

Secondary Musicality: A Modern Communicational Framework

Nathan Marsh

CMNS 359: Acoustic Dimensions of Communication II

Professor Barry Truax

Simon Fraser University

The communicational history of Western societies has been constantly shaped by new technologies. Walter Ong has put forth the idea of a dichotomy which exists between oral cultures and literate cultures (Ong, 1982, p. 31), as in cultures which rely heavily upon mnemonics and other such devices for memorization and teaching and cultures which have developed the technology of writing as a tool to replace mnemonic, rhythmic memorization for teaching purposes. Writing as a technology has had an undoubted influence on teaching in modern Western society. Learning to read and write are two of the first things students learn in primary schooling. Though learning literacy is clearly a vital skill, it is interesting to note what contemporary literate societies may have lost in having an increased onus placed upon the training of literate skills. Thus, we must examine the importance of sound in contemporary teaching practice. In this essay, I wish to take this issue regarding sound's importance in teaching into the arena of musical instruction. Basically, I plan to explore music education as a communication system through the examination of the traditional dichotomy of oral and aural methods of learning versus score-based literate music notation methods, with an emphasis on how this traditional dichotomy has shifted in the digital age with advances in music technology and in the economic marketplace. I argue that there is a new era that we belong to, one of "secondary musicality", taken from Ong's theory of "secondary orality", and that within this new era, musicians and composers have come to define themselves in completely new ways, as members not only of an exclusionary musical community, but of a global economic community constantly in flux. This global electroacoustic community has been shaped in the modern age by the invention of computerized music-making technology.

"Sound", notes Ong, "exists only when it is going out of existence." (1982, p.32) He means of course that sound, unlike the other sensations, is purely temporal. One cannot pause

sound and experience it in depth as they might in taking a photograph or in stopping to smell something pleasant on a walk. If one were to “pause” a sound, he or she would be left with silence. Therefore, in order to effectively cope with the difficulties posed by temporality, “oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar reaction of human beings.” (Ong, 1982, p.42) It is important to remember this fact when considering the humanistic power given to sound and the spoken word by primarily oral cultures, especially in naming things. Oral and literate peoples differ in their perception of naming; “oral peoples commonly think of names as conveying power over things” (Ong, 1982, p.33), whereas people from literate cultures “tend to think of names as labels, written or printed tags imaginatively affixed to an object named.” (Ong, 1982, p.33) This distinction is important because it reveals how sound can become so easily detached from the subjective human experience, or “lifeworld”, as Ong puts it. When a technology arises which enables us to record sound in objective ways, it becomes easy to take the power of sound for granted, whether it is recorded by written word, by music notation or by digital recording. The power and preciousness of temporality in sound becomes lost to literate and technological cultures with the ability to record sound to be played back or recited at a later time.

Now I will bring the argument into terms of education. Is the power of sound lost on students in contemporary education in favour of literacy? There is no question that literate, objective thinking is taught predominantly in Western education, but what remains of oral teachings in the modern world? Ong notes in his chapter on orality that the trades are taught primarily through apprenticeships, wherein the primary mode of learning comes through observation and hands-on experiential communication rather than from textbooks and objective

examinations (1982, p.43). The teacher, a professional tradesperson, shows the apprentice how to properly perform tasks related to the trade, and does so through vocal instruction, a form of acoustic communication. This style of learning therefore cannot simply be discarded as inferior to literate forms of learning. This assumption would be naive considering the obvious benefits which arise from this method of teaching and of learning. Essentially, teaching through the use of acoustic communicational methods yields a certain style of thinking in students. Ong, in his account of the psychologist A.R. Luria's work on operational thinking, states that "oral folk assess intelligence not as extrapolated from contrived textbook quizzes but as situated in operational contexts." (1982, p.55)

Luria's work consisted of interviews with literate and illiterate peasants in the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century wherein he asked them questions associated with literate teachings in order to observe their reactions. In most cases, he found that many of his interviewees responded "not by answering the seemingly mindless question but by trying to assess the total puzzling context" (Ong, 1982, p.56). In other words, the illiterate subjects were not "stupid". In fact, they actually thought that the interviewer's questions were "mindless". They simply considered problems in a completely different context from their literate counterparts, observing the world through a totalizing lens. Perhaps literate cultures lack this ability to perceive problems in their totality. Literate subjects might answer questions like "can you define the word 'tree'?" without thought to the meaning behind the question. Someone from a predominantly oral culture however, would respond with other questions along the lines of: "why am I being asked this? Surely everyone knows what a tree is? Is this some sort of game?" (Ong, 1982, p.56) Thus we see that oral communication in teaching can be helpful in providing not only listening skills and in passing down hands-on experiential knowledge, but it would also

provide alternative viewpoints for thinking about the world and how we communicate within it. It enables us to see the bigger picture and to ask questions of it.

