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Sound, Sociality, and Music: Part Two

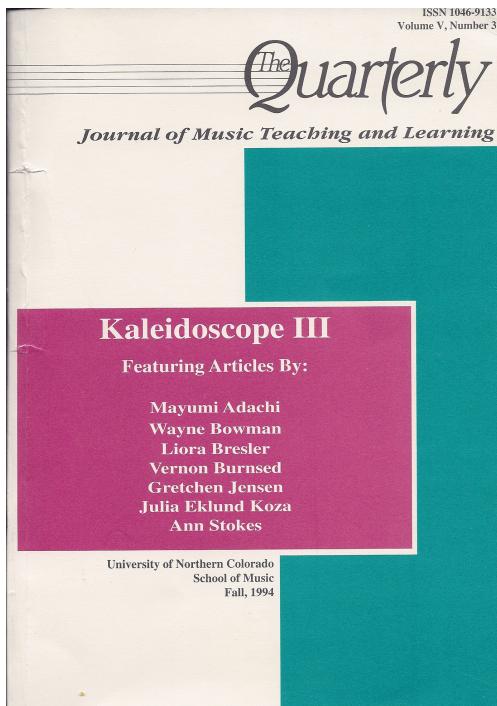
Wayne Bowman
Brandon University

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Author(s): Wayne Bowman

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It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.

Sound, Sociality, And Music: Part Two

By Wayne Bowman
Brandon University

In the first section of this essay, two strongly contrasting descriptions of musical experience were used to question certain of music education's conventional assumptions about the nature and value of music. It was suggested that the idea of an objectively grounded aesthetic value may underplay the crucial constructive role of intentionality in musical experience. In addition, emphasis upon a putatively common aesthetic core among the arts may underplay those attributes of musical experience that are most distinctly or uniquely musical.

It was maintained that the ways humans experience sound and noise are pivotal to a proper accounting of the special status accorded music in virtually all human cultures. Due to the distinctive characteristics of sonorous experience, musics are uniquely endowed in their capacities to unite and distinguish people, to define "we" and "they," and to forge community from individuality or collectivity. On this view, musics are more properly conceived as processes of human action and interaction than as objects for contemplative gratification.

Conceiving musics as sonorous interactions with fundamental social significance has the potential to confer unity on a broad range of musical endeavors that often become radically polarized by misleading theoretical oppositions between the serious and the popular, between art and entertainment, between autonomy and utility, and between intrinsic

Wayne Bowman is Professor of Music Education at Brandon University, Brandon, Manitoba, Canada. His research interests include philosophy of music, as well as the philosophical, historical, and social foundations of music education.

and extrinsic worth. It also serves to direct attention away from freewheeling metaphysical speculation about things like revelation and expression, and in the direction of fuller descriptions of what, how, and why people do what they do with musics. This orientation also places both music and musical education squarely within the broader arenas of social, political, and moral concerns.

The remaining sections of this essay will explore briefly the kinds of sociopolitical relatedness implicit in various kinds of musical processes, and conclude with some speculations on the potential practical significance of these perspectives for musical education.

The Ideological and Political Arena

Because of the unique ways humans experience sound, music is an influential agent in the definition and articulation of human sociality. This is not merely casual observation that, having been made, permits a business-as-usual conception of musical education. Rather, it implies that different ways of making and partaking of music create and reinforce different kinds of relatedness, not all of which may be equally desirable. It places music education squarely within a sociopolitical arena where controls and constraints upon, and implicit in, musical activity are legitimate aspects of musical inquiry.

The social perspective disputes music's ideological or political neutrality, and rejects claims that it is "a self-sufficient and purely formal mode of aesthetic expression essentially divorced ... from the social and cultural contexts of its creation and consumption."¹ Different music, different modes of musical production, consumption, and dissemination — all favor different kinds of sociality. To am-

plify this line of thought, I will enlist the unorthodox but intriguing speculations of Jacques Attali to the effect that sounds and arrangements of sound fashion societies, and changes in sounds and music are events with potentially profound socio-political repercussions.

