TOWARD AN ELECTROACOUSTIC TRADITION
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ABSTRACT: This paper explores parallels between the passage from techniques of the oral tradition to those of the written tradition in Western music, and the current transition from techniques of the written tradition to those of the electroacoustic tradition.

The purpose of this first paper is to outline, without any detail or discussion on methodology, some of the most important issues on the matter that will be investigated more deeply in the future.

The goal, at a more general level, is to prove the existence of a new tradition based on electroacoustic technology and electronic media, and to point out the fact that this new tradition involves significant modifications in listening, context, composition, memorization, performance and transmission. These modifications are determining a change in musical thought and expression equal to that caused by the advent of the written tradition in Western musical life.

TRANSITIONS

We can compare the survival of residue of the habits of oral composition within the written one, and the retention of the manners of written composition within the electroacoustic one. Leo Treitler (1982) studied the musi-langauge relation in tropes, contrasting different versions of the same trope, in which oral and written processes of transmission interacted. He identified, in some of those versions a greater retention of the manners of the oral tradition (the melody being less differentiated within itself and less acutely responsive to the fine points of structure and meaning in the text, proceeding more mechanically to provide an adequate setting through the use of the conventional resources of the melodic tradition while other versions are more individualized because they have made a compositional task of providing a closely responsive setting of their text). He writes: 'Trop 17 melody is more static; the Aquitaine melody more dynamic. The bare fact that two phrases are identical in the two versions and two quite different is itself significant for the nature of the transmission. It is highly characteristic for a situation in which oral and written processes of transmission interacted. Although written models were undoubtedly at hand in the passage of such an item from one place to another, in taking up the item for their use, the musicians represented it through the screen of local styles and standards. (.) There is no doubt that we must learn to read the sources from this period as witnesses to a transition in musical thought and expression from oral to literate modes, for that is surely what they represent. The characteristics that I have thought to identify in the Trop 17 versions, and that I have just summarized, are typically characteristics of the products of oral traditions (.) In the age with which we are dealing here these characteristics are residues of the habits of oral composition, which cannot be expected to have been extinguished all at once by the introduction of writing, but only supplanted in varying degrees here and there by new modes of composition made possible by writing.(.) This exemplifies the general phenomenon in the transmission of trope melodies that often it is the form of the melodies, more than their surface details, that is transmitted' (Treitler 1982).

The wide use of MIDI and of written tradition compositional strategies within electroacoustic 'territories' is in some ways a sign of the transition the history of music is undergoing in our time. It would be highly unusual not to experience this transition. This matter has often been discussed in terms of the opposition purity/imparity. However, one could learn from history. How long did it take for the possibilities of written tradition to display all their complexity? How long will it take for the possibilities of electroacoustic tradition to display all their potential? Have oral tradition manners ever disappeared in music? Will written tradition models ever disappear? (.)

Goody (1987) suggests that it is not correct to divide 'cultures' using the concepts of 'written' and 'oral', it would be more appropriate to say oral or oral plus written, (one could add oral plus written plus
electroacoustic) etc. 'The problem of assigning a work to an oral or literate tradition is that we are not dealing with a clear-cut division. In the first place there is the important distinction between composition and performance, with the further possibility of having to differentiate between performance and transmission (Goody). Beside the tropes one can find many other examples of retention of the manners of oral tradition in written music (Toccata, Dances of the 16th and 17th century, Fantasia, Canzona da sonar, Falsebordone etc.) and certainly the same kind of overlapping between techniques of different traditions will be experienced in the future.

Oral composition in a written context is quite a different process from composition in a purely oral culture (Goody). One could also say written composition in an electroacoustic context is quite a different process from written composition in a purely oral plus written culture. One could think of Grieg, Zorn, Xenakis or Ligeti's music just to mention various examples of how electroacoustic means have influenced written music.

