

**Practice and theory, orality and literacy:  
Performance in the 21st century**

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**Abstract**

Applying Walter Ong's characteristics of orally-based thought and expression directly to modes of musical memory, learning and performance, and an understanding of the contrasting nature of orality and literacy, further informs our understanding of performance, and the dynamics of the practice/theory relationship. This allows us more fully to explain different modes of behaviour of practitioners and scholars, vis-à-vis musical performance, as well as the learning and memory used to develop and deliver performances. Placing Ong's research in the context of Western Art music, we realise that musicians engaged across practice and theory are travelling along a continuum, between states of oral- and literate-being.

Keywords: Ong, orality, literacy, practice, theory.

Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* explores oral and literate cultures, provoking us to question the very notion of our existence, irrevocably shaped by an overwhelmingly literate society (Ong 1982). Upon his death in 2003, aged 90, Ong was University Professor Emeritus, Professor Emeritus of English, and Professor Emeritus of Humanities in Psychiatry at his alma mater, Saint Louis University, Missouri, USA. Saint Louis University was founded in 1818 by Reverend Louis William Du Bourg, Catholic Bishop of Louisiana, and still maintains the Jesuit link which began in 1826.

Ong became a Jesuit aged 23, then studied philosophy, theology and English at Saint Louis. He obtained an MA in 1941 for research on poetic rhythm in Gerard Manley Hopkins, and licentiate degrees in Sacred Theology and Philosophy. Ong's 1955 PhD from Harvard concerned the 16th-century French scholar Petrus Ramus. Ong then taught at Saint Louis until his retirement.

This paper considers Ong's orality and literacy, in terms of practice and theory, in respect of Western Art music.

### **Orality and Literacy**

Ong's study begins by investigating the "orality of language" through the literate mind and the oral past, and the notion of oral literature (Ong 1982: 5-15). For Ferdinand de Saussure, oral speech was pre-eminent; writing possessed simultaneous uses, shortcomings and dangers (Ong 1982: 5). Linguistics as a discipline has achieved much since Saussure. Until Ong, however, little attention was given to how "primary orality", i.e. cultures untouched by literacy, contrasts literacy (Ong 1982: 11). It is difficult to imagine life without writing and notation, but crucial to undertake as it encourages us to question how literacy shapes our lives.

Research in the area of literary studies, particularly Milman Parry's and Albert B. Lord's work on Homeric poetry, reawakened the scholarly world to the "oral character of language" (Ong 1982: 6). The distinctive features of Homeric poems, noted by Parry, Lord and later scholars, were a direct result of the economy enforced by their oral methods of creation (Ong 1982: 21). The poems' cliché-like elements and formulas, grouped around standardised themes, less varied and more obtrusive than literary themes, were crucial to memorisation and preservation. Such findings revolutionised studies of so-called epic poetry, and were felt soon after in anthropology and literary history (Ong 1982: 27).

What can musicians, particularly those of us engaged in across practice and theory, take from this research? Ong himself writes "if attention to sophisticated orality-literacy contrasts is growing in some circles, it is still relatively rare in many fields where it could be helpful" (Ong 1982: 11). Performance is certainly a field which stands to benefit from further reflection on the nature of practice and theory, through a greater awareness of orality and literacy.

Before relating Ong's work to music, however, we must consider differences between oral cultures and literate cultures.

Language is overwhelmingly oral; just over 100 of the thousands of languages known to humans have produced a corpus of literature. At the end of the 20th

century, not quite 80, of the 3000 or so, languages spoken had a literature. Ong's belief that "the basic orality of language is permanent" rings true amongst this apparent paucity of literature. Even grammar is born out of the performance of language (Ong 1982: 7).