I have suggested that music creates and consolidates community. Although all “the arts” are socially grounded, music’s social power and influence are distinctive in virtue of the phenomenal nature of sonorous experience explored above. Attali argues, more forcefully yet, that music’s “appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political”(6). Music is a primary means of channeling social consciousness. Therefore, the legitimization and marginalization of music, musicians, and musical practices are always manifestations of political power. In fact, “with music is born power,” and music’s production has among its primary functions “the creation, legitimation, and maintenance of order. Its primary function is not to be sought in aesthetics ... but in the effectiveness of its participation in social regulation”(30).

Musics and music makers that threaten official centers of power are designated subversives, marginals, outcasts. On the other hand, the makers and purveyors of musics congruent with the interests of power are hailed as inspired prophets or high priests whose revered creations embody society’s deepest values. “The entire history of tonal music,” Attali asserts, “amounts to an attempt to make people believe in a consensual representation of the world ...”(46).

Attali’s Modes of Socio-Musical Interaction

Music’s social regulatory power does not manifest itself in a single, invariant pattern of communal relatedness, however, Attali describes four basic historical modes of socio-musical interaction, each with its own distinctive modes of social relatedness. Regardless of whether one accepts or rejects Attali’s portray-

als of music (as ritual, as representation, as repetition, or as composition), the vivid image of music’s potential political force they collectively present demands close consideration.

Ritual

Ritual is the primordial human mode of socio-musical interaction. Although the nature of ritualistic activity requires little elaboration, the distinctive role of music in such activity is easily underestimated. A fuller appreciation must be informed by the phenomenal character of human experience with

noise and sound, along lines pursued above in Burrows characterization of sonorous experience as markedly ambiguous, mysterious, and peculiarly invasive.

Attali carries these observations several significant steps further, asserting that noise is a fundamentally violent phenomenon. Noise, he maintains, is disruption, disorder, destruction, a weapon,² a threat of death. In ritual, music channels or domesticates the fundamental violence

of noise. It reassuringly renders the chaotic orderly, and thus “appears in myth as an affirmation that society is possible ... Its order simulates the social order, and its dissonances express marginalities” (29). Music creates political order by assuring us that social harmony is possible “if the imaginary of individuals is sublimated” (26). Put differently, by successfully harnessing noise’s violence, music assures people of the possibility that accord may be forged from disorder. This helps to persuade us of the viability of a society constituted by “structured differences.”

Equally important, ritualistic musical experience affords an immediate personal experience of sacrificing selfhood to a larger whole, of helping sustain this magical sonorous phenomenon by yielding (sublimating) one’s individuality to it. Ritualistic music is vivid, living proof that order and coherence can be forged from seeming chaos, evidence of the inevitable triumph of order over disorder.

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der where individuals will only cooperate. In ritual, music surrounds and permeates its participants, bringing them together in sensual communality. The threats and violence inherent in noise become, given proper musical circumstances, vital agents in forging "I" into "we," collectivity into community.

Representation

The communality characteristic of ritualistic music is not universal. It is no musical "essence," but only a way music may be; one that consists in non-specialized, active collaboration among participants. In what Attali calls *representation*, the socio-musical experience becomes extensively deritualized. A division between performer and audience, producer and consumer, radically alters the sense of collectivity so distinctive to ritual.

In representation, musical execution increasingly falls to skilled specialists, while the primary role and responsibility of the audience is reduced to appreciative consumption. Where ritual is a music of intimate interrelation, representation is a music of spectacle. Instead of direct engagement in the urgent business of channelizing noise's violence, audiences bear silent witness to compelling images of hierarchical social cohesion enacted by specialists.

In representation, the myth affirming society's possibility undergoes a radical shift. Music is no longer so much action as it is commodity. Musical value ceases to reside so much in human agency as it does in "the work," whose value is independent of and prior to its realization in any given performance. This commodification "entraps, produces, exchanges, circulates, and censors [music]. Music is then no longer an affirmation of existence, it becomes valorized." (36). These characteristics of representation make it increasingly difficult to credibly sustain the myth of music as a humanizing antidote to the ills of materialistic society. For in representation, "the sound object itself has become artifice, independent of the listener and composer ..." (36).

