

# Understanding and Teaching Music Through Orality: A Case Study in the *Revival* and Transmission of the Eastern European Jewish Folk Music

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## Abstract

This study demonstrates the possibilities of understanding and teaching music through oral learning. In considering the linkage among culture, human development, and education, scholars have endeavored to emphasize the importance of oral experiences and to recognize the change in mentality in the transition from the oral to the literate world. These endeavors have been contrary to the transmission of knowledge and self-formation through writing and books, which have been dominant, especially since the 19th century. In the understanding and learning of music, oral learning is important in addition to musical notation and literacy. For example, oral learning, which is characterized by repetitive listening/imitation activities, and community learning have played important roles in the process of the *revival* and transmission of klezmer music or Eastern European Jewish folk music. In terms of learning in music classes in elementary and junior high schools in Japan, not only literacy but also oral learning is considered important for achieving the human development of the child, which is the goal of Courses of Study.

**Key words:** Music Education, Orality, Literacy, Eastern European Jewish Folk Music, Character-building.

## 1. Importance of the oral world in culture and education

In reconsidering the linkage among culture, human development, and education, scholars have endeavored to emphasize the reconfirmation of oral experiences and changes in the mentality of people in the transition from orality to literacy. This notion is

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in contrast to the transmission of knowledge and self-formation through writing and books, which have been prevalent since the 19th century.

Ong (1991) points out that a fundamental difference exists between *oral culture* and *literate culture* in terms of thought and linguistic expression. In an oral culture, the author cites that human thought is related to speech, and people do not abstractly order, categorize, explain, or analyze facts, and statements, because they do not read or write. Therefore, people learn by listening to others, repeating what they hear, memorizing proverbs, combining and recombining them, or adopting clichéd ways of saying things. In contrast, in a literate culture, words, and thoughts are more analyzed as words are written. Without gestures, facial expressions, vocal inflections, or real listeners, written speech requires a writer to carefully anticipate the expected meaning for any reader and situation and to enable clear words to work without the aid of any lived context. Therefore, the art of writing creates a sense of pursuing precision and analytical rigor that are internalized in the cognition of people. In addition, writing separates the subject from the object, which, thereby further segments the activity of reflection of the writer. In other words, by writing, the mind of the author becomes open not only to the external, objective world that is distinct from the self but also to the internal self that is in opposition to such an objective world (Ong 1991:218-219). The skill of writing creates a reflective sense of self. As previously discussed, the transition from an oral to a literate culture has produced a great change in the culture and in the consciousness and minds of people.

Illich (1991) posed a question about whether or not the mind acquired by humans through this transition is reinforced and disseminated by enhanced literacy learning using new techniques of psychology, management engineering, or electronics in the educational settings of today. Once people acquire initial literacy skills, they will no longer concretely perceive things as they primarily did. Instead, they begin to draw inferences not only on the basis of their practical experiences but also of assumptions formulated in the language (Illich 1991:112). However, only a contingent link exists between enhanced literacy learning and the newly acquired mental framework of an individual of perception, representation, reasoning, creativity, and sense of self. Therefore, the author points out that the current enhanced literacy learning may diminish the literate mind (Illich 1991:112-113).

Sanders (1998) shared the concept of Illich (1991) and stated that if enhanced literacy learning leads to the pursuit of only accuracy and clarity in reading and writing in schooling, then children with less experience of the oral world will only be able to read and write under a standard of correctness imposed by an external force. The author then argues that acquiring literacy related to the rich experience of the oral world is necessary

to regain the self-reflective, critically thinking self formed by true literacy (Sanders 1998:13). According to Sanders, in an oral world centered on speaking/listening, children gain experience in using language to communicate with others and freely use their imagination. When children enter the literate world, they become capable of considering abstract rules in relation to concrete events and environments and of taking a critical look at and orienting themselves.

The common point between Illich and Sanders is that strengthening the properties of thought and linguistic expression acquired through true literacy skills is important for the self-formation of children. Toward this end, considering the change in the human mind between the pre-literate oral world and the literate world is necessary.

