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ABSTRACT

Richard Sennett's theory that industrial capitalism triggered the gradual elimination of shared cultural symbolism and thus contributed to the impoverishment of civic involvement deserves to be revisited in light of its implications for music education in an age of global information capitalism. In 1974 Sennett produced an extensive examination of the relationship between public culture and public space, arguing that our response to large-scale social and economic forces over which we have limited control is to retreat from public cultural expressions and consequently from public life. Extending Sennett's sociological argument, I contend that the subjectivizing of musical meaning may lead to a withdrawal of critical engagement, as opposed to mere passing acquaintance, with various musico-cultural meanings, which may in turn damage people's sense of civic commitment. This essay explores the challenges that formal music education faces in a world in which musical creativity often seems a matter of personal expression, and in which musical ability is often described in terms of immeasurable future potential. Both of these related views stem from a tacit acceptance of musical meaning as existing primarily in a subjective or personal realm. Reducing musical meaning to the psychological by focusing primarily on subjective experience leads to an avoidance of what Sennett calls the "jolt" of rubbing up against something foreign and questioning our assurances in our foundational beliefs. Music educators are encouraged to discuss music as a social product whenever practical in response to this threat.

Keywords

Richard Sennett; musical expression, subjectivize, cultural symbol, creativity, civic

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Sociologist Richard Sennett's theory that industrial capitalism caused the gradual elimination of shared cultural symbols and thus contributed to the impoverishment of civic involvement deserves to be revisited in light of its implications for music education, particularly in this age of global information capitalism. In his book, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism*, Sennett (1974/1978) examined the relationship between public culture and public space and concluded that our response to uncontrollable large-scale social and economic forces is to retreat from public cultural expressions and, consequently, from public life. He demonstrates a "correlation between a strong public life and what is called in psychology the objectivity of expressive signs; as the public disintegrates, the signs become more subjective" (p. 41).

Using Sennett's theoretical framework as a starting point, this essay explores the challenges faced by formal music education in a world in which students are often subtly encouraged to accept the ideas that musical ability is best described in terms of immeasurable potential, that musical creativity is the product of individual inspiration, and that musical values are purely matters of individual preference. There is significant overlap among these three related views because they all presuppose that musical meaning exists primarily in a subjective or personal realm rather than within a public sphere of intersubjectively agreed-upon symbols. Extending Sennett's socio-economic argument, I contend that this presupposition is dangerous because of what it signals: a withdrawal of critical engagement, as opposed to mere passing acquaintance, with various musico-cultural meanings, which may by extension damage people's sense of civic commitment. This is possible because focusing on subjective experience reduces meaning to the psychological level and encourages avoidance of what Sennett calls the "jolt" of rubbing up against something perceived as foreign and questioning our assurances in our foundational beliefs. Public expression requires public recognition of mutual conventions. Conceptualizing musical expression as wholly subjective negates the role of such conventions, and by extension negates the role of social knowledge in the co-construction of musical meaning. Consequently, opportunities to negotiate public forms of artistic knowledge become reduced.

SENNETT'S THEORY OF ART AS AN EXPRESSION OF PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

The central argument in *The Fall of Public Man* is that a healthy social proliferation and negotiation of ideas is only possible in a public realm of impersonal, formalized conventions, which have become largely lost in a modern age obsessed with individual personality. Pre-industrial societies, at least in the West, considered public symbolic expression to be in the public interest. Sennett explored examples such as the history of theater reception and the speech patterns of coffee house goers in the eighteenth century to show that the way ordinary people spoke, dressed, and acted in public was markedly different from how they did these things in private. People took pains to distance their true personalities from their public personas, and this distancing effect

allowed society to distinguish the meaning of one another's clothing, words, and actions as intersubjectively agreed-upon symbols, distinct from the subjective and intimate aspects of personality.