One should also take into account the fact that some cultures are experiencing a direct transition from an oral to an electroacoustic tradition. Of course, collective creative musical activities in Burundi are tending to disappear: the evening gatherings, for example, now take place more and more around the radio. But what does it matter if, on this radio, between a Zairian hit song and a successful French song from the 60s, you can still hear the whispering voice of an inanga player? (Proustau)

MEMORIZATION AND COMPOSITION TECHNIQUES

The planning and organization of abstract structures such as harmony and counterpoint in the Western tradition only became thinkable using an out-of-time representation such as the score (...) The transition in the Middle Ages from the use of notation as a mnemonic device (...) to a prescriptive set of coded instructions available only to those who could read them, lead to the rise of polyphonic music (...)

Ironically, computer music technology is often used to serve the notation-based composer by creating software analogous to word processors that might be called “note processors”. It is clear that technology by itself doesn’t necessarily precipitate a paradigm shift. New ideas lead to new technology, but new technology doesn’t always lead to new ideas. (Thau 1991)

Maybe we could try to describe some of the new possibilities that are afforded by electroacoustic technology: sound synthesis, creation of a timbre controlling its features; repetition of the same sound (not performing the same note as with acoustic instruments); transposition of a sound not altering the relation between the harmonics, use of the concept of object sonore as an extension of the concept of note; graphic representation not necessary but not excluded; possibility of using and elaborating sound objects coming from the oral or written tradition or from the soundscape as basic materials for a composition; possibility of playing a sound from its decay to its attack; creation of virtual (realistic or fictitious) spaces and contexts; capture, analysis and reproduction of random events and ‘mistakes’; use of very precise microtonal systems; possibility of using the computer’s ability to participate in the compositional process by using programs as a way of formalizing new concepts of musical language etc. These and other possibilities available with electroacoustic technology already have some wide-spread consequences, that are certainly going to develop in the future:

a) flourishing of pieces, both in contemporary and pop music, based on the concept of 'sound object' instead of the concept of 'note' (from most of electroacoustic music to pieces by 'Public Enemy' or 'Art of Noise' or even less sophisticated pop groups);
b) reassessed primacy of the aural experience in music (also with consequences for music analysis);
c) interaction of techniques of different traditions (oral, written and electroacoustic) in the same composition, and flourishing of pieces for instruments and tape or instruments and live electronics;
d) tendency of listening to any sort of music mostly via technology (CD, tape recorders, moog, etc.) and not directly from instruments; extension of the contexts of listening and use of virtual contexts.

These and other consequences reflect only some minor expectations about our use of ‘computer in music making, but evolution of ideas and perception is not so linear as the development of technology. It has to do with human beings (and with a market!) and it doesn’t always go toward expected directions...
TRANSMISSION, PERFORMANCE AND LISTENING

Many oral works are known because they have been written down, an action that in itself may transform that composition to a greater or lesser extent. (Goody) The reduction of micronational multituds in plainchant following the advent of writing in music has been widely discussed. Also the way electroacoustic means influence the listening of classic and contemporary music is widely known. Most of people know classical music from listening to CDs, cassettes, via media etc., and not from hearing it in concerts, so one can say that written works are mainly known nowadays, because they have been recorded. The action of recording can transform the composition to a greater or lesser extent.

One should consider the way pieces are recorded in sections, editing sounds and 'inventing' performances in studio. They become virtual, 'larger than life' performances, often put in comparison with 'real' ones. The possibility of looking backwards and thinking forwards and reworking that is afforded by electroacoustic means as regards recorded performances has a strong impact on the listening to music of the written tradition. One cannot compare this to the same possibilities (looking backwards, thinking forwards and reworking) that were afforded by writing with regard to transcriptions of oral chants, in a situation in which oral and written processes of transmission interacted (i.e. tropes).