In contrast to ritual, representation is a

mode of socio-musical relation to which spectacle and commodity are central. Representation relinquishes the kinds of relatedness so distinctive to ritual, yet sustains its own particular version of the myth of inevitable order, an order implicit in its characteristically hierarchical, superior-subordinate relationships.

Dissonance, ambiguity, and deviation are permissible within an overall context of harmonious consonance whose dominance they ultimately serve to affirm. Likewise, orchestral spectacles showcase the submission of individual performing musicians' wills to that of the conductor.³ Audiences assume receptive roles of silent anonymity, suppressing their complicity in performances except for those socially sanctioned moments when the overt expression of appreciation is appropriate.

As music becomes an artifact for silent consumption, ritual's use-value is replaced by exchange-value. "Thus delimited, music [becomes] the locus of the theatrical representation of a world order, an affirmation of the possibility of harmony in exchange" (57). Direct collaboration in the ritualistic channelization of violence is no longer necessary to make people believe in the inevitability of order, says Attali. In representation, observing the spectacle of its enactment is enough.

Repetition

To the extent that representative music directly implicates human activity, if only by performing specialists, its commodification is partial. As long as the experience of music relies on people actually doing musical things in each other's presence, music is a "commodity" in a rather attenuated sense.⁴ With the advent of technologies that enable the storage or "stockpiling" of performances, this changes abruptly. What was previously an inescapably singular musical event is captured and subjected to potentially infinite replication. Commodification is complete. The capacity for *repetition* means that "usage [is] no longer the enjoyment of present labors, but the consumption of replications" (88). In repetition, both the music-making

event and the musical “object” are devalued, and the repetition, the recording, becomes the locus of musical experience.

Reproduction means “the death of the original, the triumph of the copy,” says Attali, since in mass production the original mold “is no longer anything more than one of the factors in production ...” (89). Performers become fabricators of a product that, once produced, may be duplicated in superabundance without them. Creation of demand (the creation of audience — a responsibility not infrequently presumed central to music education) becomes as important, if not more so, than the actual making or doing of music. Thus, repetition transforms performance into an imitation of the recording; and the collectivity so characteristic of earlier modes of socio-musical activity becomes ever more attenuated as musical experience moves further from the trappings of live concerts and concert halls.

Repetition’s mass production and dissemination eradicate value-generating differences, creating uniformity and transforming it into a virtue. Musical “product” is multiplied and disseminated, infusing virtually every crack and crevice of daily life with noise masked as music. Such superabundance discourages real listening, real engagement, and real communication. In its excess, repetition suppresses and silences. Excess depletes both musical and social meaning, leaving in their wake little more than the mere “flow of noises as ersatz sociality” (111). In Attali’s account, repetition renders musical experience a hollow thing, no longer capable of affirming the possibility of society. Instead, music becomes an echo: It merely “repeats the memory of another society — even while culminating its liquidation — a society in which it [music] had meaning” (120).

Composition

Depleted meaning, resignation to centralized technocratic power, silent uniformity: These are indeed bleak images. Yet, Attali finds hope and inspiration in another socio-musical mode, whose paradigmatic example is jazz. *Composition* (as Attali chooses to call it) entails the affirmation of personal difference and autonomy, empowering individuals to compose music and lives distinctly their

own. Musically, this means rejecting repetitive stockpiling, renouncing passive consumption, and a turn to direct engagement, an affirmation of human agency.

Composition entails doing for its own sake, making music for the joy it brings, and taking “pleasure in being instead of having” (134). Most importantly, composition takes pleasure in producing the kind of differences that are anathema to repetitive power. It is a “social form for the recreation of difference,” one fundamentally committed to the tolerance and respect of individual autonomy. Instead of standardization and uniformity, composing celebrates originality, difference, and even marginality. Its orientation is more social than objective, so “music is no longer made to be represented or stockpiled, but for participation in collective play, in an ongoing quest for new, immediate communication, without ritual and always unstable” (141).