## 2. Orality and literacy of music

In the case of music, literacy pertains to the ability to read and write sounds and music translated into visual symbols such as sheet music. Specifically, it is the ability to read and sing notes on a staff notation at the correct height and length. A musical notation cannot convey the entire sound of music, but it can contain musical information, even in parts, without time, or space limitations. Furthermore, it can be a means of recalling music at a later time. Notation enables music to remain intact for centuries and can be replayed at any time. In addition, similar to writing, being written on a score enables the elaboration and creation of a sophisticated structure. However, even in the case of music based on notation, such as western classical music, not all stylistic characteristics of music can be conveyed. Moreover, conventions that were assumed in performances in older times, such as basso continuo and ornaments, are frequently not reflected in the score.

Alternatively, orality pertains to the oral transmission of music, in which a learner learns a tune or musical style by being taught by a master in a phrase-by-phrase manner. This method of transmission is used for many folk songs and folk music worldwide. In this manner, music reproduction frequently follows a strong rhythmic pattern or uses a clichéd melodic pattern. Musicians are also expected to use traditional sound materials to create performances that respond to the situation and the reaction of the audience. Many Japanese music genres, such as *nagauta*, *gidayu-bushi*, and *kabuki-bayashi*, are genres that emphasize the orality tradition to master the complex musicality required to produce stylistically appropriate tones, voices, and ensemble performances (Tokumaru 2016: 240). It is effective in developing a sense of style and flexible musicality, including variations, because it does not rely on musical notation. Even western classical music requires oral

instruction by a teacher in lessons. In addition, *kuchi-shoga* (aural cues that use pitched or rhythmic syllables), which is used in the study on gagaku, shamisen, and various vocal, and instrumental music of the world, is a form that lies between oral and written forms. For example, in the learning of Burmese classical songs, a teacher sings part of a melody, and the learner immediately imitates it. The repetition of this action proceeds in which a songbook with lyrics plays an important role. Although this method is oral, it contains an aspect in which the written form reconstructs the memory (Inoue 2007).

### **3. Oral tradition and literacy in the *revival* and transmission of klezmer music**

To illustrate the effectiveness of orality in music learning, the study focuses on the case of klezmer music, which is an Eastern European Jewish folk music. Originally passed down orally for several centuries, young Jewish musicians in the United States revived this music after the tradition was in danger of dying out in the mid-20th century. At the time of the revival, the traditional method of oral transmission was already lost, but literate revivalists extracted the structure and style of the music from the available materials and provided instruction that emphasized orality. This scenario is an example of the manner of the revival of music, which has developed exclusively as an oral culture, in the modern age through oral and written learning methods.

Klezmer music, which was nurtured by Eastern European Jewish communities since the 16th century, is instrumental ensemble music played by musicians called *klezmerim* (singular: *klezmer*). These musicians performed at weddings and holidays in Jewish communities to facilitate ceremonies, evoke emotions appropriate to the occasion, and accompany dances. The tunes and performance styles were passed down from *klezmer* families by directly learning by ear from the demonstrations of a master. When many Eastern European Jews immigrated to North America since the end of the 19th century, the center of this music moved to the United States (especially New York), where it flourished for a time. However, klezmer music declined during the 1940s due to various factors, including the assimilation of second-generation Jewish immigrants to the American way of life, the collapse of the Eastern European Jewish communities due to the Holocaust, and the emphasis on the Israeli/Hebrew culture and the shunning of the Yiddish culture that accompanied the establishment of the State of Israel. However, in the mid-1970s, young American Jewish musicians of classical, jazz, and folk music began collecting, researching, and performing klezmer music in search of their roots. In contrast

to other musical revivals of the same period, klezmer music had no homeland to return to, such that these musicians reconstructed their music by finding and listening to old records and learning directly from a few performers of previous eras. They repeatedly listened to SP records from circa 1920s and carefully noting as many details of the performances as possible and strictly imitating them to learn the tunes and styles. They also formed master–student relationships with the surviving performers and invited them as lecturers at Jewish music festivals.

Since the revival, Jewish music festivals have become central venues for klezmer music education. Various Jewish music festivals are held dependent on their purpose and organizers. They are annually or biannually held for a few days to a few weeks mainly in North America, Europe, and Israel. Among them was KlezKamp in New York, which was the forerunner of all Jewish music festivals since 1985. Henry Sapoznik, one of the revivalists, founded the KlezKamp to promote the Jewish culture, which was held every December until 2014. Other music festivals were initiated in other areas with similar events based on the success of the KlezKamp. This study demonstrated the characteristics of Jewish music festivals, which were mainly based on the participant observations of the researcher at two festivals, namely, Yiddish Summer Weimar, and Yiddish New York.