Yet as modernization advanced, the public sphere began to reduce to a series of market-based exchanges, ostensibly negating the need for a public good. This aspect of Sennett's theory, we can now confirm, was not only accurate but continues increasingly to dominate social thinking under neoliberal, globalized capitalism in the twenty-first century (Castells, 1998; Haque, 2008; Harvey, 2007; Plehwe, 2016). Examining the theory from a music education perspective, however, the most concerning feature is Sennett's description of how the social exchange of artistic symbols becomes replaced by economic exchange, leading to alienation as such symbols become increasingly unreadable in any but the most intimate terms. He wrote:

Convention is itself the single most expressive tool of public life. But in an age wherein intimate relations determine what shall be believable, conventions, artifices, and rules appear only to get in the way of revealing oneself to another: they are obstructions to intimate expression. As the imbalance between public and intimate life has grown greater, people have become less expressive. (Sennett, 1978/1974, p. 37)

One of the signs of this imbalance, according to Sennett, is the cult of personality. Sennett identified changes in our reception of the arts as key to understanding how the cult of personality affects political engagement, singling out the "star system" and music recording technology in particular as catalysts. Although famous and obscure performers have coexisted throughout history, Sennett (1974/1978) argued that the modern era saw an exaggeration of the differences between these two categories to the point where people have little desire to experience a live performance by someone not already famous. In other words, unlike in pre-modern times, we now feel the need to 'know' performers before watching or listening to them in public. He understood that recording techniques exacerbate this situation by enabling performers to piece together snippets and multiple takes until the resulting product represents near perfection. The perfect performance is abnormal, yet it becomes accepted as normal while heard in the intimacy of one's home through the 'magic' of recording technology. This then becomes a disincentive to attend 'ordinary' live performances, as concern for perfection replaces interest in possible meanings of the musical sounds themselves.

Under these conditions, the meaning of a performance essentially becomes its execution; when one does attend a live performance, one often feels more concern about the fame and personality of the performer than for interpreting the musical symbols offered up. The 'star system' thus accelerated a collapse of differences between public and private spheres, as the original meaning of public performance—to communicate artistic ideas through what is spoken, sung, or acted—became replaced by a psychological investment in *who* the person is rather than what they have to say, figuratively speaking. Society then applied this thinking to politics, according to Sennett, by becoming increasingly concerned with relating to politicians' personalities rather than their policy positions.

Sennett's reasoning about the causes of decline in public discourse seem even closer to the mark today than they were when he first began writing on the topic. Consider the many examples of our collective obsession with individual personality that seem suspiciously concurrent with an impoverishment of healthy public discourse. To be a reality TV star in the early 2000s, one did not have to do anything or say anything particularly interesting, unusual, or thought-provoking. To reveal the intimate moments of one's life was sufficient. The same can be said of TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube stars today. If anything, the criteria for stardom are reducing to the point of caricature. Reality TV, the mockumentary, and the now all-too-common device of 'breaking the fourth wall' all suggest not only that acting and singing serve an enhanced need for intimacy, but that their principal purpose is to entertain those watching rather than to communicate ideas, as Postman (1985) warned. I am not suggesting that 'reality' devices such as breaking the fourth wall nullify all communication, but their intentional disruption of narrative structures through encouraging the audience to peek into the (ostensible) psyche of an actor constitutes a form of voyeurism that presents the speaker as ultimately more interesting and important than what is being spoken. These developments can thus be seen as fully supporting Sennett's theory.

The theme of alienation from the public sphere, explored through the dual lenses of the sociology and psychology of labor, is present in many of Sennett's other writings, particularly an earlier work titled *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. In that book, he and fellow researcher Jonathan Cobb interpreted extensive interview data to show how, in the United States, people's "ideals have traditionally involved not just escape from the demands of the state, but from the demands of the social bond itself" (Sennett & Cobb, 1973, p. 55). They argued that the growth of Emersonian individualism, the idea that one earns respect not for how one acts within society but "because one can get along without the help of others" was largely a post-Enlightenment overreaction against the older system of measuring one's dignity by one's position within a caste, class, or social group (p. 55). In *The Fall of Public Man*, Sennett extended this argument and concluded that true public discourse had consequently been largely replaced by the cult of personality, leaving us vulnerable to harsh forms of political domination. Regardless of whether the theory is entirely accurate, his social observations imply that musical meaning may be conceptualized, particularly by the young, in ways that threaten to obscure its role as a set of negotiable cultural signifiers.