Composition’s instability, its decentralization of power and authority, its ruggedly individualistic nature, its emphasis upon autonomy and personal agency situates it in stark contrast to the socio-musical values and practices of repetition, representation, and ritual. Composition creates and celebrates differences instead of eradicating them through standardization and repetition. “It is thus laden with risk, disquieting, an unstable challenging, an anarchic and ominous festival ... with an unpredictable outcome.”⁵ If images of instability and unpredictability are unnerving, Attali would urge that the security of the status quo is only apparent, a delusion. Indeed, “the World, by repeating itself, is dissolving into Noise and Violence,” (148) or as Kundera’s Sabina might well have called it, the phase of total ugliness.

Intriguing though Attali’s ideas are, I do not put them forward as the definitive account of music’s evolution. Rather, Attali’s striking descriptions illustrate a view in which musics are not construed as things, as artifacts. They are modes of human interrelatedness, instances of human behavior. There is no fixed task (aesthetic or other) musics perform as inevitable and invariable functions of their “inherent” nature. Nor is music’s history a story of inexorable convergence upon some essence to be found in the

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music of a particular culture or tradition. Musics are, rather, multiple stories about alternative ways individuals and societies incorporate sonorous experience into the fabric of their existence. No music exists outside the realms of human, social, political, and, therefore, moral interaction.

I began by speculating that music, as sound, has unique and remarkable powers to forge unity and community among human beings. To this was added the assertion that this social function was not a useful means for distinguishing popular from serious, bad from good, inferior from superior musics. Finally, with Attali, we see that different music implicates different kinds of relatedness, alternative modes of socio-political interaction, and visions of social order. Clearly, if music educators wish to adhere to their time honored conviction that their fundamental professional guidance derives from music's "nature and value," the plurality and relativity of music's nature and value present a host of rather thorny problems.

Music as Socially Significant Enterprise: Some Implications for Music Education

To construe and pursue musical education as an endeavor whose significance is, for all practical purposes, exhausted in the aesthetic, is not just shortsighted but wrong. Music is a socially significant enterprise, and not in a trivial sense. Musical instruction is at least implicitly political. Teaching music is no mere aesthetic endeavor. It is political and moral. I will conclude by speculating how music education's priorities and practices might differ if the various assertions made here were taken to heart.

First, it should be recognized that an ostensibly proper musical education based on the strictures of music-education-as-aesthetic-education has the capacity to obscure the centrality of human agency and interaction to musical activity. Music's sonorous and social foundations are not trivial or benign curiosities that, once acknowledged, may be ig-

nored. Nor is faulty musical instruction ultimately harmless, music being but a pleasant, vaguely enriching diversion.

Second, we might reconsider the narrow, reproductive focus of much musical instruction, exploring with our students music's capacities to offend and intrude, the ways people make music their own, and how they construct "musical homes." Homes are places for "us," without "them," at once inclusionary and exclusionary:

A secure feeling of being at home is necessarily founded on repression: it depends on suppressing awareness of the differences among people, on refusing to see who is excluded from the home. However expansive and inclusive a home may feel from within, membership is inevitably contingent upon characteristics only a restricted set of people possess.⁶

Musical education should acknowledge and explore the ways various types of music embrace and alienate, bring together and separate. It should show students that the occupation of multiple musical homes does not amount to trespass or self-contradiction; that there is no musical equivalent of bigamy, such that engaging in music with visceral appeal constitutes a betrayal of Mozart. Since the uses and values of music are as numerous, diverse, and contradictory as human behavior, teaching that all music can and should be judged by the same criteria is educationally irresponsible.

Phrased differently, one educational goal that seems both plausible and feasible for some music instruction to pursue is the expansion of the "we-intentions"⁷ that undergird social solidarity — the ways "we" and "they" are made manifest and reinforced in musical experience. More directly, we might undertake to use our studies of various musics to enhance our students' imaginative identification with the details of others' musical lives. We might thereby endeavor to help our students and each other extend our senses of "we" to people and musics whom we have previously considered "they," en-

hancing our tendency to “think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’.”⁸

Third, musical education might strive to make students responsible stewards of the sonic environment. Superabundance of sound and music does indeed result in devaluation. Sonic excess dulls awareness and devalues musical experience. We should strive to sensitize students to the profound impact of sound upon the quality of human life. The musically educated should be resolute defenders of environments in which sonorous experience can be savored, rather than endured in numb saturation or fled like Sabina’s pack of hounds.