These alternative viewpoints for pedagogical communication can be especially useful in musical instruction. For example, when perusing a musical score, a music student learning an instrument through literacy alone would look at the notes, find them on the instrument, and play them as true to the written score as possible. Conversely, a student who has been purely ear-trained would not understand the written notes, but instead would perhaps listen to a recording or live performance of the piece and try to replicate it as best as possible, with his or her own unique improvisational flair added. The aurally trained musician might not even consider playing someone else's music at all and simply improvise original musical pieces with other like-minded musicians. Alternatively, a student who was given a combination of music literacy and ear-training in the same instrument might look at the score, play the notes, and then pause to think about performance inflections that he or she could apply to the piece to make it sound better in concert, thus effectively combining the improvisational element of orality in music with the objectivity of literacy in music. This combination of orality and literacy is clearly the most desirable option for most, if not all, contemporary music students when learning not only to play and write music, but also to inherently understand music. In a particularly potent passage from his book *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology*, Paul Théberge points out that:

In the curriculum of the conservatory or the university music program, the study of the techniques of instrumental performance are kept separate from the study of theory, composition, and to a lesser extent, even history. In this way, the tools and the practice of music are thought of as distinct from the discourses of knowledge *about* music. We are

thus presented with two systems of “logic”: One concerned with the practical – a world of skill, dexterity, immediacy, expressive action, style, and subjectivity – and the other, with knowledge – analytic, methodical, detached, formal, structured, and objective. To a large degree, this separation is an expression of a more fundamental division in Western culture between the body and the mind. (1997, p.161)

This passage is extremely effective in its illustration of the separation between the oral and the literate skills taught in Western schools, not only in describing music instruction but also in describing the West as a culture in and of itself. The division of body and mind referred to by Théberge is essential in revealing the nature of the orality versus literacy dichotomy in music and culture. Instruction on how to physically use musical instruments, the “practical” system of logic as Théberge puts it, would be taught largely orally in very much the same way as with the trades apprentice concept described above. A teacher, considered a master in whatever instrument they happen to be teaching, instructs a student in how to manipulate his or her instrument in order to make music with it. Though text and diagrams may be used to accompany the aural teachings, the process is largely experiential. Furthermore, each student develops his or her own “style” whilst learning their instrument, whatever it may be. Style is developed rather than learned, and so is a subjective aspect of musical pedagogy as opposed to the more literate, objective aspects such as musical theory and history. Théberge points out that musical style “is as much physical as it is cognitive” (1997, p.167), and that in improvised or semi-notated forms of music, such as jazz and some types of world music, “relevant musical traditions and conventions are passed on not through discourse but through practice.” (1997, p.167) Before I venture on I must note that when I mention the word “style” in these contexts, I do not mean it as an interchangeable word with musical “genre”. Rather, I mean it as a method of playing or writing music which is unique

to an individual musician or composer. For example, Mozart helped to define the Classical period of musical history with his frequent use and domination of sonata form. This was a unique style which helped define a generation of musical history.

So far in this paper I have implied a correlation between the oral and the physical. Théberge notes that personal musical style is not passed on through discourse, but through physical practice, basically getting a “feel” for the subtleties of particular genres of music. When he uses the term “discourse” as the opposite of “practice”, I take it to mean that though oral discourse is involved in the teaching of musical style, the term “discourse” as it is used here refers to literal, objective discourse as instruction. Basically, Théberge is implying that in physical practice, the teacher shows the student how to develop his or her own style, and encourages subjectivity in developing said style rather than teaching it in a literal, objective way. This is in itself oral interpersonal communication, but it is not pure “discourse” as mere conversational instruction. Rather, this discourse is physical, and is therefore considered “practice” because it requires *physical demonstration* in order to fulfill its purposes. In other words, though terms like “physical” and “practice” are used here as counterexamples to “discourse”, they are not necessarily counteractive to *orality*.