Sennett (Sennett & Cobb, 1973) described psychological processes that ordinary people use to block out the realities of social injustice and inequity in order to quell feelings of class-based inadequacy in the only way possible: by pursuing "freedom," that is, the freedom to get on without help from others in society. He called these processes "hidden dimensions of individualism in a corporate society" (p. 58). The question I pose is: Are there also hidden dimensions of musical individualism within a rhizomatic, digitally informed—yet simultaneously misinformed—society?

Sennett collected his data and theorized about what it might mean in the early to mid 1970s. At that time, neoliberalism's future hold on our collective imagination was

merely a nascent possibility. That the dominant political-economic outlook now promotes freedom and ability in terms of one's capacity for functioning without group assistance is a given. Since the ascendancy of neoliberalism, which celebrates a "ruthless competitive individualism" (Giroux, 2005), the well abled self has been portrayed as an individual who truly functions apart from, rather than within, society. Sennett's lifelong work concerns the effects that various forms of late capitalism have in masking the importance of social bonds to both individual and societal success.

In a related vein, my concern is that popular conceptions of musical creativity as a series of personal choices, or musical talent as indefinable potential, may function ideologically to amplify the view of the self as one who stands apart from (musical) society. Before proceeding further, I should clarify what the following discussion is and is not trying to accomplish. In arguing that we should better help students to understand that music is a social product I am not advocating that we constrain their individual creativity by insisting they embrace established collective musical meanings at the expense of personal interpretations or artistic statements. This is not an argument to preserve or uphold existing musical values, in other words. It is an argument that we should help students to recognize the role that mutually shared musical conventions play in shaping their understanding and interpretations, lest they mistakenly believe such meanings are formed in a vacuum. Recognition, I will add, need not involve agreement. One must at a minimum recognize a value or convention to react against it.

Additionally, I am not arguing that society is shifting away from communal and toward individual musical meanings because that stance falsely assumes that these are binary categories. Communal and individual musical meanings are and always have been inextricably (or we can say dialectically) intertwined. My argument is simply that there is evidence from different sources pointing to a greater emphasis on the latter and less acknowledgment of the crucial function of the former. Any collective forgetting of the role of the social world in constructing musical meaning may, following Sennett's theory, be associated with overlooking larger, more important societal connections, at which point the potential for civic disengagement may become realized.

To support this concern, I will briefly discuss three examples of social phenomena that can be seen as reflecting and simultaneously enabling the belief that musical meaning belongs not in the public sphere of (contested but) shared cultural symbols, but in the private, subjective world of personal preference and ineffable potential. These are: musical reality competitions, the framing of improvising and composing music as a product of individual inspiration, and the role of digital technologies in curating musical identities. I have chosen these examples because they all have great potential to intersect with and impact students' formal and informal music learning.

MUSICAL 'REALITY' COMPETITIONS AND THE SCARCITY OF REWARDS

Musical reality competitions are built on the meritocratic ideals that in capitalist societies first become instilled through formal schooling, where individual students must try to win the respect of their teachers by showing that they somehow stand apart from the rest of their classmates and may therefore 'make something' of themselves. Sennett notes that for this reason the teacher's power is felt most acutely "not when the many are openly scolded" but instead "when the kids are trying to be good" (Sennett and Cobb, 1973, p. 88). This economically generated need to stand out from the crowd, to earn what Sennett calls "badges of ability," leads to an insatiable desire to rate ourselves and each other (p. 64). Christopher Ames (2007) suggests that this explains the ongoing popularity of the reality singing competition *American Idol*.