Fourth, musical education should cultivate awareness of the uniqueness of sonic experience. A musical education must strive to sensitize people to the worlds of the ear and their remarkable contrasts to those of the eye. Such education empowers, gives people control over qualitative aspects of their environments and lives to which they might otherwise remain oblivious or vulnerable.

Fifth, as events and processes people make and share, musics are not natural or biological but cultural. Treating them as “things” in the world commodifies what is profoundly processual, objectifies something deeply subjective, and subjugates current action to past accomplishments. The musically educated should conceive musics not as artifacts or commodities, but as meaningful shared actions. Students should conceive music not as a static body of works or pieces, but as a dynamic field of negotiated meanings, ever regenerating and changing. Musics are shared, lived ways of being in the world and of being present to each other. Musics are actions that affirm and vivify existence. They do not just reflect who we are, but help create and define us.

Education in music should nurture makers and doers of music, not worshippers of superhuman achievement. Music education must strive to reclaim a musically vigorous society from the paralysis of spectacle worship and the vacuity of repetition. That many of the musically educated are not currently prominent among those who espouse this view of musical endeavor will, I hope,

justify one brief revisitation of points advanced earlier in this essay.

Art music is not a constellation of beautiful patterns that are only incidentally sonorous and social, nor are seriousness and structural sophistication the ultimate in musical values. The idea of art music’s intrinsic value is a vestige of the professed cultural superiority of the social classes from which the masterworks emerged and to whom the task of their preservation fell. Aesthetic value’s supremacy requires subordination of other musical values, and, too often, the false conviction that musics that fail to conform to aesthetic strictures are inferior. Philosophical alternatives to aesthetic doctrine will compel music education to place far greater emphasis upon diversity, individuality, and tolerance than the vision founded in the implicit assumption that music of the high European tradition is the culmination of an inexorable evolutionary process.⁹

Renouncing art music’s superiority does not mean eschewing all musical value. On the contrary, it humanizes and reunifies a realm of human experience radically dichotomized by concepts of art and aesthetic value. Recognizing musics as social constructions and sets of socially constituted meanings ameliorates the debilitating effects of abject reverence to sonic monuments, releasing students into their own present and future worlds, and into the joy of their personal musical doings.

Sixth, musical education should not create diffident individuals, but people who are confident, committed, and fluent in the kinds of value distinctions appropriate to a variety of musics. The musically educated should be both broad and discriminating in their tastes, secure in the capacity for independent musical judgment that protects them from manipulation both by arbiters of “good taste,” and by mass producers who would have them accept as natural and inevitable the sonic saturation of every second of their lives.

Seventh, as a political and potentially indoctrinative endeavor, musical instruction must develop critical awareness of these processes, nurturing in students the kind of consciousness that discerns and resists arbitrary value imposition. Musical instruction that re-

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fuses to concede its own potential intrusiveness, to recognize the “messiness” of musical value determinations, to confront and embrace the validity of diverse musics, virtually guarantees its deterioration into the irrelevant endeavor known to students as “school music.”

Eighth, the perspective sketched in this essay implicates a more predominantly subject-centered, less object-centered, mode of inquiry. Theorizing from personal experience instead of ideological “givens” helps offset the debilitating effects of musical commodification and the “apotheosis of art,”¹⁰ as well as nurturing tolerance for ambiguity. We must strive to conceptualize musics as flexible modes of experience that survive by continual transformation, and to nurture awareness that art music’s inertness and stability are only apparent, not actual. Musics are ambiguous, various, and unstable. Though risky and unsettling, such attributes are in themselves crucially important to the educational enterprise. They are, after all, features of the world and of life that musical experience is uniquely capable of capturing or portraying.

