

From text to discourse. Oral features in popular music

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As a scholar my work over many years has involved me in the study of the musical avant-garde of the XX Century. As an Italian I have great experience of the deep-rooted conservatism of the Italian musical establishment and academic circles and the discrimination with regard to what in my country is often called “consumer music”: a label generally used as a badge of infamy by those who consider themselves to be above any failings of this kind.

Over recent years – finally coming back to my origins – I have become increasingly interested in music which lies outside the academic realm: popular music (with particular emphasis on experimental trends) and non-European music. On this territory, as was inevitable, I came up against the phenomenon of world music and little by little was born the conviction that the ideological divide between western art music and popular music cannot be explained in terms of the hackneyed dualisms of highbrow/lowbrow (Levine 1988), autonomy/heteronomy, art/non-art, etc. I am convinced that the deepest roots of this comparison/encounter must be sought in a completely different milieu, that is in the cultural and linguistic sphere in which is enacted the complex dialectic between the written and the oral, a relationship that, as we are all too well aware, has been revolutionized by the developments in sound reproduction and media communications.

The differences between western art music and popular music probably rest on these foundations. Notwithstanding the hybridization between *art* and *popular* that has always been an active ingredient in the processes of change in languages and musical practices – from Johannes de Grocheo to Wendy Carlos, from Orlando di Lasso to Mauricio Kagel, Frank Zappa, George Martin or Brian Eno – this otherness remains, in my view, very substantial.

World Music, or rather the interface, the hybridization or even the *coalition* between western popular music, non-western popular music, non-western traditional music and non-western art music casts light on this different nature, showing how almost completely extraneous these forms of music are to the technology of written music, with their common use of formulaic techniques, mnemonic approaches to shared repertoires, the means by which they are learnt, the collective creative processes, the prevalence of improvisation, performance arts, etc.

Making use of a term first used by Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1967) and adopted by others (Ong 1982, Goody 1987, Goody 2000, Chandler 1994, etc), this diversity between western art music and popular music can be summed up in the fact that the former is very largely *graphocentric*, in other words giving prominence to the writing, while the latter is substantially *phonocentric*, in that it exalts the sound event.

As the phenomenon of mediamorphosis in the course of the XX century increased the ease of access to, the spread and the immediacy of the new-oral approach to music (Blaukopf 1992), so in the context of western art music there was a marked graphocentric and text-based reaction, and with it, the election of score analysis as the principal means, if not the only means to access to linguistic and structural content and hence the aesthetic value of the work. In equal measure there was increased distrust of listening, a kind of wariness about the inadequacy of listening as an instrument to enhanced awareness. The structural listening that Adorno rates so highly, is no more than the mental ability to represent architecturally (and therefore graphically, id est spatially) what is heard.

This drift is, in effect, an attempt to defend a cultural hegemony. Indeed, mediamorphosis and reproducibility have given popular music, afroamerican music, dance music, folk music, and the song, not only the vehicle for widespread distribution, but also a broadly congenial environment for forms of music which are created and performed independently of the written form and notation, and for which the version in written form comes after creation and performance, and is generally adopted as a means of remembering, and often limited to a mere outline of melodies and chords.

In contrast to authorities like Walter Ong and Jack Goody who consider orality and literacy as two distinct cultural spheres and assign to orality a primary importance in respect to the written forms, scholars of the stamp of Ruth Finnegan (1986, 1988) or Steven Feld (1986) reject the idea of a *great divide* and prefer to draw attention to the inexhaustible variety springing from the continual interweaving of the oral and the written. For his part, Derrida, true to his textualist point of view, refuses the idea of the written word as a derivation, or a "secondary system" of the spoken word. From the standpoint of the philosophy of language this is a meaningful position, but on a purely musical plane, it is no easy matter to deny the primacy of the sound event and performance in relation to the written forms: in musical terms, in brief, we can do nothing but assume a predominantly phonocentric stance. The millenary history of musical notation could be described as the progressive establishment of increasingly detailed and binding prescriptions, by which composers sought to impose total control on performance, reducing to a minimum the scope of performers to interpret, and making them mere executors of the musical text.

We can also observe how this growing hypercodification goes hand in hand with a increasing division of labour in which the author/composer becomes more and more distant and ultimately excluded from the final outcome (the performance) of his creation (the score). It's hardly surprising therefore, that in modern times the score has come to acquire the status of an unassailable and unchallengeable text, assuming an absolute

identity in which the act of composition works out independently of a performance that appears more and more hypothetical and untrustworthy.

The textualist shift in the compositional practices of the 20th Century has been powered by the development of the technology of sound reproduction, which ambivalently enough has reinforced the centrality of written music, conferring a totally new textual form on the sound event, turning it into a mediated orality, and therefore, a written form which can be manipulated and transferred at will. Yet textualism and the exaltation of the writing are not generalizable landmarks in the avant-garde musical landscape of the last century. Reactions to the perceived despotism of the writing were many and various, from dadaism to radical improvisation. In essence the art of John Cage could be characterized as a full-scale pillorying of the cult of musical writing.