Ong calls a spoken language a *dialect*. It, through visual notation becomes a *grapholect*; only a few dialects undergo this transformation, each becoming a "transdialectal language formed by a deep commitment to writing" (Ong 1982: 8). A *grapholect*'s power lies in its function as a semantic repository, creating a residue unknown in orality. The potential for vocabulary preservation and expansion is exponential in a written language. Oral cultures, however, have fewer word resources, with the meaning of each derived exclusively from current practice. Ong asserts that: "Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality" (Ong 1982: 8).

Orality and literacy impact fundamentally on how knowledge is gained and stored. Analytic thought is common to both; writing and reading are crucial for abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of stated norms or phenomena (Ong 1982: 8). In contrast, oral thought is shaped by modes of learning: through imitation, repetition, participation, combination and recombination. To 'study' means something quite different in oral and literate cultures (Ong 1982: 9).

The Greek alphabet had developed by c. 720 BC, but not until Plato, some 300 years later, was writing fully interiorised (Ong 1982: 24). *Techne rhetorike* means 'speech art'. *Rhetorike*, the art of oratory or public speaking, was oral, however reflective and organised. In antiquity it was uncommon to speak *verbatim* from a pre-prepared text; speeches were transcribed after the event, and studied thus as texts not spoken utterances. Writing enabled the organisation of the constituents of oratory into a scientific art, thereby enhancing orality. The scholarly mind has been dominated relentlessly by textuality leaving the effective articulation and understanding of orality wanting. Ong reminds us: "words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever" (Ong 1982: 12).

### **Pedagogy, Ethnography and Ethnomusicology**

In their provocatively-titled *The Intuitive Practitioner: On the Value of Not Always Knowing What One is Doing*, Terry Atkinson and Guy Claxton explore relationships between “articulate/rational/explicit” modes of knowledge and their acquisition versus “inarticulate/intuitive/implicit ways”. These contrasting modes embody the very characteristics of literacy and orality (Atkinson and Claxton 2000).

Ethnographers have, as James Clifford asserts in *Writing Culture*, come to terms with “the consequences of literacy” in beginning to understand how “one group of humanity has for millennia construed its world” (Clifford 1986:10). The “self-reflexive fieldwork account”, a subgenre of ethnographic which emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s began to challenge literacy on its own terms. These accounts, “variously sophisticated and naïve, confessional and analytic”, allow the discussion of “epistemological, existential and political issues” whilst attempting different textual strategies (Clifford 1986:14). He continues:

The principle of dialogical textual production goes well beyond the more or less artful presentation of “actual” encounters. It locates cultural interpretations in many sorts of reciprocal contexts, and obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multi-subjective, power-laden, and incongruent...Once dialogism and polyphony are recognised as modes of textual production, monophonic authority is questioned. (Clifford 1986:14)

Naturally Ong’s words have already resonated within ethnomusicology. In her study of collection practices amongst Italian traditional songs, pre-1939, Linda Barwick reports that the history of an orally-transmitted song is “the history of the lives and the experiences of the people who performed it. Documents of such represent only random moments in a constantly varying process of growth and adaptation” (Barwick 1988-9: 35-41). By the process of transcription, indigenous musics move from their world of orality into the ‘other’ world of literacy, becoming deflowered during this profound shift

The late Catherine Ellis, draws on anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson’s three levels of progressive learning (Ellis 1986: 6). Ellis uses Bateson in to interrogate perceived divergence in the evaluation of different skill levels of music-making. The participatory and imitative nature of Ellis’s own *Learning I* owes much to orality. She perceives boundaries between ‘learnings’ as

presenting problems for the learner. In Ongian terms, this is clearly a result of the shifts between heavily-oral and heavily-literate modes of learning. Indeed, Ellis's *Learning III*, is one with ecstatic experiences many performers find difficult to convey in words: "At this level the musical material suddenly becomes in some inexplicable way luminous, operating as if by itself, with the performer merely a spectator. The audience immediately senses when this has occurred" (Ellis 1986: 7). This suggests the strong intervention of an oral state of consciousness within a literate experience.

