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THE WRITTEN-ORAL PARADIGM IN THE TRANSCRIPTIONS OF CHURCH MUSIC BY STEVAN STOJANOVIĆ MOKRANJAC[1]

Abstract: The question of the relation between the written and oral media of communication finds its application not only in linguistics, but also in philosophy, sociology, ethnology and other areas. Other possibilities for applying this theory in musicology were noted some fifty years ago, but when it comes to church music, such issues have not yet been subject to wider examination. This text considers the musicological implications of orality, literacy and "secondary literacy" in the collection of Serbian church chant transcribed and published by Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac. Psychodynamic elements of the oral-written/ literal paradigm, with a special emphasis on the latter, are analyzed, with the aim of defining a different context for the understanding of Mokranjac's specific approach to chanting tradition.
Key words: Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, Serbian chant, oral-written paradigm, Walter Ong, musical cognition, musical memorization, Octoechos, formulae, musicology

In 1911, probably before the convocation of the Holy Synod Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac (1856–1914) wrote a letter to one of the bishops, saying, among other things:

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I beg of you and your hallowed companions to see to it that this work be printed not later than this summer, so that in the autumn, serious and reliable work can begin in the St. Sava Seminary. Should the Holy Synod decide that the work not be printed, then I beseech you to inform me urgently of the matter, and I shall with pain and sorrow commit the entire work to infernal flames.[2]

Such a prediction of the fate of the collection, known as *Alien Chant*, should it remain unpublished, is truly disheartening, particularly if we have in mind that it took Mokranjac more than twenty years to notate the chants. Leaving aside the (realistic) assumption that Mokranjac's intention was to put certain pressure on the Synod, and the fact that until that time a large number of church melodies remained unpublished, and that his students at the Seminary were already familiar with the then available means of copying,[3] we should bear in mind that the delay in the publishing of the collection would not by any means have imperilled the subject Mokranjac taught at the St. Sava Seminary. We should not overlook the impatience of the author, either, but taking into account certain steps undertaken by the composer in relation to the previous collection from 1908 – *Octoechos* – the direction of scientific interests takes a different turn. By carefully reading this letter between the lines, we become aware of other reasons why the issue of the printing of this second collection was raised in such a determined, uncompromising, and at times even dramatic way.

Mokranjac's approach to Serbian musical heritage was tinged with positivism, and he, like his contemporaries – painters, architects, artists of various types – incorporated the results of his research into his artistic creation, in an effort to draw it closer to modern expression.[4] Precisely this scholarly side to his involvement with ecclesiastic musical heritage is fundamentally linked with the phenomenon of orality and literacy, a highly important development pervading linguistic studies for several decades now. The questions of the origin, organization and institutional definition of Serbian chant make this body of music extremely suitable for observation from the vantage point of the dialogue between oral and written transmission. Although the chant has been studied from various

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[2] The facsimile of the letter was cited by Kosta Manojlović in the preface to the collection. Stevan St. Mokranjac, *Srpsko narodno crkveno pojanje. Opšte pojanje* [Serbian Demotic Ecclesiastic Chant. General Chant]*,* ed. and expanded by Kosta P. Manojlović, Beograd, Državna štamparija Kraljevine Jugoslavije, 1935, 2–3.

[3] See: Kosta Manojlović, *Spomenica Stevanu St. Mokranjcu* [Homage to Stevan St. Mokranjac]*,* Beograd, Državna štamparija Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca, 1923, 92–93.

[4] Ivana Perković, *Od anđeoskog pojanja do horske umetnosti: srpska horska crkvena muzika u periodu romantizma (do 1914. godine)* [From the Angelic Chant to the Art of Choral Music: Serbian Church Choral Music in Romanticism (to 1914)]*,* Beograd, Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, 2008, 49–51.

aspects, this perspective has not earned a significant place within such studies. Almost twenty years ago, Danica Petrović published a text in which the above mentioned issues were considered primarily from a historiographic perspective, rather than engaging with the theory of communication.[5] Only recently a study was published in which the possibilities of applying the said linguistic theory were considered.[6]

Where indeed is the meeting place between the linguistic theory of orality and literacy and interdisciplinary amplifications of the current musicological discourse? In what ways can the communication theory serve as the starting point for novel and/or different interpretations of musical phenomena, particularly Serbian chant? Finally, to what extent is it possible, from today's perspective, to observe and interpret certain concepts from precisely this angle?

