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Oral Transmission: A Marriage of Music, Language, and Tradition

Emma Patterson

When studying a standard music history textbook, the chapters typically go in chronological order by first discussing the earliest forms of music that were transmitted through oral tradition. More often than not there will be comments such as, “Before written notation was developed. . .” to refer to orally transmitted music practices. However, this encourages a misunderstanding that oral transmission and written notation are opposites. Oral transmission incorrectly becomes the weaker, outdated version of the advanced written music notation. However, oral transmission is far from being an archaic practice.

There is a false dichotomy between oral transmission and written notation, but fortunately, researchers have recently become eager to better understand oral transmission and have developed a much more informed and fascinating answer. Research continues to develop our definition of ancient and contemporary oral transmission.

My goal is to delve into the evolving research and join the conversation on the relevancy of oral transmission.

I propose that oral transmission is not only present in today’s world, but is an inseparable part of music in general. Despite misconceptions that music was primitive before it was documented in music notation, oral transmission was a sophisticated method used before as well as amidst music notation and it continues to be inextricably incorporated in music, language, tradition, and culture.

I will examine this topic by challenging common misconceptions about oral transmission, reviewing the evolution of music scholars’ views of oral tradition, and exploring examples of oral transmission in contemporary music.

Concept and terms should be clarified:

The terms oral and aural tradition are used frequently in research as well as this discourse. Oral culture refers to what is spoken and sung, and aural culture refers to what is heard. Both are necessary for effective transmission to occur, and oral and aural methods are

almost always simultaneously present in most societies.¹ When oral culture is discussed here, it refers to the combination of both elements and is closely related to oral tradition.

The most notable terms to differentiate are oral transmission and oral tradition. Typically, oral transmission refers to the basic action of passing information, in this case music, through oral and aural means. Oral tradition, however, is the more general concept that synthesizes oral transmission, tradition, and culture.

Misunderstandings about ancient oral transmission that negatively affect the way musicians view music history and also the process of how music was and currently is conceived, recorded, and shared. One of the crucial misunderstandings is the belief that there is a strict dichotomy between oral and written transmission. Leo Treitler addresses this in his article, “Oral, Written, and Literate Process in the Transmission of Medieval Music.” He discusses that scholars and musicians view medieval music with this dichotomy in mind because historically, our evidence of orally transmitted music styles ends about the time that our evidence of notated styles begins—around the end of the ninth century.² Though this is a correct understanding of how notation developed chronologically, Treitler disagrees with the assumption that they are separate processes, and argues that, “the realization process entailed copying, remembering, and composing, separately or all at once, in various mixes.”³ Both the oral and notated tradition requires this realization process, so they should not be viewed as opposite styles. Because remembering, copying, and composing naturally occurs in both oral and notated processes, they should be viewed instead as subtly different, complex, and connected traditions.

The belief in a dichotomy between oral and notated traditions also leads to the assumption that music must have been transmitted either imperfectly through oral transmission or perfectly through written transmission. Musicians learning the history of music imagine a tattered, ever changing tune passed from generation to generation through oral means, while a notated piece travels, untouched through time. However, both Treitler in his previous article, and Jordan Sramek in his article, “Seeking Common Ground through Oral Tradition,” assert that early-notated works were typically not effective representations of the orally produced music. The written process is often mistakenly viewed as a stable form of communication in a sort of untouchable vacuum, but many elements, such as the performer, scribe, and various channels the

¹ Akesson, “Oral/Aural Culture in Late-Modern Society?” 70.

² Treitler, “Oral, Written, and Literate Process in the Transmission of Medieval Music,” 473-474.