The first characteristic of klezmer music education at Jewish music festivals is the establishment of learning in the community. The first music festival, KlezKamp, created the space and time for the transmission of klezmer music after the cessation of the existence of the oral world of the Jewish community. At the time of its founding, programs were held exclusively for klezmer music; however, as various Jewish people from different generations came together in search of a place to stay and as a result of their demands, a diverse program was established. This program included not only klezmer music but also vocal music, dance, language, literature, folklore, and cooking, among others. Thus, spontaneously, a place was created in which people could experience not only klezmer music but also various forms of the Yiddish culture. For a few weeks or months every year, many people, including repeat visitors, share a common culture through their bodies, which creates a cultural community and a temporary modern re-creation of a lost Jewish community. For a few participants, the festival became an important part of their lives with their children growing up with the festival and Jewish coming-of-age ceremonies and weddings that occur during the festival.

In this context, participants are taught music by ear and mouth in principle. In addition, an environment is created through coordination with other programs in which participants can perform music in response to the movements of dancers as they unfold before their eyes. These performances occur in the atmosphere and emotion of traditional

Jewish rituals and in response to the reactions of the audience. In other words, they can learn music within the oral world.

The second characteristic of klezmer education at these festivals is that learning occurs through the body, that is, listening to the performance of an instructor, imitating it with voice or instrument, and memorizing it through repetition. Through this learning method, learners accumulate, and memorize the unique phrases and rhythmic patterns of this music. As such, when they perform, they can draw on these notions in their style and expression. Learning by ear enables them to acquire subtle styles of phrasing, intonation, accent, rhythm, tone color, and ornamentation that cannot be expressed by musical notation. In addition, doing so promotes an understanding of the structure of the clichéd melodic patterns that compose the melody and how they are spelled together. Lastly, the performance is not fixed; thus, the performance of each player varies, which creates free, and varied performances because no musical notation is used.

As previously discussed, education at Jewish music festivals is orally conducted through communal and physical learning, but it is also supported by literacy. The reason is that instruction at Jewish music festivals is a result of the revivalists listening to the details of numerous old recordings and deriving the regularities involved in the compositions and performance styles in klezmer music. Originally, klezmer music nearly lacked a theory for performance or composition and concepts or terminology for style and structure. Thus, the revivalists addressed extracting these regularities through the analysis of the remaining sound recordings and then created an effective method for learning such knowledge and concepts along with the oral tradition. For example, they identified the modal system that forms the basis for melodies and chords, typical melodic patterns, and characteristic chord progressions. In addition, they realized that playing melodies in heterophony is important, in which each player in an ensemble presents different details instead of playing in unison and to vary it when a melody is repetitive. These theories and aesthetics were not verbalized or systematized in the oral tradition of the past. Instead, they were shared in the experience of playing. Once the tradition broke down, however, they were passed on through musical notation and words in the present.

Thus, klezmer music education at Jewish music festivals succeeded in reconstructing and transmitting a large part of the characteristics of the oral culture through orality and literacy. In this manner, it was revived as music for the modern age instead of preserved and protected as the music of the past. In principle, music is not written in musical notation. Instead, it is listened to, imitated, and memorized, which, thereby, promote an in-depth understanding of the unique verses, nuances, and other aspects of the music. In addition, forming a cultural community render possible the

learning of music in an oral world, which enables performances to be adapted to traditional social functions and the current situation.

#### **4. Importance of orality in school music education**

The example of klezmer music illustrates the importance of orality in the revival and transmission of a vanishing traditional culture, which can be partially applicable to music education in schools. According to the Courses of Study for elementary and junior high school students (announced in 2017), the goals of music education include not only the acquisition of musical knowledge and skills, but also, beyond that, an understanding of the relationship among musical mood, structure, and background, and the diversity of music. It also includes the ability to express oneself through music according to the image that one intends to express. In addition, one may infer that music learning is positioned as a subject deeply related to the self-formation of children by fostering the development of cognitive and perceptive abilities related to music, such as expression, evaluation and determination, and the cultivation of sensitivity and emotionality relative to music. What, then, is the necessity of learning through orality for self-formation in music learning?