Oral interpersonal communication is itself a very physical process; physical demonstration and practice are integral components in functioning acoustic communication systems. Take this passage from Ong for example:

The oral word...never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body. Bodily activity beyond mere vocalization is not adventitious or contrived in oral communication, but is natural and even inevitable. (1982, pp.67-68)

In this passage, Ong is writing about orators and their patterns and methods of public speaking. He notes that in oral cultures in which there exist no written text to memorize speeches and stories from, physical gesture and rhythmic structure are integral to enabling the speaker's oral memorization skills (1982, p.67). This is much the same with musical practice. There is no doubting the convenience of having access to written or recorded musical material from which to study and learn from. I am sure that Ong's orators would have loved to have had text to glance at for reassurance when speaking in front of crowds of people. However, I would argue that the style with which speakers address their audience has more power on the audience than the words themselves do in the speeches given. Rhythm and gesticulation are the elements of oration which rouse the senses and intrigue the masses. In music, it is the individual musical style of the musician which endears him or her to the audience, in much the same way as with public speakers. Therefore, we see that orality and physicality are two interlocking concepts which are essential to a functioning acoustic communicational framework. The physicality involved in music instruction is in physical demonstration and through arduous practice of methods learned from discourse. The non-physical verbal and literal discourse only serves to establish a starting point from which the student can practice from and in turn develop his or her own unique musical style after much physical exertion.

This leads us to an important question: how has music changed in the modern digital age? This is a question which can be examined through the lens of Ong's concept of "secondary orality", describing particular cultures which have gone beyond plain literacy and into the digital age, wherein new technologies have initiated a semi-revival of oral values in contemporary culture (2002, p.133). Ong describes this new orality's characteristics in comparison with primary orality:

Secondary orality is both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary orality. Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience, just as reading written or printed texts turns individuals in on themselves. But secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture—McLuhan's 'global village' (2002, p.137)

An example of this lies in modern social media networking websites such as Facebook, who have built a corporation based on online communication in the oral style. On sites like Facebook, users communicate with their "friends" in casual ways very similar to how they might in an acoustic setting. Specific slang is developed, and communities are forged amongst individuals without any form of spatial relations between them. Modern video gaming works in very much the same way. With the proliferation of online gaming, players can play with not only their personal friends but with people from all over the world in a massive kind of electroacoustic community, thus Ong's reference to Marshall McLuhan's famous term "global village".

Technology in music has advanced very similarly to technology in communication; music notation has enabled composers and musicians to create and to perform works objectively at any time, just as the technology of writing came about to enable thinkers and speakers to record and recite their thoughts in a concrete, easily replicated way. In turn, the literate cultures of music became able to teach their students methods and techniques from the past, and have historically contrasted past methods with present ones. A combination of literacy and orality became widely practiced in musical instruction, as the argument regarding style development based on initial literate competency illustrated above. In the twentieth century, a new

development in music technology has risen to take us into the digital age: the computer. The invention of computerized technology has enabled the creation of digital musical instruments such as the synthesizer, instruments which in turn have reshaped the musician's thought process regarding traditional musical practice (Théberge, 1997, p.186). Théberge argues that in the era of digital music, "the emphasis...is on the acquisition and technical modification of pre-existing sounds rather than on their direct production through performance, recording, and/or original programming." (1997, p.187) This theory is posed in direct contrast to his ideas regarding musical improvisation practice and the development of style outlined in the above sections of this paper.

Later in this section of his book, Théberge asserts that "'sound', as a conceptual category, has become separated...from the 'language' of music as represented in the notated score." (1997, p.188) The context in which he uses the term "sound" is in describing modern production norms in various media including radio, television, and film sound. He seems to be stating when he describes "sound" as a totalizing term far detached from the "language" of music, that whatever elements of literate culture were present in music prior to the invention of modern musical production technology have been at least slightly deteriorated. This statement can be interpreted as an indication that music has moved into its own stage of secondary orality, or "secondary musicality", if you will, in which it is now termed more generally as "sound". This indicates a vast expansion of the community encompassed by music as not only a musical community, but one which includes every existing form of sonic media, a prime characteristic of Ong's theory of secondary orality.

The expanded community created by the culture of secondary musicality has resulted in greater expectations being required of composers and musicians in the digital age. Andrew

Hugill, in his book *The Digital Musician*, states that “one of the biggest changes in music in the past thirty years or so has been in the role of the composer.” (2012, p.117) He goes on to describe the musical hierarchy which once existed between the public, at the bottom, musicians, in the middle, and composers, at the very top. This hierarchy formed much of Western classical music, putting the composer on a pedestal as the “figure of ultimate authority” (2012, p.117). He then states that “new technologies have challenged this hierarchy.” (2012, p.117) I would go one step further and say that new technologies have not just challenged, but have all but toppled this hierarchy, given the comparative ease of making music in the modern world as opposed to the pre-modern one. With a relatively inexpensive piece of software and some minor computational skills acquirable from free online videos (a by-product of secondary musicality’s expansion of community), anyone can now compose and perform digital music. There can be no hierarchy when a single person can be the musician, the composer, and the consumer all in one. Therefore, those who wish to pursue composition as a viable career path must now contend not only with a community of fellow composers, but practically everyone else in the world as well. Echoes of McLuhan’s “global village” concept are prevalent here.