³ *Ibid.*, 473.

music is put through constantly temper with the elements of the music.⁴ Also, in these early communities, there was no regular practice of using these notated sources practically or of transcribing the music for preservation. Sramek describes that these works were not at all meant as a perfect copy to use for future reproduction. The earliest neumatic notation was simply an aid for experienced singers to recall from their memories what had already been placed there. Sramek even boldly argues that when looking for solid evidence of ancient music, “musically notated source material of any historical significance is highly unlikely.”⁵ When contemporary musicians seek to reproduce ancient music, it is often more helpful to look to the tradition itself, such as the memorized skills, styles, and culture, to properly carry on the oral transmission.⁶

However, there also shouldn't be the notion that when orally transmitted music was first notated, it was haphazardly written down. It is true, early notation was simply a series of “mnemonic symbols” above the text,⁷ and it was also deficient in many instructions that contemporary musicians and scholars would consider necessary in transmitting music. However, these texts had a “very handsome and tidy physical appearance,” proving these texts were not hasty notes scribbled down to help a specific musician.⁸ In context of the period, composers, scribes and performers had a thorough knowledge of the performance tradition and skills involved. The scribes intentionally only included what was necessary to signal the musicians at that time of the general melodic curve of the song while they performed. The musicians would then pull from their minds the skills and traditions already in place to properly perform the piece. This also emphasizes my claim that oral and notated transmission of music are two traditions that developed to work together. Oral tradition is the medium by which music is created and rests in musicians' minds, and written tradition is the medium that keeps the oral tradition alive, aids the musician's memory, and serves as the means of transmitting musical information indirectly.

There is substantial evidence for the interdependence of oral and notated music from distinguished musicologists in the field. During a lecture at Harvard University in 1989, Albert B. Lord describes how during the times of vibrant oral tradition, “the singer and the audience shared knowledge and had the same sense of values. . .they shared tradition.”⁹ The tradition of sharing and experiencing music and tradition together was the motivation behind oral

⁴ Ibid., 473.

⁵ Sramek, “Seeking Common Ground through Oral Tradition,” 215.

⁶ Ibid., 217.

⁷ Ibid., 216.

⁸ Treitler, “The Transmission of Medieval Music,” 477.

⁹ Due and Lord, “Performance and Performer: The Role of Tradition in Oral Epic Song.”

transmission and could essentially be the motivation for music in general. However, the motivation for early music notation was the need for subtle reminders and documentation of the oral tradition. Leo Treitler remarks in his research, “There is no reason to think that it is a fundamentally different process if the maker has written the chant down in a book rather than singing it out in the service.”¹⁰ Both scholars remark that oral and written traditions actually work together. The notated music is the documentation of the oral performance practice.

This previous research provides a foundation and helps sift through some misconceptions about oral transmission. There is also now a growing amount of research that builds on initial studies and illustrates new ideas contemporary experts have about ancient oral music transmission. Anna Maria Busse Berger, a noted scholar of the connections between music and memory, commented in her book, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, that music scholars have started to, “ask where, when, and why many of our views on music history originated,”¹¹ There are specific concepts scholars have started to understand and appreciate about oral transmission that assert its continuing relevancy. Researchers can even trace the development of appreciation for oral transmission over the decades.

One primary example is the budding concept of melodic stability. The initial misassumption when considering the faults of orally transmitted music is that oral transmission is like a game of telephone. The original phrase is whispered from one person to the next until by the end of the line of listeners and re-interpreters the phrase is often completely different from the original or just complete nonsense. However, orally transmitted music follows a different pattern than the telephone game’s basic principles. Composers were not trying to “trick” listeners with unusual patterns but sought to compose music with ease of future oral transmission in mind. The performers perpetuating the song were insistent on keeping the melodic structure intact and were well trained in the musical conventions the composer followed.

Earlier sources already indicate there is surprising melodic stability in orally transmitted songs. Bertrand H. Bronson wrote his article, “Melodic Stability in Oral Transmission” in 1951, and he discusses how melodic stability in ancient times was already a prevalent idea during his time.¹² He compares the stability to biology, where we find “The same infinite variety among the individuals of a species. . .but, over all, an imperious insistence upon self-perpetuation in generic

¹⁰ Treitler, “The Transmission of Medieval Music,” 480.

¹¹ Busse Berger, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, 9.

¹² Bronson. “Melodic Stability in Oral Transmission,” 50-55.

types.”¹³ Bronson then plots the melodies of a family of the same folk song and proves how the song, even over generations, follows the same melodic contour. It is important to note that Bronson does disclaim there is also evidence for partial or total avoidance of particular notes.¹⁴ However, this only perpetuates a developing idea that oral transmission was not an act of carbon copying a song in a collective memory, but rather recreating and perpetuating a song while keeping its essential shape and elements intact.