### **Orality and Literacy: Interrelations - Oral memorisation and the interiority of sound**

Studies of extant narrative poets in former Yugoslavia yielded further insights into orality. When oral peoples acquire literacy skills, i.e. they learn to read and write, their skills in orality are disabled. Once text becomes a controlling narrative, normal processes of oral composition become untenable. 'Originality' in orality is the effective undertaking of a bespoke weaving of traditional materials into the fabric of each performance (Ong 1982: 41). Oral persons respond to social pressures to vary material, and only recount what audiences want or are prepared to tolerate. Oral memory's "highly-somatic" component distinguishes it from textual memory (Ong 1982: 66). Orality fosters a more communal and externalised sense of self, as opposed to the introspective character of many literates (Ong 1982: 68). By the time a sound comes into 'being' it is on the way to 'not being'. In comparison with sight, sound is incorporating, having a centring effect. A sound-dominated verbal world employs "aggregative (harmonizing) tendencies" in contrast to the "analytic dissecting" modes of the inscribed visualised world (Ong 1982: 73).

### **Orality and Literacy: Characteristics of orally-based thought and expression**

Ong isolates nine characteristics of orally-based thought and expression (Ong 1982: 36-57), which is:

1. additive rather than subordinative, most obvious in a narrative where a statement is made. In the opening of the biblical book of

Genesis the creation of the world is described sequentially: A happened, then B, then C etc. Such accumulation eliminates hierarchy via a linguistic structure, i.e., the elaborate grammar of written discourse;

2. aggregative rather than analytic, reflected also in 1. above. It relies on formulas, often adjectival clauses such as 'the *glorious* revolution' 'the *brave* soldier' which literacy views "unwieldy" (Ong 1982: 38-39);

3. redundant or copious, largely as a result of the evanescence of oral utterances. Repetition keeps both speaker and listener attuned. Sparsely linear or analytic thought and speech are created by what Ong calls "the technology of writing"; later, he writes "oral cultures encourage fluency, fulsomeness, volubility" (Ong 1982: 40);

4. conservative or traditionalist by nature. The energy necessarily invested in repetition houses knowledge with a minority of respected persons, i.e. conservators. Writing, and printing, of course, are differently conservative but essentially democratise knowledge. However, it is important to note that in oral tradition "there will be as many minor variants of a myth as there are repetitions of it, and the number of repetitions can be increased indefinitely" (Ong 1982: 42);

5. situated in close proximity to the world of human experience. Oral cultures conceive of and verbalise all knowledge by close reference to practice, i.e. through personal knowledge derived from participation or observation. Few facts known to oral cultures are not rooted in the everyday. Learning takes place through observation and imitation, needing little recourse to verbal explanation;

6. agonistic in tone, where the context of knowledge is combative;

7. empathetic and participatory by nature. Oral cultures draw upon a close communal identification with the known instead of objective distance;

8. homoeostatic, set on preserving equilibrium between interdependent elements. Memories deemed no longer relevant and the meaning of words no longer true are discarded; "the integrity of the past is subordinate to that of the present" (Ong 1982: 48);

9. situational rather than abstract. Operational frames of reference are minimally theoretical, preferring to draw upon practice, i.e., categorisation according to use. Oral cultures do not deal in formally logical reasoning processes, definitions or even comprehensive descriptions, given the expectation of a shared awareness, or articulated self-analysis, as all of these a by-products of text-formed thought.

### **Ong and music: orality-literacy contrasts**

In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century it is highly unlikely and undesirable that any musician involved in the performance of music of the Western canon would be untouched by the literacy/notation tradition. Whilst Ong's observations apply more easily to non-Western musics, they are relevant to those whose activities reside within the Western canon.

In attempting to bridge the gap between practice and theory, is the act of speaking about performance an important intermediary step to make before we write? How should what we write differ from what we utter? Is there room for dialogism and polyphony here? As language is fundamentally oral, so music is fundamentally performed. The need to practise in order to develop as a performer parallels those ways in which oral thought is fashioned. By contrast, abstractly sequential, classificatory and explanatory interrogations characterise much musicological literature.