In any ostensibly meritocratic system, however, an affirmative vote of confidence, whether by formal assessment or informal comment, is automatically "an expression of negative preference as a practical matter" (Kang, 2010, p. 1224). Whether we are talking about students in a classroom or contestants on *American Idol*, meritocratic ideals by definition must prevent some from advancing. This situation sets up a subconscious conflict in many 'average' people whereby the economic pressure to succeed and improve oneself is simultaneously offset by a social pressure not to stand out and alienate oneself from one's peers. Sennett describes this age-old conflict as stemming from the "classic contradiction between a scarcity of rewards and the claim of careers open to anyone of talent" (Sennett and Cobb, 1973, p. 154). How do we explain, for example, company employees not revolting in situations where 1,500 workers desire advancement and only six positions are available? The dilemma is conveniently resolved by using personality, intuition, and other non-verifiable standards for determining who gets ahead. Thus, in a world with many equally well-qualified individuals, the focus shifts to mythical and unquantifiable standards of 'potential,' through which "the higher knowledge of those in power creates at once the mystification of power and its legitimacy" (p. 159). Referencing Foucault, Sennett describes potential as the "soft center" within a powerful "meritocratic scheme," soft because a judgment about potential ability, unlike a judgment of achievement, "focuses only on the self" (Sennett, 2006, pp. 115, 123).

In the case of musical reality competitions such as the *Idols* franchise, which began in the U.K. and has spread to 150 other countries, the absence of stated criteria for stardom must be explained by something more than the average audience member's lack of technical musical knowledge. As avid viewers know, *Idol* producers consider only audience preferences when eliminating contestants who reach the final stages of the competition. This practically guarantees that the reward of winning the contest cannot be demonstrably connected to any set of commonly agreed-upon criteria for good singing within a given style. The problem was particularly noticeable in 2007 when Simon Cowell threatened to quit *American Idol* over the constant advancement of a fan favorite whom he claimed was a very poor singer (Amegashie, 2009, p. 267). That

episode was an exception, however, for a television program that rarely references criteria for judgment in the competition's final stages and whose design ensures that criteria for final decisions remain a mystery.

Tying the *Idol* franchises' rewards to specific, objective criteria would destroy the mystique of those rewards and, by extension, the shows themselves. It would crash headlong into the reality that there is a scarcity of rewards for musical ability in the world. *American Idol*'s favored 'rags to riches' narrative especially reinforces the meritocratic myth that papers over the reality of a scarcity of rewards. Evidence of its effect is seen in Wei's (2016) study of contestants who were eliminated from the singing competition. "Contestants' desires to audition and audition again after failure," she states, "are driven by meritocratic ideals. They develop accounts in line with these ideals to explain how despite being rejected they are talented and can still excel in the future" (p. 3). Literally anyone can *potentially* go from rags to riches.

Human potential, always future-oriented, is seen by these contestants as more important than technical ability that might be evaluated objectively in the present based on commonly accepted formal conventions, recognizable within specific style contexts. As Sennett argues, meritocratic ideals in late capitalism make *potential* the currency of both personal fulfilment and professional, or in this case celebrity, advancement. Such competitions remind us that the word 'talent' is referenced constantly in popular culture as a placeholder for musical ability. The word suggests endowments, perhaps divine inspiration, but not the idea that effective musical expression requires practical knowledge of commonly understood cultural symbols. The effect is to reinforce the myth of "the artist as the sole originator of a work," which, as Wolff states, "obscures the fact that art has continued to be a collective product" (1993, p. 27).

MUSICAL CREATIVITY AS UNMEDIATED PERSONAL EXPRESSION

Musical creativity is often popularly portrayed as a product of unmediated personal expression. Improvisation, perhaps because of its seemingly spontaneous nature, appears particularly susceptible to being misunderstood in this way. On the subject of creativity, Gardner (1993) maintains that "when it comes to the forging of new understandings and the creation of new worlds, childhood can be a very powerful ally" (p. 32). The ease with which children engage in creative behavior is not lost on teachers, who often encourage new improvisers to tap into a childlike sense of playfulness and to abandon, at least consciously, concern for compositional rules. The improvisation advocacy group Music for People publishes a combination workbook and manifesto called *Return to Child*, which suggests that aspiring improvisers "approach music making as naturally as children" and "emphasize feelings and openness over technique" (Oshinsky, 2015, p. 3).