Further down the lineage of this concept is research from Leo Treitler, who, in 1974, identifies the same concept in his article, “Homer and Gregory: The Transmission of Epic Poetry and Plainchant.” He defends the stable and enduring tradition of orally recreating and developing music by asserting, “remembering is a process not of reproduction but of reconstruction.”¹⁵ The stable “melodic contour” that Bronson previously mentions in his article is further described as “points of orientation” in Treitler’s writing. Treitler takes the position that orally transmitted music has formulas that have developed because of the essential need to remember music in this way. The performers know the melodic types, and the formulas are what are memorized more than anything else. There is a strategy the performers use for recreating these melodies and songs, so it is hardly the pure act of copying exactly what the performer heard from the previous transmission.

The most recent research continues to expand on these ideas and focuses most on the overall complexity and deeply rooted connection between oral transmission and music itself. In her article, “Music as Means of Transmission in Jesus Communities,” written in 2013, Holly Hearon doesn’t even distinguish between oral transmission and notated transmission.¹⁶ Instead, she seeks to clarify the distinction between music and language itself. She describes, “When words and music are combined as song, the result is a distinctive communicative medium that is neither wholly words nor wholly music.”¹⁷ She considers oral transmission as tightly woven with speech itself. This describes one of the most distinctive developments of our contemporary understanding of oral tradition and transmission and also lends to how fluid our definition of it has become. Orally transmitted music is hardly viewed as a genre or style but as an integral part of music, language, and culture.

¹³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵ Treitler, “Homer and Gregory: The Transmission of Epic Poetry and Plainchant,” 344.

¹⁶ Hearon, “Music as Means of Transmission in Jesus Communities,” 180-190.

¹⁷ Ibid., 181.

A contributing factor to the oral transmission discussion is new findings that there was a greater amount of improvisation valued in orally transmitted music of the ancient past than we understood before.¹⁸ When an amount of improvisation is present, and orally transmitted music was performed as an interpretation of a piece, music becomes a representation of the overall music context and culture of the time. Hearon comments, “Participants are a part of an ongoing creative process,” and praises oral tradition as essential to a “community’s ‘canon’ of tradition.”¹⁹ Composers and musicians within this tradition are cultural ambassadors responsible for not only understanding the methods and rules for the music, but also interpreting it with their own cultural context and flavor. The contemporary appreciation for oral transmission has certainly increased, and research supports that oral tradition has the power to, “effect social reproduction and serve to unite and define social groupings.”²⁰ Now, instead of a rudimentary method of reproducing and continuing music, oral transmission is defined as a practice that intertwines language, music, and culture.

Most of this research for oral tradition is from ancient music, but language, music, and culture still certainly exist in the current day. Composers and musicians are still considered cultural ambassadors because they certainly interpret music with their own cultural context. These “ancient” oral tradition styles play just as vibrant a role as they did in ancient times because oral transmission is inextricably intertwined with music as a whole. Ingrid Akesson discusses the role of oral tradition in modern society in her article, “Oral/Aural Culture in Late-Modern Society? Traditional Singing as Professionalized Genre and Oral-Derived Expression,” and first describes the natural marriage of oral and aural tradition. She describes how they both naturally occur together in societies because the transmission occurs with both a speaker and a listener. She regards them as a continuum rather than separate modes, and they “mutually interact and affect each other.”²¹ Though the connection between oral and aural transmission this seems obvious, it further affirms that oral tradition occurs inherently in all social contexts.

Akesson also asserts the consistency of oral tradition through time and establishes, “Tunes have chiefly been transmitted in oral/aural ways, far into the twentieth century, and into our own time.”²² Melodies and songs are still mostly orally derived, and this also pertains to the passing

¹⁸ Ibid., 186.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 182.

²¹ Akesson, “Oral/Aural Culture in Late Modern Society?”67-84.