Hugill sums up his overall point by stating that “[a] ‘digital musician’ is typically an amalgamation of performer, composer, engineer and informed listener, all to a certain extent.” (2012, p.241) We see here that it is clearly not enough for a professional musician or composer to be a master of one instrument or of one style of music; musicians are now expected to know the ins and outs of production techniques, be constantly up-to-date with current music technology and software, and to promote themselves in a way they never had to before. Furthermore, in the digital age it seems that technologies go out of date even faster than they come into prominence. Musicians and composers must be extremely open to new technologies,

because their musical careers depend on them. Hence, the modern musician in an era of secondary musicality must be a musical jack-of-all-trades rather than a specialist in a single area.

Beyond the skills required in composition, production, and performance in contemporary music-making, there exists yet another challenge for the modern musician to face: succeeding in the economic marketplace. Paul Théberge states that “making music with new technology has...become a process of simultaneous production and consumption.” (1997, p.213) In other words, there now exists a commercial market for music and sound, and musicians and composers, beyond simply being concerned with their musical capabilities, need to also have business savvy and a great adaptability to constantly changing global markets in order to be successful. They must become members of the marketplace; consumers of technology and producers of multimedia. There is perhaps no better way to sum up this revelation than the conclusion of Théberge’s book:

Indeed, as the technologies of electronic and digital reproduction have increasingly become the central mode of production, distribution, and consumption in popular music, learning “to manage”, both with and without new technology, has become one of the essential ways in which many contemporary musicians learn to define themselves, their relations with others, and the “sound” of their music. (1997, p.255)

With all of the changes that have occurred in the last century in the music world, it is difficult to imagine where an aspiring composer or musician would even begin to learn all of the skills required to be a modern “digital musician”. The question we are left with is: how does musical instruction keep up with the constantly changing landscape of necessary musical competency?

Perhaps an answer to this question lies in how a digital musician or composer in an era of secondary musicality might seek to create an individual style with electronic instruments. After all, as has been illustrated in the earlier discussion of discourse versus physical practice, the communication of style is inherently connected with the oral elements of music on a personal, physical, level. How does one introduce this personal physicality when the instruments involved in digital music are often not able to be physically manipulated? I will first address issues of originality in compositional style, and then go on to addressing style in musicianship within the realms of digital music.

Hugill refers to originality as a key element in style in digital music composition, and he lays out his argument in terms of sample-based practices by asking: “Who is the originator of a sample-based piece?” and, “to what extent should the composer use models or ‘borrow’ from other artists?” (2012, p. 128) Herein it must be said that originality is a grey area in digital music composition. Hugill goes on to acknowledge that in today’s era of digital music, there “is a less clearly established set of values regarding pastiche work available to the digital musician, because both the media and the musical forms that arise from them are so new” and that “sample-based culture is pervasive” (2012, p.128).

I would argue here that though it is true that the oeuvre of digital music is decidedly smaller than that of traditional classical music, there are no rules to say that composers of digital music cannot draw inspiration from other pre-existing, non-digital styles. In fact, digital music’s frequent use of sampling underlines this point in that many samples are electroacoustic recordings of acoustic instruments (hip-hop drum tracks for example), which rather than creating a wholly new digital sound, recall connections the listener may have with the instrument when used in its original context. When Hugill says that sample culture is “pervasive”, he means that

the culture embeds itself into every aspect of digital music composition; it is an all-encompassing practice. It would be easy to write off sampling as nothing but a problem for composers when crafting original works. However, I do not believe that sampling is an issue for establishing originality in composition. Sampling is ultimately just a modern method of drawing inspiration from the work of another, a practice which has been taking place throughout music history (Hugill, 2012, p.128). “The important thing when creating music,” says Hugill, “is the *music itself*, which will develop its own style.” (2012, p. 129) In other words, style comes through in *how* methods like sampling are used, not in whether or not they are used at all. If a sample of another piece of music, or of someone else’s recording of an instrument is used, and it is in a context not initially intended by the composer or recordist of the original work, then the use of the sample is entirely justified and the piece it is included in can be said to be original.