The question of the relations between the written and the oral medium of communication found its application not only in linguistics, but also in philosophy, sociology, anthropology, culturology, psychology, and other areas.[7] Basically, as defined by one of the founders of this theory Walter Ong, these two modes of transmission imply a conceptualization of knowledge in coordinate systems which differ substantially; this means that the presence of either oral or written discourse correlates with differences not only in mental, but also social structures. Thus, "oral cultures" are characterized by their proximity to the real world, orientation towards the "here and now", the non-existence of text (not only in a concrete form, but in a conceptual one as well), an economical relation to resources, fragmentariness, the existence of patterns, repetitiveness, presence of mnemonic models and the like. On the other hand, in the communities that have mastered written expression, language becomes an "autonomous" discourse, and having in mind that writing, to borrow Yuri Lotman's formulation, is a "secondary modeling system", it depends entirely upon the primary context, namely, the spoken word. Here, the cognitive approach is marked by abstraction, objective distance, as well as spatial and temporal distance, self-consciousness, the possibility of textual "touch-up" and so on (see Table 1). Similarly, oral noetics as

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[5] Danica Petrović, "Srpsko pojanje u pisanom i usmenom predanju" [Serbian Chant in Written and Oral Tradition], *Naučni sastanak slavista u Vukove dane* [Conference on Slavic Studies, Days of Vuk Karadžić], 1985, 14, 257–264.

[6] Ivana Perković, "Serbian Chant on the Threshold: the Dialogue between Orality and Literacy", in: Laura Vasiliu et al. (eds.), *Musical Romania and the Neighbouring Cultures. Traditions – Influences – Identities,* Frankfurt am Mein, Peter Lang, 2014, 81–87.

[7] Cf. Jadranka Božić, „Transformacije koncepta usmenosti i pismenosti u informatičkoj kulturi" [Transformations of the Concept of Orality and Literacy in Information Culture], *Kultura, časopis za teoriju i sociologiju kulture i kulturnu politiku,* 2012, 133, 162.

"ways of acquiring, formulating, storing and retrieving knowledge" influences the content, structure and style of the creative act.[8] From the perspective of Serbian chant, of particular importance is Ong's contribution to the understanding of "secondary orality": since "primary orality" in the sense of a culture "totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print" does not exist today,[9] it has been replaced with secondary orality, which therefore depends on the culture of literacy and the existence of writing. Accordingly, "residual orality" is a phenomenon in which the effects of writing, literacy and printed media do not eradicate the traces of oral markers. Such a dialogue, in which orality and literacy enter into diverse, often extremely complex and dynamic relationships, results in texts that possess a prominent oral component, but also a series of implications stemming from literacy, including the possibility of memorizing, analyzing, studying, reworking and observing various relations.

Table 1: Binary opposition of oral and written/literate discourse

Some properties of oral discourse	Some properties of written/literate discourse
Subjectivity	Distance and self-consciousness
Transience	Permanency (particularly visual)
Closeness to real world	Objectivity, isolation
Orientation towards "here and now"	Atemporality, atopicality
Aggregation of information	Autonomy and authority of written sources
Shared knowledge	Individual "guarding" of knowledge
Situational character	Abstract and analytic character
Fragmentariness	Cohesion based on linguistic markers

The musicological implications of the above represented elements of linguistic theory were noted some fifty years ago, beginning with the influential study by Leo Treitler titled "Homer and Gregory" devoted to Gregorian chant.[10] Treitler combined Milman Perry's and Albert Lord's theory of oral transmission of epic poetry with Noam Chomsky's generative grammar, and his writings

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[8] Walter J. Ong, "African Talking Drums and Oral Noetics", *New Literary History*, 1977, 8/3, 412.

[9] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, London and New York, Methuen, 1982, 11.

[10] Leo Treitler, "Homer and Gregory: The Transmission of Epic Poetry and Plainchant", *The Musical Quarterly,* 1974, 60/3, 333–372.