First, orality in music education practice is considered effective in enabling children to listen to music without being bound by musical notation and to form and express their self-image. The fixed nature of musical notation can lead children to constantly ascertain the expressions of others and their own and their thoughts as right or wrong, which can hinder their natural feelings and thoughts toward and free expression in music. In addition, children can directly recognize and perceive the sounds of music in terms of intensity, tempo, timbre, and vocal nuance, among others, which cannot be written in notations. Furthermore, children can independently perceive musical moods and structure, because the perception of sounds as sounds (without words or symbols) is independent of the musical literacy of children. In addition, children can obtain an experiential understanding of concepts, such as rhythm, and scales, as well as the elements and forms that compose a piece of music, by repetitive listening using the ears, imitating using the voice or instruments, and experiencing using the body.

Second, oral learning enables communication through not only language but also the body and voice and enables collaborative music-making along with connections to places, situations, and people. By exchanging and sharing voices, sounds, and physical actions between teachers and students or among students, one can learn the sensitivities and thoughts of others through their reactions and situations and changes in places and

devise one's personal thoughts and expressions.

Third, the oral means of learning is effective for understanding the diversity of music. In junior high school, one of the goals of music learning is to respect the inherent value of different types of music and to enable students to understand their diversity. In addition, "using musical views and ideas," as cited in the goal of the music course common to elementary and junior high schools, does not refer to a single viewpoint. Instead, it expects students to acquire multiple views according to various types of music worldwide. Therefore, recognizing the characteristics, and styles of various music not only as knowledge but also as experiences is necessary for children, such that they can directly receive the unique narrative and expression of each music and understand them while they expand their sensitivity.

For this reason, scholars are currently pursuing the research and implementation of teaching methods that utilize the traditional teaching methods of each music, including oral tradition, instead of the staff notation, which is associated with the characteristics of western music. Since the beginning of the Heisei era, Japanese traditional music was no longer taught using the stave notation but was required to adopt teaching methods, such as traditional Japanese singing techniques and voice color through singing folk songs (Kojima 2018: 15-16). In this manner, the perspective of fostering an attitude of awareness and respect for the positive qualities of the country and its local traditional music culture is adopted. In addition, *kuchi-shoga* (oral singing for learning) can capture the entirety of the tones, melodies, rhythms, and techniques of certain Japanese instruments. Thus, scholars endeavor to use it to learn the characteristics of traditional music expression, methods of transmission, and the relationship between Japanese language and music (Tokumaru 2019: 2-3).

In the United States, where multicultural music education is advanced, Campbell (2004) proposed the "World Music Teaching Method" as a realistic strategy for integrating various forms of music worldwide into the classroom in situations where teachers are unable to perform and possess limited instruments and audiovisual resources. This method consists of five activities as follows:

- (1) listening with attention to the various elements of music to guide children toward the characteristics of the music in question;
- (2) listening physically by clapping and singing to actively engage them in the music;
- (3) reproducing music using voices and instruments based on memories they gained from listening;
- (4) deepening their knowledge of the background of the music to help them understand music as a human activity; and



- (5) creating songs according to the singing and structural characteristics of the music they have learned to encourage them to reaffirm their awareness of the characteristics of music and to listen to it in a more conscious manner (Kanemitsu 2016).

Clearly, this teaching method focuses on listening and imitating, which forms the basis of oral learning, and on connecting it with creating music. Campbell mentions that listening is typically the primary or sole method for learners to learn music in various cultures. The reason is not only to become familiar with musical elements but also to understand pitch and rhythm, among others. It can be also a central process in music learning in schools. In addition, the author mentions that listening must give way to creating, and although learners may initially make mistakes when singing or playing music they only partially understand, such mistakes can be corrected orally or by listening to the correct sound (Campbell 2018:107). To learn about diverse music in the world along with its cultural backgrounds, school teachers need to adopt oral learning, which was traditionally used in many musical cultures, and help children view music from the perspective of cultural relativism.

Today, compact disks, and online music distribution services provide access to various music any time and any place. However, a concern emerges that if music is simply accepted as a given, then it may not lead to personal development or the exercise of creativity. In the case of klezmer music, the revivalists created a space for people to learn about musical culture based on the oral traditions. In addition, they learned to listen to/imitate the performances of their masters with the increase in interaction between them. As a result, the innate qualities of klezmer music were transmitted without being lost. One may infer that klezmer music was not simply revived as music of the past but was re-created as music that is alive today. To render music education a truly effective place for human development in terms of communication, connection with others, and the formation of self-image, then assigning a place for oral education along with literacy education is desirable.

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