Musicians engaged in practice and theory really travel along a continuum, or spectrum, between states of oral and states of literate being. In performance we are more oral, when reflecting practice in theory, we are more literate. It helps to know *where* we are *when* we are there. We need to learn to recognise moments of transition between more extreme states of either oral or literate consciousness, as well as how we need such extremities to function most appropriately in either practice or theory. We must interrogate how these states shape our processes and our products. Performers who are unable or unwilling to articulate practice in theory are perhaps just less familiar with regulating the orality-literacy struggle within themselves.

The location of orally-based knowledge in the minds of its custodians mirrors the position of the majority of my colleagues at London's Royal College of

Music. Treatises and manuals make instrumental learning more readily available, but can one really learn both the art and craft of performance without recourse to a living practitioner? Just as oral cultures discard redundant meanings, redundant performance styles disappear. Since performance is embedded in the world of experience, is the most useful knowledge about performance known only to performers? We are all aware of a hierarchy amongst performers, particularly in our respective fields. But within the world of clarinettists to which I belong, those of us who play the instrument are bonded by a communal identity.

Musicologists, i.e., scholars whose musical life is firmly grounded in theory, have much to gain more explicitly from embracing oral modes of thinking. The relentless domination of the scholarly mind by textuality is mirrored by the often seemingly-relentless domination by musicology of research into music, and the relentless domination of written outputs. Persons theorising about music, particularly live and/or recorded practice, could realign their stance regarding use of literacy. We should accord primacy to the act of performance over that of any notated record. As the journey from dialect to grapholect empowers a language so too notation/recording can empower musical performance. But how does documentation detract from the entity that is performance? A written text is the residue of spoken language, likewise a recording, which offers a residue of a performance, but only a residue.

The popularity of empirical studies of musical performance, particularly as regards recorded performances, presents problems for musicians whose practical musical life is spent largely in the arena of live performance. This sub-discipline of musicology often exhibits overtly colonialist intentions in its harnessing of so-called scientific methodologies to legitimise musical performance. Some studies ignore features of the master/apprentice model on which the basis of teaching and learning in performance is grounded, that is, the more oral nature of this relationship. Too few realise the danger of referring to recorded performances as simply 'performances'.

As long as scholars with literate mind-sets interrogate and reflect on performance in a similarly literate manner, this interest will not be reciprocated on the part of performance. Studies of fundamentally oral procedures



undertaken by fundamentally literate persons using fundamentally literate means are profoundly flawed.

### **What next?**

A paper entitled 'Interpretation in creative practice-led PhD projects' suggested: "Critiquing the effects of binary oppositions between visual/performative creative work and textual/denotative exegetic work, we could adopt a more subtle and sympathetic approach to differences between language and image, which may reveal that creative aspects reside on both sides. Could writing, then, not be embraced as a parallel creative practice, for its own generative potentials, all through the process of a practice-led PhD project?" (Engles-Schwarpaul 2008: 105-7). This suggestion is worth adopting far beyond the realms of doctoral research. If we have yet to learn how to account for orality on its own terms, then there seems to be a similar lack of concepts for the effective understanding of practice except through theory.

In conclusion, let us return to Walter Ong:

Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness can never achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. (Ong 1982: 14)

Oral formulaic thought and expression ride deep in consciousness and the unconscious, and they do not vanish as soon as one used to them takes pen in hand. (Ong 1982: 26)

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Ingrid E. Pearson combines her position as Deputy Head of Graduate School at London's Royal College of Music with research and performance activities, working with ensembles including the *English Baroque Soloists*, *Florilegium*, *Gabrieli Consort*, *The Hanover Band*, *Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment* and *Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique*, at the BBC Proms, Lincoln Center Mostly Mozart Festival, The Barbican and Wigmore Hall.