inspired debates that are still ongoing. Beside mediaevalists, among whom Susan Boynton and Anna Maria Busse Berger[11] attracted special attention lately, it was quite natural that ethnomusicologists should also become interested in these questions. Their research included observation of the oral-written paradigm from an ideological angle,[12] the possibilities of the study of Gregorian chant from an ethnomusicological vantage point,[13] as well as the issues of musical transmission within a single culture (Japan, for instance).[14] As far as Orthodox musical traditions are concerned, Thomas Apostopoulos has recently published a study on the levels of orality in Byzantine music, discussing both historical and practical questions.[15] Particularly inspiring for the present research are contributions of Regina Randhofer, owing to the way in which she applied Walter Ong's original theory. One of her studies, devoted to the binary opposition of the oral and written/literate modes of transmission is based on the research of Jewish and oriental Christian traditions. Of special importance is the defining of the various types of relations between oral and written discourses, located between melography and the written composition; these relations are positioned at the opposite poles of the same axis, and crystallized through three paradigmatic levels:

1. oral material is transcribed out of ethnographic, historical or archival motives; transcription is, therefore, a change in medium, since the oral material is "translated" into text;

2. material is transcribed so as to facilitate memorizing; in other words, only the framework remains in written form; its purpose is to "guide" the performer through the development of a musical line during (oral) improvisation;

3. the transcription approaches the oral source, but at the same time develops it, uses and elaborates on it; i.e. the material is "literarized".[16]

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[11] Susan Boynton, "Orality, Literacy, and the Early Notation of Office Hymns", *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 2003, 56, 99–168. Anna Maria Busse Berger, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.

[12] Francesca R. Sborgi Lawson, "Rethinking the Orality-Literacy Paradigm in Musicology", *Oral Tradition*, 2010, 25/2, 429–446.

[13] Peter Jeffery, *Re-Envisioning Past Musical Cultures. Ethnomusicology in the Study of Gregorian Chant,* Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

[14] Kwok-Wai Ng, "Orality and Literacy in the Transmission of Japanese Togaku: Its Past and Present", *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 2011, 20/1, 33–56.

[15] Thomas Apostolopoulos, "Levels of Orality in Byzantine Music", in: Ivan Moody, Maria Takala-Roszczenko (eds.), *Unity and Variety in Orthodox Music: Theory and Practice.* (Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Orthodox Church Music), Joensuu, International Society for Orthodox Church Music, 2013, 73–81.

[16] Regina Randhofer, "Oral versus written: Structural differences in Jewish and Christian psalms", in: Laszlo Dobszay (ed.), *Cantus Planus*, Kongressbericht Lillafüred, Budapest, 2006, 44.

When we talk about Serbian chant, and more broadly, music in the Orthodox Church, the word, the questions of memorizing, played an important role not only in the educational process, but also in the formation of repertoire and its principal characteristics. Up to now, orientation towards transcription directed our attention to musical text/texts and comparative surveys of various problems, whereas the role of cultural practice in the origin and formation of these texts received only modest attention.[17] As Christian Troelsgård points out, even Byzantine neumatic manuscripts were neither descriptive nor prescriptive in view of specific manners of performance; they lacked directions as to what a particular rendering should be like. Their function was paradigmatic: they provided examples and models how to perform a certain text in accordance with tradition.[18] When Serbian tradition is in question, secondary literacy – in which musical discourse is variously determined by liturgical text – modeled the relation between music and text along two channels: liturgical books without notation that have been in existence since the earliest periods of Serbian liturgical chant, and notated sources. Concerning the latter, we have taken into account those written in linear notation; they represent more recent chant know as the "Karlovci chant", or "Serbian demotic church chant". Liturgical texts are, therefore, a constant that plays a role in fixating the musical layer; on a certain level, they stabilize the flow of music. At the same time, as recent developments in cognitive psychology have shown (although such investigations in Serbian chant have so far only been planned), within the prevailing oral paradigm, melodies can serve as reminders of the texts.[19] This "double dependence" on text, which makes Serbian chant especially interesting for study from the perspective of the orality-literacy model, was not created at a single historical moment, but evolved gradually, with all the characteristics that such processuality implies.

Can collections of Serbian church melodies be classified into any of the categories defined by Regina Randhofer? Do they belong to "translations", mnemonic aids or "literarized" sources, or perhaps occupy some different positions along this axis? The transcribers themselves admitted that they introduced certain adaptations, revisions or modifications; thus, the question about the degree of difference is not irrelevant. Finally, who is the real "author" of church melodies?

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[17] For a similar position regarding early polyphonic forms cf. Anna Maria Busse Berger, op. cit., 1–3.

[18] Christian Troelsgård, *Byzantine Neumes. A New Introduction to the Middle Byzantine Musical Notation,* Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2011, 14.

[19] Cf. Susan Boynton, "Orality, Literacy, and the Early Notation of Office Hymns", op. cit., 108–109.