When instructing this type of originality in contemporary digital music composition however, it is vital that teachers first inform students of historical elements which have come to shape the current landscape of music today before encouraging them to find their own compositional style. In order to effectively draw inspiration from and extract direct samples from other works, students must first understand the contexts from which contemporary music has arisen in order to create truly original works, otherwise students will be limited in their creative expression with no ideas to draw on and create from. This type of instruction fits into the secondary musicality framework in that the amount of historical content available to modern music students is extraordinarily vast in comparison with what might have been available prior to the digital age and the invention of the Internet, a phenomenon specific to the era of secondary musicality. The communication between teacher and student can take place in a much broader

scope than previously possible within this framework, as students can now draw inspiration and knowledge from people, places, and cultures from all over the world.

There exists an intimately personal connection between the musician and his or her instrument. The musician is often identified purely based on the instrument they play. Therefore, the musical instrument is basically an extension of the musician's body. However, in an age of secondary musicality wherein digital instruments utilizing the computer and other forms of technological equipment have become the norm for musical performance, the way in which a musician identifies with their instrument has changed dramatically (Hugill, 2012, p.138). Thus, digital instruments have altered the way in which musical culture has come to consider "style" in the era of secondary musicality. Hugill notes when addressing the contrasting elements in style with acoustic and digital instruments "that for many people a crucial difference is the need to 'mould oneself' to an acoustic instrument, whereas a digital instrument can be created to suit the needs of the user" (2012, p.138). Therefore, style in this sense seems to be entirely mouldable to each individual user of a digital instrument, bypassing the need for communication of style from teacher to student through physical demonstration and practice.

Is it really this simple though? Digital instruments oftentimes have little to no logical tactile interface; a standard piano keyboard used as an interface for a MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) synthesizer can have each of its keys "mapped" to individual arbitrary sounds and functions within a computer software program. These sounds have little, if anything, to do with the traditional audio-visual correlation associated with the keyboard of an acoustic piano, thus leading to the potential for disorientation amongst the listening audience, and overall musical alienation. Moreover, the performer has no set of standards to work within when attempting mastery of their instrument, as the interfaces and mappings are all replaceable and

interchangeable. How do teachers even begin to facilitate the practical development of style in their students when the systems they are working within fluctuate so rapidly? Style is not as easily developed in the digital age as one might initially think.

One way to look at this argument concerning style in digital music is to disregard traditional concepts such as “mastery” or “virtuosity” of a particular instrument. Instead, perhaps the music instructor in the era of secondary musicality should be more overtly concerned with the skill of adaptability in their students. With the vast sonic potential offered by customizable digital instruments, and the relative ease through which each of these can be individually programmed to fit the needs of the performer, perhaps the modern music student should be more concerned with developing skill in multiple areas of digital music-making rather than with classical mastery of a single instrument or of elements of musical theory. After all, musical notation and theory were devised as ideals for organizing sound in logical patterns. It appears that, in the era of secondary musicality, these patterns have changed and have become much more expansive. The sonic possibilities available to musicians and composers today in comparison to what was available prior to the invention of the computer for purposes of music creation are extraordinarily overwhelming. The best assets a contemporary student of music can have are an open mind and a creative will. These skills can be taught through the communicational framework of secondary orality just as modern compositional skills can, through an instructional balance of literal, knowledge-based discourse utilizing the vast resources available in the global electroacoustic music community, and of subjective physical practice and experimentation based upon the knowledge gained from said literal discourse.

As we have observed, style derives from the way in which musicians use the tools at their disposal; the vast availability of digital music technology and the total freedom to use said

technology in whatever way dreamed up by the musician are products of the era of secondary musicality. These revelations have created a massive community of people involved in digital music, all sharing ideas and in turn inspiring the style of others. In a way, the massive electroacoustic community itself, created by secondary musicality, serves as the teacher of style; it encourages experimentation and adaptability in musicians and this is ultimately where style in musicianship comes from in the digital age.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the traditional dichotomy of orality versus literacy has come to shape the contemporary world of musical communication in many ways. The era of secondary musicality is built upon a combination of elements taken from both orality and literacy, with the added element of modern computerized technology coming to define the era in its totality. The modern student of music must now not only consider his or her knowledge of literal theory or of style development through physical, oral practice, but must now consider music as an entirely new framework of acoustic communication, one concerned with “sound” as a whole rather than “music” exclusively, one which is now entirely immersed in the capitalist marketplace of production and consumption. Within the new communicational framework that is secondary musicality, musicians and composers are now members of the economic marketplace in ways they never were before, and must now respond and adapt to constantly changing methods and concepts concerning the creation of modern digital music in order to remain relevant in a world so constantly in flux.

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