In a purely oral tradition, in fact, in the absence of scores, the medium of composition is performance. (...) In composition through performance the primary, pervasive, and controlling condition is the continuity of the performance. (Trotter 1974) The separation of the time and place of composition from that of performance in the written tradition can be compared with the separation of the time and place of performance from that of listening in the electroacoustic tradition. The impact of the latter separation on listening habits, context, memorization, transmission, performance and composition is quite remarkable and should be considered as a sign of our time.

CONTEXT

Recording a performance and therefore reproducing the sounds of it also affects the context of listening to it. That performance may be reproduced in any kind of space or time. Truax and Schafer have often written about this split between an original sound and its electroacoustic reproduction referring to it as 'schizophrenia'. Original sounds are tied to the mechanisms which produce them. Electroacoustic sounds are copies and may be reproduced at other times or places. (Truax 1978) This wide-spread 'virtual context' is difficult to define but it's everywhere, we experience a different notion of space and time, listening to music in situations that were unthinkable in the past. All this has a strong impact on the ritual of listening to music in our time, as deep as the change of ritual that was experienced with the introduction of concert halls in musical life. The theory of electroacoustic music has often focused on the 'object' (music) rather than on the impact of electroacoustic means on human beings and their notion and experience of music, but we can't avoid these issues if we want to understand what is happening to our world.

TRANSMISSION AND ORIGIANL VERSIONS

We should also consider the changes in the field of memorization and transmission of music. One could say that transmission via a recorded version of a piece might have some points of contact with oral tradition, because they both support the primacy of aural experience in music. What is transmitted in oral culture though, is not the same 'object' as in electroacoustic transmission. We could mention the theory of oral composition and the notions of 'formula' and 'formulac system' developed by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the field of ilomeric studies and Yugoslavian epic tradition, and applied to plainsong by Lou Toulker, to explain all that, but the next example, quite extreme in fact, regarding the recitation of the Bagre, recorded among the Lobiagga of northern Ghana, will be clear enough: 'What happens in performance is that the Speaker recites, the audience listens and one or more individuals respond by repeating his words. However, Speaker and respondents are not working from an original that both have learned, the chorus repeats exactly what the Speaker says, and they are in no position to question him. It is he that has the authority of the 'text' on which he sits; his words are the Bagre. He
recites rapidly and cannot be interrupted unless he himself calls upon someone else to take over. It is true that on the next occasion the recital takes place, another Speaker may choose to ignore some form of words, some order of incident, that his predecessor used. But since he does not explain that he thinks his predecessor was wrong, the audience now has (at least) two differing models in front of them. Indeed new models proliferate all the time. It is not simply that there is an absence of sanctions against deviation from the original, but rather that the whole concept of an original is out of place. For even if people were trying to reproduce and correct a recital of this length and complexity, they would be unable to do so because they cannot set utterances side by side. It is quite different with texts where writing gives the work an external spatial dimension. A detailed comparison of successive verbal inputs of this length and rapidity is quite beyond the capability of the long-term memory of individuals in oral societies. Since there is no one authoritative speaker or authorized context (judges exist in many settings), versions proliferate. (Goody) These same ideas can't be thoroughly applied to plainchant for example, (because of the existence of authorized contexts and schools), but it is the concept of the non-existence of the original version that we are focusing on now. Oral tradition must be understood as a normal practice whose object and effect is to preserve traditions. (...) This brings to a conception of an improvisational practice that carries the sense of elaboration and variation upon a Grundgestalt. (Tetzlaff 1974) This Grundgestalt follows certain rules, based on tradition, that the singer learned to apply.

In a written tradition, instead, the original version of a piece exists, and it is written on paper. This leaves a possibility of proliferation of versions for as regards performance. In an electroacoustic domain even a recorded improvisation can become 'original' (such is one done by a Charlie Parker), and so also 'performance' can be transmitted. It is interesting to notice that we can study an improvisational style just listening again and again to the same recorded versions. One can find people playing the same jazz standards, using a similar improvisational style in different countries of our world. This brings us to the idea of inter-ethnic, inter-cultural schools and nets of relations that were inconceivable before the advent of electroacoustic means.

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