This language appears (understandably) aimed at trained musicians who may be fearful of abandoning rules; however, when taken too literally it creates a false opposition between rules and freedom. In other words, it obscures the fact that formal musical conventions are necessary for expression to exist. Green (1988) first pointed

out that even music educators routinely mistake creativity for natural, unmediated expression. British music teachers were for a time swept up into the “creative music” trend, which advocated children composing without pre-established boundaries. Unfortunately, however, the absence of explicit parameters leaves implicit ones in their place; that is to say the formal conventions that children will have learned informally through their environment. In the case of “creative music,” those conventions formed a “predetermined reality” of which the students were unaware (pp. 126–127). In this important sense neither composition nor improvisation are ever completely free acts. They are always mediated by socially recognized conventions, “otherwise the result would not be counted as music” (p. 135).

Yet if children’s creative expressions are mediated, why do they seem not to be? Sennett (1978) observes that there is in fact a balance between subjective expression and objective rules built into children’s play. “The element of aesthetic training that goes on in play lies in accustoming the child to believe in the expressivity of impersonal behavior, when it is structured by made-up rules. Play for the child is the antithesis of expressing himself [*sic*] spontaneously” (p. 315). Children’s play is thus a means of *establishing* new conventions, not abandoning, or working outside of, conventions. It is the ‘rules’ of play that allow young people to create symbolic meaning. When children ‘catch each other up’ on the latest iterations of whatever game is being played, they are acknowledging that such ‘rules’ are socially constructed because malleable (p. 321).

Swanson and Sheehan Campbell (2016) explain that a similar process happens in children’s improvisatory musical play. Children, contrary to some adult beliefs, do not express themselves musically in a void. Instead, they conceive of musical conventions as “dynamic and fluid forms to be shared and innovated among friends” (p. 201). “Far from the compositional imagery of a solitary composer at a desk,” they explain, “these innovations [occur] among the laughter, cheers, and kinesthetic energy of play—emerging in the moment, and through the give-and-take of social interaction” (p. 201). The fluidity and dynamism of children’s musical creations is thus balanced by a *tacit acknowledgment of musical forms as the basis for variation*. The difference appears to be that children have not yet learned to reify musical conventions into seemingly inviolable objects. This appears to happen later, likely accelerated by secondary music education (such as that commonly found in North America) that emphasizes reproducing over creating music. Similarly, the lack of improvisation classes in higher education outside of jazz studies (Attariwala, 2016; Song, 2013) is clearly a symptom and possibly even a cause of this misunderstanding.

Accomplished improvisers seem able to move beyond this false binary, whether through conscious effort or not. Experimental jazz bassist William Parker (2016) explains that he had no knowledge of the word ‘improvisation’ when being introduced to the practice simply through playing music with others (p. 177). Emphasis on the participatory rather than individual aspects of music making—a hallmark of the informal training of countless jazz musicians—may explain how it is easier for some to escape binary thinking about creativity. Yet once the setting is formalized and the

improvisational vocabulary reduced to a series of abstract conventions that no longer appear moored to socio-historical contexts, the risk of falling into the binary trap becomes amplified. Stated differently, whenever improvising students perceive the ‘rules’ of jazz as objective and permanent, they will have fallen into the trap of binary thinking because they will be unable to perceive those rules as socially constructed (sedimented, if we want to use Adorno’s terminology) and therefore not only subject to alteration but a necessary part of the historical development of styles and genres. For example, if students assign a normative function to chord/scale relationships, they will fail to grasp the dual nature of those relationships as both tools for creating and historical products of creativity.

To draw on Sennett’s (1978) point about children at play, if the establishment of a collective set of performative parameters depends on each participant’s willingness to balance the need for personal expression against an understanding of the necessarily *impersonal* nature of shared musical gestures, then music educators need to contextualize those conventional gestures in formal settings to help students to strike that balance.

