

Oral Transmission in Arabic Music, Past and Present

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In this article I shall study the nature, process, and problems of oral transmission in Arabic music in medieval Iraq and twentieth-century Egypt. The choice of areas and eras is dictated by the present state of scholarship pertaining to the subject of oral transmission in Arabic music, particularly the work of my colleague Salwa el-Shawan, my own research in medieval Arabic music, and my training in early twentieth-century Arabic music.

The Medieval Period

For the medieval period I shall rely on one source: the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*¹ (*Book of Songs*) of al-Iṣbahānī (d. 967). This anthology, written in anecdotal form, covers, in approximately ten thousand pages, poetical and musical practices as well as social and cultural history from the fifth to the tenth century in Arabia, Persia, Syria, and Iraq. Among the many musical practices described in the *KA*, the processes of oral transmission are relevant to this study, and also the fact that the oral medium was by far the most popular.

1. Written Transmission

Though the most popular, oral transmission was not the only medium used. Written transmission is also known to have been employed, though in very rare circumstances. We learn of two such unique occasions in the *KA* when Iṣḥāq al-Mawṣilī (d. 850), the ʿAbbāsīd composer-singer-historian-theorist, sent a notated song to Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (d. 839), the ʿAbbāsīd prince-singer-composer (X:105-6, 110). The notation must have been quite accurate, for, if we believe the *KA*, Ibrāhīm was reported to

¹ Abbreviated hereafter as *KA*.

have sung both songs exactly as Ishāq himself had composed and performed them. The precise nature of musical notation in the ninth century is not entirely clear to us: pitches were precisely delineated in terms of lute fretting, as in theoretical treatises of the ninth century, but durations, and subsequently rhythms, were not as exact as pitches. In the tenth century, however, al-Fārābī produced a very accurate system of notation which included not only pitches and durations but also dynamics and timbre.²

The very meager use of notation in the medieval era can be ascribed to the fact that most musicians were not as well versed in music theory as were Ishāq al-Mawṣilī and Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī. Thus the oral medium was the rule in music transmission, whereas the visual medium (i.e. notation) was a very rare exception indeed, and it remained confined to the field of music theory.

2. Oral Transmission

At first glance the process of oral transmission seems to be very straightforward: a singer [transmitter] transmits through many repetitions his or her composition—or compositions transmitted to him or her—to another singer [receiver]. The accuracy of oral transmission presupposes both an accurate “transmitter” and an accurate “receiver” who in turn shall accurately transmit a repertoire to future accurate “receivers.” Though this ideal situation obtained to some extent (see X:69-70), it was often jeopardized by inaccurate “transmitters” and/or inaccurate “receivers” and further threatened by memory erosion.

(a) *Music Transmitters*

In the *KA* one can isolate two distinct types of transmission: direct and mediated.³ In direct transmission the composer personally transmitted a song directly to a student or a colleague. In mediated transmission, the transmitter was a singer who had learned a song directly from its composer, or indirectly through a chain of other transmitters going back to the original composer. In either case, the success of an accurate transmission depended upon the reliability of the transmitter.

A requisite of a good transmitter, whether original composer or

² Al-Fārābī borrowed, in his notation system, concepts and terminologies from grammar, prosody, arithmetics, and Euclidean geometry. This is detailed in his *Kitāb al-Mūsīqī al-Kabīr* (Grand Book of Music), *Kitāb al-Iqā'āt* (Book of Rhythms), and *Kitāb Iḥṣā' al-Iqā'āt* (Book for the Basic Comprehension of Rhythms). See Sawa 1983-84:1-32.

³ I am borrowing the terms direct and mediated transmissions from el-Shawan (1982).

performer, was to reproduce a song as originally composed and not alter it in the least in the many successive repetitions needed during a musical lesson. According to the testimony of Ishāq al-Mawṣilī, the °Abbāsīd singer °Allūyah (d. 850) was a trustworthy transmitter because he never changed a song no matter how many times he sang it. On the other hand, Muḫhāriq (d. ca. 845) was untrustworthy and difficult because of his constantly changing creative performances. The following anecdote from the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* vividly depicts these points and also points out the following dichotomy:

A good transmitter was uncreative, and often considered not so excellent a performer; a bad transmitter was creative, and often considered an excellent performer.

“I [al-Iṣbahānī] was informed by Muḫammad ibn Mazyad who said: Ḥammād the son of Ishāq informed us saying: I asked my father: In your opinion who is better, Muḫhāriq or °Allūyah? He said: My son, °Allūyah is more knowledgeable as to what comes out of his head and more knowledgeable in what he sings and performs [on the lute]. If I were to choose between them both as to who will teach my slave singing girls, or if I were asked for advice, I would choose °Allūyah: for he used to perform vocal music [well] and compose with artful mastery. Muḫhāriq, with his [masterly] control over his voice and his [consequent] overabundance of ornaments, is not a good transmitter because he does not perform even one song as he learned it and does not sing it twice the same way because of his many additions to it. However, should they meet with a Caliph or a [wealthy] commoner, Muḫhāriq would win the favor of the assembly and get the reward because of his nice[r] voice and abundant ornamentation.”

(XI:334)

Muḫhāriq’s musical twin was Muḫammad ibn Ḥamzah, an excellent singer whose constantly changing interpretation made him likewise an impossible and useless teacher (XV:359).