Table 2: Some psychodynamic elements of the oral/written statement according to Ong[20]

Oral statement	Written statement
Additivity	Subordination
Aggregation	Analysis
Redundancy	Free flow
Conservative, traditional set of mind	Innovativeness, instability
Participation	Objective distance
Homeostasis	Instability, disequilibrium
Concrete thought	Abstract thought

Interaction between oral and written discourse is clearly seen in Mokran-jac's collections of Serbian chant, *Octoechos* from 1908, and *Alien Chant*, first lithographic edition in 1911, subsequently printed in 1914 and 1920.[21] The collections of which he was the author possess numerous specific traits; many of their elements unequivocally testify to a more significant influence of the written discourse, which distinguishes them from the works of both his predecessors and followers. On the one hand, the most important psychodynamic elements of the oral style discussed by Ong (aggregation, redundancy, additive structure, conservativeness, see Table 2) are evident in his writings, as well as in collections transcribed by other authors. In a musical context, we are talking about musical formulae (aggregation of musical statement), standardized formal principles (redundancy), the hierarchical primacy of endings, particularly of the closing sections of hymns as opposed to other segments of church songs (additive structure) and the tendency to preserve melodic identity (conservativeness).[22]

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[20] Cf. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, op. cit., 36–57.

[21] For more information on the transcribers and transcriptions of *Octoechos* and other collections of church chants see: Kosta Manojlović, *Spomenica Stevanu St. Mokranjcu,* op. cit., 165–173; Danica Petrović, Srpsko narodno crkveno pojanje i njegovi zapisivači [Serbian Demotic Church Chant and its Transcribers], *Srpska muzika kroz vekove* [Serbian Music through the Centuries]*,* Beograd, Galerija SANU, 1973, 251–274, Ivana Perković Radak, *Muzika srpskog Osmoglasnika* [Music of the Serbian Octoechos]*,* Beograd, Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, 2004, 12–21 i dr.

[22] The aggregative character of oral thinking is "closely related to the formulae that are supposed to activate memory... Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight " (Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, op. cit., 38). Furthermore, redundancy of oral statement "keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track" (Ibid., 39), whereas the additive style, unlike the subordinative one, secures a "flow of narration", it is characterized by the accumulation and connection of ideas (Ibid.,

On this occasion, we would like to draw attention to those aspects of the written discourse that offer various possibilities. As noted by Ong, "without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing, but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness."[23] When Serbian chant is in question, writing has brought along the possibility of literal repetition. Once the chanter has learned the notated melody, he can visualize and analyze it, single out characteristic elements, observe the relationship between textual and melodic phrases, and finally compare different versions of the same church hymn. For this very reason Mokranjac underlined in the preface to *Octoechos* that the transcription of melodies in all modes *in F* was an aid to "students and all those interested in using this book, so that they might see in which part of the scale a voice moves, whether high or low, and according to this learn how to adjust the beginning of various melodies with various tones, according to the nature of their throats".[24] It is plain to see that the composer – whether intentionally or not – chose to rely on notation (although to this day, his endeavors have not suppressed the oral mode of learning), so that his starting point in determining the absolute pitch was the possibility of the visualization and analysis of the notated melody. In the same context, we could regard the composer's procedure of omitting regular metric division in favor of bar lines at the ends of melodic sections.

A no less important characteristic of the written statement is the possibility of comparison between various sources and determining which one is the most adequate. Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac has not only done that with respect to trills, but also to characteristic melodic formulae. The primer mover in the selection of trills was the tendency to transcribe songs in as pure a form as possible, "without tasteless obsolete adornments", and at the same time without endangering the melodic identity of church songs. As is well known, the author took great pains to enter the purest melodies into the basic transcription; variants that he considered important were written at the bottom of the page, as a kind of musical footnote. In such a manner, the chanters who wished a more elaborate melody were able to choose between two, and sometimes several different versions. Be-

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37–38). Finally, the conservative mindset is accompanied by an inhibition of intellectual experimenting, and it is a consequence of "investing great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages" (Ibid., 41). More on the psychodynamic elements of the oral style in relation to Serbian chant see in: Ivana Perković, "Serbian Chant on the Threshold: the Dialogue between Orality and Literacy", op. cit., 83–84.

[23] Ibid., 78.