An undesirable effect of formal music education that can work against this goal is the reification of notation, which reinforces the myth of the solitary, inspired composer or improviser. Notation’s original purpose was not prescriptive: it was to aid memory and communicate musical information. Brown (1999) demonstrates, for example, in his extensive study of performance practices from 1750-1900, that classical and romantic era composers expected performers to use many contextual cues in addition to the score so as to “see beyond the literal meaning of the composer’s text” (p. 416). Specific examples include Brown’s observations that composers in the nineteenth century often failed to include expressive or technical markings, such as bowings, and would not have generally expected them to be followed explicitly when they were included (p. 182); the absence of legato or staccato markings did not necessarily mean an intended note length of intermediary value (pp. 195-199); the fermata could generate a number of different meanings (p. 588); dotted rhythms were not necessarily intended to be performed mathematically accurately when scored against triplet rhythms (pp. 614-621); and the amount of sustain added to dotted figures also varied according to musical context and circumstances (pp. 621-626). Yet, and despite that many musicians outside the Western art music world continue to use notation non-prescriptively when they use it at all, as Waller (2010) argues, resources for introducing students to notation often present musical symbols as directions to be followed rather than tools for creative manipulation.

There are other ways in which formal music education (in particular) conveys messages that conceal the traces of social knowledge in musical creation. One of the most impactful of these is the role of the teacher as ensemble conductor. Particularly dominant in North American secondary schools, this role has inherited much of the romantic ideology associated with the nineteenth-century artworld. Sennett (1978) sees the ‘cult of the conductor’ as one of many symptoms of our retreat from public life. He connects the social rise of ‘the artist’ directly to “the spectator investing the public

performer with a personality,” whereas public performances had previously existed to communicate musical ideas and performers’ personalities had been confined to their private lives. Audiences eventually elevated the status of conductors for this same apparent ability to express their personalities through their interpretative performances (Sennett, 1978, p. 211). From a student perspective, the large ensemble setting might initially appear to prevent the subjectivizing of musical meaning, since opportunities for personal expression are limited. However, it is the romanticized role of the conductor—the supreme arbiter of interpretation appearing to express personality directly through the baton—that de-emphasizes music as a product of collective creativity even as it emphasizes the virtues of collective performance.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND MUSICAL IDENTITIES

In much the same way that the notion of musical potential may function as a psychological marker of individualism in a neoliberal global economy, music in the digital age may function merely to accessorize one’s personality. Using music “as a means or resource for developing ... aspects of our individual identities” is an example of what Hargreaves, Miell, and MacDonald (2002) call *music in identities* (MII). This concept is distinct from *identities in music* (IIM), which deals with “aspects of musical identities that are socially defined” (p. 2) within categories such as musician, non-musician, performer, and so forth. Although people, and particularly the young, have always used music to define and develop their identities, digital technology has increased the likelihood of such behavior happening in more individualized ways. As we have shifted from single household telephone ‘land-lines’ and communal televisions to a time in which students have several digital devices on their persons at all times of the day or night, the technologies through which music is shared have become “profoundly individualized” (Hunsinger, 2002). And as Hunsinger notes, “technological individualization relates to social individualization” (p. 504).

As young people continually curate their musical identities through near-constant digital access, there are at least two factors that may work together to enable musical symbol/sounds to follow Sennett’s predicted pattern shift from public to personal. First, musical sounds are increasingly conceived of not as forms of cultural communication but as advertising for one’s personal brand or online profile (Hebert, 2018). Derges (2020), summarizing the findings of her content analysis of research on musical identity and social media, reports that “profile work, branding, and sharing content” are used to “demonstrate group membership or role identity” (p. 323). This is a contemporary example of shared cultural symbols that risk being replaced by tribal badges of identity, in which case personality itself can become “an antisocial idea” (Sennett, 1978, p. 223).