²² Ibid., 71.

on of performance styles and skills. She also interestingly states that it is considered true mediated orality if it is “subject to continuous change.”²³ Akesson alludes that in order for oral transmission to be authentic, it in fact should be malleable and perhaps should change from transmission to transmission. This concept was discussed earlier for evidence of medieval melody stability, but there is evidence of the malleable yet continuous melody in current music. Some examples of acceptable modern transmission are borrowing stanzas and refrains from other ballads, stressing certain motifs, melodic variation, minor changes in the text, changing the mood of the music through changing keys or chord patterns, and creating entirely new melodies for the text.²⁴

However, even with a simple understanding of music history, researchers can see musical transmission has certainly changed since ancient times. So what is the largest change? While the presence of oral transmission is certainly alive, there has been a change in the amount of vertical transmission versus horizontal transmission.²⁵ Horizontal transmission is the dispersal of music to other people in one generation at one time, while vertical transmission is the prolonging of music to later generations. Horizontal transmission still certainly exists, while vertical oral transmission is not as pertinent. Written notation more effectively executes vertical transmission, because written scores and music more accurately transmits information to later generations. However, oral transmission is still richly horizontally active because musicians and music lovers are constantly sharing and transmitting music to each other.

Examples of how horizontal transmission occurs in late modern society are strongly tied to the growing mediatized world. Scholars use the term “mediated orality”²⁶ to describe anything that assists in the oral transmission process, and in the contemporary world, mediated orality is now typically associated with technology. Technology, though it is notated in a way, is more of an electronic version of oral transmission. CDs, MP3 players, recording equipment, internet, and social media especially are important elements of contemporary oral tradition. Miikka Salavuo asserts that the Internet is no longer just about finding information; it is ingrained in our way of

²³ Ibid., 74.

²⁴ Ibid., 76.

²⁵ Ibid., 73.

²⁶ Ibid., 74.

life.²⁷ Salavuo and a number of other researchers have also picked up on how oral tradition has already become ingrained in our Internet and social media habits.

A sense of belonging to a community is a motivation behind internet and social media especially, and that motivation is also essential to the lifeblood of oral tradition. Much value in the way we use the internet now comes from the possibilities to externalize our own ideas, music included, as well as explore other musicians, music, and communities to interact with.²⁸ One of the most well known examples of mediated musical oral transmission in social media is YouTube. Musicians can easily post their videos of music they perform and viewers all over the world can immediately access their work. Viewers can then quickly learn the music by listening to it and may even copy the performer's piece and interpret and perform it themselves. The constant activity on Youtube and social media in general of uploading one's own music, listening to other's music, providing and receiving feedback, recommending music, connecting together and making joint projects, and blog posts about the song-writing process are all examples of oral transmission at work in late modern society.²⁹ In some ways, social media is providing a much more horizontal transmission of music than ever before with the wide stretching breadth of the Internet community.

Another example of oral transmission permeating contemporary music is music education. Interestingly, an emphasis on aural music learning was not part of "traditional" learning styles in formal education of the past. In her article, "Social Media as an Opportunity for Pedagogical Change in Music Education," Miikka Salavuo describes, "The idea of collaborative processing of knowledge, alongside the culture of contributing to traditional practices of education was often alien to the existing learning culture."³⁰ However, the idea of intentionally incorporating aural learning and oral tradition in our music education is blossoming. Salavuo remarks that in recent years, we have become, "much more conscious of our historical past. Our late modern society is starting to view oral transmission as an important pedagogical tool."³¹ Music educators now see oral transmission and aural skills as an effective technique to help students focus on playing style, interpretation, and individuality rather than simply duplicating the tune.

²⁷ Salavuo, "Social Media as an Opportunity for Pedagogical Change in Music Education," 121-136.

²⁸ Ibid., 123.

²⁹ Ibid., 126-127.

³⁰ Ibid., 121-136.

³¹ Akesson, "Oral/Aural Culture in Late Modern Society?" 74.

Music educators are engaging in the tradition and also adding elements to fit the contemporary times. Technology plays a strong role in not only mediating the social element of oral tradition, but also the educational element. Kathryn Marsh in her article, “Mediated Orality: The Role of Popular Music in the Changing Tradition of Children’s Musical Play,” reinforces that technology reinforces the repetitive and social learning that is involved with oral tradition. Listening and watching videos and CDs provide templates for children to learn whole songs and the formulas that shape them and allow them to “utilize their own ways of learning to derive what they require from this oral-aural source.”³² Ancient methods of absorbing and recalling large amounts of music required learning patterns and skills more than pure memorizing. Similarly, contemporary music media provides a repetitive mediated orality that encourages memorizing patterns, shapes, and formulas for music.