In the field of writing, it is all too easy for the more orthodox of academic musicologists to accumulate proof of the aesthetic inconsistency of popular music, to point out its tendency to approximation, the crude syntax, its banal and stereotypical nature, its limited conceptual depth, its subjection to ready-made formulas, its repetitiveness and its lack of originality.

These facets are usually held up as proof of subalternity to the diktat of the consumability that weakens and degrades compositional quality. But as Richard Middleton makes clear in his essay on popular music (Middleton 1990: 167 –70), by the end of the sixties, authors such as Charles Keil and Andrew Chester had already underlined the incongruity of comparing genres on the sole basis of syntax, of form understood only in its extensional sense, thereby neglecting the intensional aspects of performance, and the leaning towards pragmatics (that is the efficiency of discourse) and not syntactics (that is the coherence of the text). Others, like Mellers (1973), Tagg (1979), Shepherd (1982), have repeatedly emphasized the pointlessness of studying popular music according to the methodological and aesthetic criteria of western art music, as though no other yardsticks existed.

These observations don't seem, however, to have been given due consideration. The attempt to evaluate popular music in aesthetic terms, has relegated to the shadows, at least in part, the fundamental issue to be resolved, and that is that popular music is certainly not, because of its supposedly low-born nature and destination audience, a linguistically and syntactically poor and ignorant derivative of classical music. Popular music, on the contrary, can be defined as a set of musical practices featuring many of the characteristics of orality and belonging to musical forms derived from oral traditions in the west and elsewhere. The tirades against popular music mask the fact that in reality it is popular music, with its very existence, its very history, and its transcultural achievements that should place in the dock the graphocentric ideology of western art music.

Therefore we move on to the core of the matter. The weaknesses that musicological analysis uncovers in popular music, ascribing them at times to its nature as a product of consumption, at others to its rudimentary linguistic and syntactic content, correspond closely to the features that we can observe in oral and new-oral communication rather than

in written items. *Discourse*, taken to mean a communicative process that is oral in its nature (like a speech act or a performance) and *text* (or in other words the output of written communication) are two fundamentally different entities in terms of their qualities and their functions. And these distinctions remain in the transition from a context of primary orality (where the notion of text doesn't even exist) to a literary context or of secondary orality context where, conversely, a graphocentric bias reduces everything to text. Anyway, a discourse, shorthanded, recorded, transcribed and analysed will be considered and studied as text: the temporal-auditive dimension of a speech act or a performance comes to be converted uncritically into a spatial-visual format. The music meets a similar destiny as well, not only those varieties born in written form, but also those which one would never have imagined being transcribed onto paper or any other medium.

Undoubtedly this passage changes the nature of the discourse, removing it, by means of technology, from some *auratic* condition in which it is unrepeatable and elusive. But most importantly, as Walter Ong, Ruth Finnegan and others have always underlined, once a verbal or musical performance has been reduced to a text, it is stripped of more specific oral characters and values.

Understanding or making a replica of even a few seconds of a Jimy Hendrix solo, only making use of a transcription, however accurate, is a hopeless task. In fact today we have many other resources at our disposal: audio and video recordings, alternate takes, interviews (id est, oral history). Even so, the greater part of the musical analysis still depends on paper transcriptions, perhaps pursuing Heinrich Schenker or Allen Forte.

The graphocentric bias has strong arguments in its favour. From the time of Plato, writing and its main product, the text, have been considered the essential prerequisites for the expression of rational and scientific thought. Historically, the great religions have been founded on the word of God which became the *scriptures*. The Word, the *logos*, belong to an other-wordly and metaphysical dimension. In music, as in other fields, texts are the bricks from which Canons are constructed.

Derrida is right: writing can achieve things that are beyond the power of spoken words. But the opposite is also true. Writing works by segmenting into discrete units a continuous sensory flow, in so doing transforming a quality into a quantity. Writing can be said to be to orality what the digital is to the analogic: it is a form of reproduction as exact and manipulable as it is also fatally approximative and reticent.

For popular music, emerging in a hyperliterary and hypertechnological world, and developed in a state of cultural subordination with respect to art music, subjection to the rules of textual analysis (imposed from-on high) was unavoidable. Only in this way could it become the object of scientific study and musicological analysis, a field of research for the humanities, and by these expedients climb the steps of the aesthetic hierarchy, lay the foundations of its own canon and legitimize its intrinsic values. There was probably no other way to escape its subalternity, but to shuffle off a state in which its orality was seen

as a handicap, a state which not only confined popular music to the ghetto of folklore, but also damned it to the ranks of the most despised: those who give themselves for money.