[24] Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, Predgovor, *Osmoglasnik,* Beograd, Sveti arhijerejski sinod Srpske pravoslavne crkve, 1908, 4.

sides embellishments, the composer, owing to the notation, followed other kinds of impulses, which were productive and creative in nature. The existence of written versions enabled him to observe specific "grammatical rules" of singing, cataloguing and "archival memorizing."[25] Let us take as an example the seventh mode from *Octoechos*, in which, according to Mokranjac's decision, the closing section in the "principal notation" is always the rarer (and older) variant. The more usual version is given in the footnote with the following remark: "This is how the song is usually sung, and above is another (older) form different from the closing form from the third mode."[26] In other words, it was more important for the author to emphasize the individual melodic features of the seventh mode than to favor the more common manner of singing. In this way, he demonstrated that he approached chanting primarily as a composer, preoccupied with the musical side of Serbian chant, rather than as a chanter who would probably blindly follow traditional and broadly accepted solutions (see Example 1).[27] This could be related to Ong's observation that "print culture gave birth to the romantic notions of 'originality' and 'creativity' which set apart an individual work from other works..."[28]

According to Ong's observation, there is yet another side to the written/ literate discourse: the possibility of distinguishing between dialects. The case in point is dialects such as Tuscan or High German, which were included in printed publications more frequently than other dialects.[29] It is precisely in relation to Mokranjac's transcriptions of Serbian chant that we come across the designation "Belgrade chant" pointing to a distinction between this and the so-called Karlovci type of church chant. However, whereas the expression "Karlovci chant" is acceptable in the topological sense, as it specifies the place in (or around) which recent Serbian chant was formed, the term "Belgrade chant" in the sense of something specific, different from and opposed to Karlovci is unjustified and without foundation in musical material. The confrontation of these two variants gives a false impression that there are (only) two different forms of singing; in

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[25] Concerning "grammatical" rules and the oral/written paradigm see also: Anna Maria Busse Berger, *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, op. cit., 3–4.

[26] Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, *Srpsko narodno crkveno pojanje I. Osmoglasnik*, op. cit., 218.

[27] See also Ivana Perković Radak, "Crkvena muzika Stevana Stojanovića Mokranjca" [Church Music of Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac], in: Ivana Perković Radak i Tijana Popović-Mlađenović (eds.), *Mokranjcu na dar* [An Offering to Mokranjac], Beograd – Negotin, Fakultet muzičke umetnosti – Dom kulture Stevan Mokranjac, 2006, 157–196.
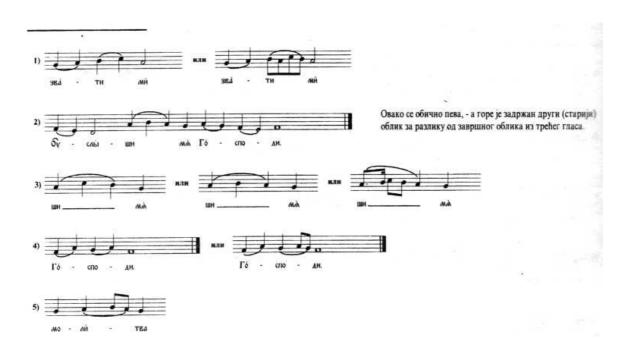
[28] Cf. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, op. cit., 131.

[29] Ibid., 104.

other words, only two types are singled out, ignoring the fact that Serbian chant, owing to its oral transmission, "lived" through many variants, causing greater or lesser differences between transcriptions that pinned down these variants.[30]

Finally, we reach a conclusion that the rich and multi-layered residue of oral thinking, formed over time in Serbian chant after the adoption of musical literacy in this genre, entered into an interesting and provocative dialogue with the principles characteristic of written/literate style. Although musical notation, from the perspective of Serbian chant, was not a novelty at the time Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac began with his transcription of church melodies, this dialogue, owing precisely to his work and his contributions, opened numerous new possibilities, not only regarding the "technology" of notation and the importance of printing, but also in defining the position of the transcriber, the completeness of the collection and many other elements. Finally, this composer has demonstrated that the relation between oral and written discourse cannot be examined at the level of a simple binary opposition, but only within the framework of their coexistence which has not been interrupted to the present day.

Example 1[31]

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[30] Cf. Ivana Perković Radak, "Crkvena muzika Stevana Stojanovića Mokranjca", op. cit.

[31] Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, *Sabrana dela, sv. 7. Duhovna muzika 4. Osmoglasnik* [Collected Works, Vol. 7, Sacred Music 4, Octoechos], Beograd, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 1996, 238.