This whole idea of oral tradition in music education is contradictory to the more traditional, instructivist model of education, which typically involves only receiving and internalizing information from another source. However, the growing interest in engaging oral transmission in education shows a growing recognition of some of the most natural and human ways to learn—through social interaction and developing skills.

An example of how oral transmission naturally occurs is in children’s play. When Marsh discusses mediated orality, she uses the specific example of contemporary children’s musical play. There is a misassumption that children’s musical play is threatened by contemporary music styles and technology, but Marsh argues that it is simply another part of oral tradition that continues to develop the oral culture. Electronic sources such as radio, video, and digital audio, are not only relevant, but an, “integral part of [children’s] auditory and visual environment.”³³ When children engage in the current popular music through the mediated oral methods, they are enriching their music education and societies’ oral tradition. The singing games and music children use during play are predominantly transmitted through oral methods. Marsh even references back to Albert B. Lord and connects these concepts with his original concept of oral transmission being associated with formulas. She cites, “As part of an active oral tradition, children’s playground singing games are composed orally by means of combining culturally predetermined formulae, a formula being defined as a standardized pattern of sounds which will

³² Marsh, “Mediated Orality,” 2-12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

evoke an implicit meaning for those within the culture (Lord 1960).”³⁴ Even in contemporary children’s musical play, there is evidence of oral tradition through remembering and utilizing patterns and incorporating culture and interpretation.

Late modern children’s learning habits also easily connect back with Busse Berger’s discussion about medieval learning techniques. A young boy during the medieval era, “from the moment [he] entered a monastery. . .spent much of his time singing and memorizing chant.”³⁵ Young children then, even if for different reasons, memorized chants and psalms by heart. Even when they could read and write, they still memorized music and writing was still used as a “mnemonic tool.”³⁶ This can be seen in contemporary children’s musical learning, too. Even when children are learning basic music notation, songs from popular media are still learned by heart, and children develop musical habits and understandings through the music they hear everyday.

Children aren’t the only ones naturally using oral transmission in late modern society. Adult musicians use oral tradition abundantly, and jazz music especially is a key example of relevant oral tradition. Kenneth E. Prouty in his article, “Orality, Literacy, and Mediating Music Experience,” even criticizes notated learning styles and praises the oral learning focus in jazz music for surpassing intellectual barriers.³⁷ Prouty describes how musical apprenticeships are still extremely valued in the jazz community and other music communities as well.³⁸ Jazz teaching usually follows a structure where the teacher plays a selection and the student repeats it to the best of his ability, with very little written guidance. Also, when learning jazz, teachers will often tell their students to “listen to the greats.” Jazz is one of the many genres of music that cannot be taught simply from written notation, so jazz musicians learn from constantly listening, copying, and interpreting music from great musicians of the past and present.

This is evident in the popularity of fake books for jazz and other popular music. Musicians use fake books, essentially simplified chord charts of popular songs, to use as a guideline for the more intricate music they play. Fake books are not meant to be followed exactly but instead provide an aid for musicians to recall melodic information they already have in their memories. Does this sound familiar? Just as medieval musicians would use neumes to remind them of the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Busse Berger, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, 47.

³⁶ Ibid., 48.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Prouty, “Orality, Literacy, and Mediating Musical Experience,” 317-334.

melody and patterns they already learned, contemporary musicians use fake books to give melodic signals and stir their memory for the correct musicality.

Breaching the barriers of its reputation as a stagnant custom that occurred before written notation developed, oral transmission has been a pervasive practice throughout the history of music. From communication in ancient medieval times to education in current music circles, there is an abundance of research pointing to the essential qualities of oral transmission that inextricably marries it to music, language, and culture. Oral transmission is not something that needs to be specifically revived or taught, because it is a tradition that will always occur as long as music, language, and culture are present. However, it can be further encouraged as an effective pedagogical tool and celebrated as it continues evolving as culture and music evolves as well. Its characteristics of repetition, skill-based learning, and consistency along with flexibility make musical oral transmission a practice that has stood the test of time, from the development of written musical notation to the advancement of technology and social media.

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