All the evidence teaches us that without writing and its texts, humanity wouldn't have got very far. The same applies to western music, which has flourished in step with the development of an unequalled technology of writing. But these are not good reasons for overshadowing the specific values of orality, or ignoring them altogether. Curt Sachs held that every progress entailed a loss, and as an ethnomusicologist he was making precise reference to the phenomenon that Walter Ong knew as the predatory and imperialistic behaviour of literacy in relation to orality.

From Walter Ong and his observations on the psychodynamics of orality (Ong 1982: 59 pp), we can draw some interesting conclusions in the musical field: these I have set out in the accompanying chart. This graphically illustrates the two domains of orality and literacy through two sets of characters, which are also mobile, interactive, and which can in some cases apply equally to both categories.

Ong's terms are in large characters on a pale background and are followed by brief descriptions of the terms (the items in square brackets have been inserted for the sake of completeness)

The features relating to the music are on a coloured ground: green for orality, blue for literacy.

The characteristics listed in the column on the left, trace, in my view, in a very suitable manner, the ideas, values, practices and aims of a linguistic and cultural "set" which popular music or popular musics belong. This "set" differs considerably from the set relating to western art music, though there is no clear-cut division between them.

A close comparison of the two columns would reveal a widespread degree of osmosis, without the elimination of the fundamental differences. From Allan Moore to Walter Everett attempts to survey the language of popular music in terms of classical musical analysis and theory have produced extremely interesting results. However, these studies account for only a part of the core of popular music, which is not irreducible to the syntax of classical music because its roots lie elsewhere, in that sphere of orality more pragmatic than syntactic in nature and the values of which are often decidedly antithetical to the values of written music.

[showing of the chart]

As I have already remarked, scientific and graphocentric biases tend to transform everything into text and to downgrade discourse as rather crude material unsuitable to analytical study. Ruth Finnegan (1986) believes that it is seriously misleading to consider classical music as a written text and to neglect the aspects of orality linked to performance. This is a reflection that carries even more weight when applied in the context of popular music.

In any case, the method of representation that I have chosen captures only in part and approximatively the range of interactions between orality and literacy in the musical field. In this domain there is certainly more to the matter, than the psychodynamics of Walter Ong.

The values imposed by the culture of written music act in many ways to modify and perhaps violate the style of delivery of oral traditions. The whole issue of the so-called “whitening” of black music, from jazz to soul, to hip-hop (without seeking here to deny the predatory excesses of the music industry) can be understood in the wider context of the progressive elimination of oral features, in favour of characters typical of written music: perfect synchronism, precise intonation, well-trained vocals, harmonic elaboration, careful instrumentation and so on. What cannot be written becomes an error or a defect and it is replaced by what *can* be written.

I would like to close with a piece chosen from the many possible examples, taken not from popular music as it is commonly understood, but from Egyptian music of the last century – a genre that in this respect is quite a mirror image of the western pattern.

In the world of arab music the introduction of western notation in the course of the XX century aroused fierce opposition from the ranks of both traditionalists and innovators. Oum Kalthoum for example has always been against the use of written music.

In fact notation spread chiefly to facilitate record production on an industrial scale. To record new compositions use was often made of ensembles gathered together for the purpose, and they had very little time to practise. Musical notation was the perfect solution: with musicians able to read scores the time required to produce a recording was cut dramatically. The results obtained were excellent from the one point of view and unsatisfactory from the other.

We will now listen to two recordings of the same song, an anonymous muwashshah from a classical repertoire, *Ya mīmatī*.

The first recording, sung by Shaykh Sayyid al-Saftī, is an excerpt taken from a Gramophone record recorded in 1910 (Lagrange 1996). The piece is performed in the traditional way, with no recourse to written notation.

LISTENING 1 [2:17]

Now we will hear the same piece performed by Firqāt al-Mūsīqā al-‘Arabiyya, a state ensemble of arab music whose director, ‘Abd al-Halīm Nuwīra, was an advocate of the use of musical notation. The track is taken from a Sono Cairo recording issued in 1971 (Lagrange 1996).

LISTENING 2 [1:40]

Setting aside the matter of the audio quality, the difference between the two is startling. Compared to the first performance, in the second recording the melodic and rhythm lines are clean, precise and perfectly consonant with our current quality standards. Not the slightest hint of heterophony remains.

As I imagined, musician friends to whom I played these two recordings found the second sung and played better. Oum Kalthoum would have expressed the opposite opinion. To my mind, and in this I would echo Curt Sachs, I don't know whether the second recording represents a progress. What I can say with some certainty, however, is that what has been lost is incalculable.

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Recordings

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Anonymous. *Ya Mīmatī*. Performed by Firqat al-Mūsīqā al- 'Arabiyya. *Musiques d'Egypte*, CD: Cité de la Musique/Actes Sud - A 1961, attached to Lagrange 1996 (original recording: Sono Cairo, 17-17079, 1971)