Embracing difference means accepting instability and renouncing absolutes. But that is to state the positive negatively, for students so educated would learn not only to appreciate but to savor the intangibility, the subtlety, the ambiguity, the delicate transience of life. Music education should not merely accept or acquiesce to diversity and ambiguity, it should encourage and honor them. For not only do such attributes illuminate the true nature of music, diversity is itself a highly desirable social model.

Ninth, a music education profession that takes seriously its role in the *production* of culture, as opposed to its mere *reproduction*, can scarcely confine its efforts to schools. The perspective described here implies important educational roles for musics and indi-

viduals to whom the existing system of institutionalized music education recognizes little obligation, whose existence, indeed, it scarcely concedes. Only if music education becomes characterized by dialectical reciprocity between the musical values of the community and those of institutionalized musical instruction can the profession effect a reclamation of human agency from the destructive processes of commodification and repetition.

The cultural and value plurality of the decades ahead, together with the increasing politicization of previously marginalized groups (women, racial and ethnic subcultures, the elderly), will require serious reassessment of many traditional assumptions about music and musical instruction. The reproductive conception of musical education, crafted during an era easily placated with assertions of universal truth and value, and when students came from highly similar communities, is nearing obsolescence. Learning to deal sensitively and meaningfully with a multiplicity of musical voices and homes where, for years, relatively few have kept us abundantly busy, is among the greatest challenges confronting the music education profession. Our attempts to meet that challenge and to feel our way into an uncertain future will be immeasurably enhanced by a restoration of sound and sociality to their properly central position in musical education.

Notes

1. John Shepherd, “Music and Male Hegemony,” in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, *Music and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1987): 161.
2. James Attali, *Noise* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): 24. On page 27, Attali further equates noise with dirt, pollution, blasphemy, and plague. Consider in this light the use of rock music as a weapon by American troops against Manuel Noriega in Panama in 1988. Consider as well a September, 1992, newspaper article carried by Reuters which relates that a Chicago

high school instructor uses Frank Sinatra recordings as punishment: "The kids just hate it. They're miserable," he boasts. The idea of music as a weapon presents a startling contrast to many of the doctrines traditionally espoused by music educators.

3. In *Creative Music Education* (New York: Schirmer, 1975) R. Murray Schafer has characterized the large ensemble experience as "herdesque happiness" (235) and choral singing as "the most perfect example of communism ever achieved by man." (223).

4. It would seem that *aural* musical traditions (jazz among them) would by their very nature resist representation's commodification more strenuously than their notated counterparts. For such aural music, the possibility of repetition represents a radically profound transformation. What was formerly an utterly unique and singular event (as opposed to a "work" tied to a score) becomes entrapped and frozen in recordings and is henceforth an easily replicated artifact.


5. Page 142. It is intriguing to consider in this light claims that jazz constitutes a distinctive musical genre or idiom (as opposed, that is, to a different "style" or way of "doing" what other art music "do"). Such claims to inherent difference are generally denied by advocates of the aesthetic-rational perspective whose theoretical orientation requires that all "genuinely" musical experience be mediated by the same fundamental cognitive processes and mechanisms. It is noteworthy that jazz circles accord high priority to individuality, difference, chance, spontaneity, freedom, and even anarchy — each of which contrasts rather markedly with the values, priorities, and social order implicit in other music. Is jazz a style or an idiom?

6. Hank Bromley: "Identity Politics and Critical Pedagogy," in *Educational Theory*, Vol. 39, No. 3 Summer, 1989: 209.

7. This is Wilfrid Sellars' phrase, cited in Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989, Cambridge University Press) p. 59.

8. Rorty, *Contingency*, pp. 191-92.

9. Austin Caswell explores this line of thought in "Canonicity in Academia: A Music Historian's View," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Fall 1991: 129-145.

10. I owe this vivid phrase to Christopher Lasch's "The Degradation of Work and the Apotheosis of Art," in Donald Shetler (ed.) *The Future of Musical Education in America* (Rochester, NY: Eastman School of Music Press, 1984). 

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