Second, instant access to a theoretically unlimited supply of music easily untethered from its socio-cultural or historical origins, using highly individualized technology, has the potential to accelerate the flattening of collective meanings associated with particular musical styles, gestures, or phrases. The ease with which

sounds can become separated from their contexts through technology results in what ethnomusicologists have dubbed “schizophonia,” (Hebert & Williams, 2020) and this effect is compounded by what Kanellopoulos (2012) calls “a popular conception of aesthetic as a highly personal form of advertising” as music becomes increasingly psychologized (p. 152). Kanellopoulos is speaking about musical sounds resulting from improvising or composing. However, the neoliberal idea of the aesthetic as a form of advertising applies equally to meanings constructed through listening—the sounds that are re-appropriated and re-constructed as young people become prosumers, listening to and curating music to construct their identities both online and in the real world.

Additionally, the condition of being digitally ‘plugged in’ may itself create difficulties for students trying to contextualize musical sounds. Turkle (2011) describes the psychological effects of digital technologies and the internet as the “unsettling isolations of the tethered self” (p. 154). The seemingly paradoxical phrase refers to how we are constantly connected to yet often simultaneously disengaged from our fellow humans because of digital culture. Digitized relationships are often “predicated on rapid response rather than reflection” (p. 17). Moreover, and as is the subject of much recent public debate, the algorithms of the internet generally encapsulate and feed our tastes instead of challenging them. The processes that make social media sites and Google searches function in financially successful ways are designed to reinforce rather than trouble our self-images. Yet truly meaningful social engagement requires some challenge, some sense of rubbing up against the unfamiliar. As Allsup (2015) writes, the point of meaningful exchanges with others is to “set aside who we are to more fully know who we might be” (p. 256). Finally, there is the “the glut of information generated by modern technology [that] threatens to make its receivers passive. Overload prompts disengagement” (Sennett, 2006, p. 172). Any passivity that results from an overload of available musical sounds exacerbates the challenge of trying to contextualize them as pre-existing symbols with possibly shared meanings.

CONCLUSION

What all these examples have in common is a tendency to de-emphasize or overlook the crucial role of musical conventions in any artistic expression that succeeds in connecting meaningfully with others. Interpreting musical sounds as collections of symbols to be read according to one’s knowledge of one or more public ‘languages’ (styles or genres) may seem less important today—when acknowledged at all—than interpreting musical expression as an inherent part of one’s personality. Sennett’s lifelong concern has been the alienation and pain that average people experience from the forces unleashed by late-stage capitalism, a concern seemingly unrelated to music education. In pursuing the causes of this pain, however, he has uncovered an effect that should be of concern to all music educators, politics and economics aside. This insight, that artistic symbols become intensely personalized once dislocated from stable referents, dovetails with a similar one from the field of critical pedagogy. That is, if we only perceive artistic expressions as personal, they become politically neutered. Giroux

(1994, 2005) has been the most consistent messenger of this argument. Like Sennett, he is concerned with the effects of late-stage capitalism on aesthetic symbols. Giroux goes further, however, in claiming that corporate interests coopt postmodern aesthetics—which insist on fluid symbolic meanings—mostly through their use of cultural symbols in advertising, and thereby replace public cultural discourse with reappropriated, seemingly ahistorical symbols that instead reference personal identity as reflected in one’s purchasing choices.

Sennett argues that “sustained verbal conflict ... forms a more realistic basis for connections between people of unequal power or of differing interests” (1998, p. 144). This argument can and should be extended to highlight the importance of engaging with differing interpretations of common cultural symbols including music. We risk missing out on important opportunities to negotiate our different understandings of musical sounds if we assume that music is so personal that there are no grounds for negotiation. Additionally, the need for self-distancing to achieve aesthetic, as opposed to personal, expression also clearly highlights “the differences between presentation and representation of feelings” (Sennett, 1978, p. 314) that Langer had explained three decades earlier in *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942). Music educators should be aware of this concern, then, and work to (re)contextualize musical meanings for their students whenever possible by introducing them to some of the many ways in which music is constructed and understood socially.

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