In addition to performance creativity there was another factor which hampered the flow of oral transmission, and which pertained to the capriciousness of °Abbāsīd musicians, who often gave themselves the freedom to alter the repertoire of the °Abbāsīd (750-1258), Umayyad (661-750), and pre-Umayyad periods (X:69-70), in order to suit their musical dispositions in style, taste, or musical abilities. This is documented in an epistle written by the one-day Caliph and proficient musician °Abd-Allāh ibn al-Mu°tazz (d. 909) to the musician °Ubayd-Allāh ibn °Abd-Allāh ibn Ṭāhir (X:276; see also Sawa 1983:238-39). The alterations consisted of melodic and rhythmic ornaments: note replacement, addition and removal of notes, metrical expansion and contraction, and addition of ornaments as well as simplification and elimination of ornaments. They also consisted of repetitions of sections and additions of new melodic sections (Sawa 1983:235-37).

A third factor is what I shall term the competitive economic factor. A court musician who had exclusive knowledge and mastery over a repertoire of songs, and who in addition wished to keep a monopoly over such a repertoire, resorted to musical alteration at every concert performance so as to prevent his colleagues or rivals from learning any of it. By keeping a monopoly over a set of songs, a court musician was assured of being constantly in demand among the aristocracy and of being generously remunerated for performing such songs. One of the many documented examples of such economically motivated practices was that of Prince Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī who purposefully distorted one song at each repetition to prevent the gifted singer Mukhāriq from learning it (X:102).

A fourth factor affecting the accurate transmission of songs was intoxication resulting from wine consumption. Tired, relaxed, and intoxicated musicians unconsciously altered the contents of their songs as evidenced in the following anecdote about the singer Ḥakam al-Wādī (d. 809):

Hārūn ibn Muḥammad and Yahyà ibn Khālid said: We have not seen among the singers anyone who is a better performer than Ḥakam (al-Wādī). And no one [among the singers] has heard a song and sang it but altered it, adding [here] and curtailing [there], except Ḥakam. This was mentioned to Ḥakam who said: "I do not drink, others do." If they drink, their rendition changes.

(VI:285)

(b) *Music Receivers*

Music receivers were students learning a repertoire from a composer or teacher/transmitter; or they were musicians learning from colleagues. Transmitters were paid in money or in kind. Remunerations were, however, waived when there was an exchange of songs (XIX:221).

Singers' learning skills varied a great deal from accurate to inaccurate, and accuracy in turn depended on the relative difficulty of a repertoire. Inaccurate learning made a receiver a future inaccurate transmitter. After generations of exponentially compounded inaccurate transmissions, the final product came to be quite different from the original one, hence making—in the words of the enlightened music historian al-Iṣbahānī—the transmitters the composers of the new product:

This change, al-Iṣbahānī informs us, was compounded from generation to generation of teacher/student so that, after five such generations, the final version of a song had so little in common with the original that the musicians who caused changes had virtually become the composers of the final music product (Sawa 1983:238).

Two classic pages in the *KA* list a chain of accurate transmitters/receivers and a chain of inaccurate transmitters/receivers (X:69-70). Among the accurate ones were the renowned slave singing girls of al-Ḥārith ibn Buskhunnar; Ishāq al-Mawṣilī advised Mukhāriq to relearn his songs from them (XII:48). Another accurate repository was Muḥammad (d. 847), the son of the above-mentioned al-Ḥārith ibn Buskhunnar. Hibat-Allāh, the son of Prince Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdi, reported that Muḥammad had learned all of Ibrāhīm’s compositions from Ibrāhīm himself and that he altered none of them (XXIII:177). Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Buskhunnar was also able to learn some of Ishāq al-Mawṣilī’s songs known for craftsmanship and extreme sophistication:

I [al-Iṣbahānī] was informed by Jaḥzah who said: Abū °Abd-Allāh al-Hāshimī told me: I heard Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muṣ°ab saying to [the Caliph] al-Wāṭhiq (d. 847): Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī said to me: No one has yet been able to learn⁴ from me a song correctly⁵ except Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Buskhunnar. He has learned a number of songs from me as I sing them.... (XII:48-49)

The proverbial difficulty of Ishāq’s songs was related in two anecdotes in which top musicians were still at a loss after the song was repeated two hundred times. It was reported that, by the time Ishāq died, the singers knew only its skeleton (*rasm*; V:314, 417-18). Regarding another difficult song of Ishāq, it was reported in a second anecdote that even Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Buskhunnar was unable to learn the song accurately, though it was repeated seventy times. Particularly illuminating in this anecdote, partially translated below, is the statement Muḥammad made about the problem inherent in oral transmission:

I myself counted more than seventy repetitions and everyone [among the singers] thought that they had learned it [correctly], but by God none [of them] did. I, the first among them, was not able to learn it accurately though I am—God knows—the fastest learner. I don’t know [the reason]: is it because of its many ornaments or because of its extreme difficulty . . .

(V:315-16)

As to what is meant by the “extreme difficulty” of Ishāq’s song, one can only conjecture that it refers to unorthodox melodic movement and rhythm, chromaticism and changes of melodic modes, and virtuositic cadences.

The relative degree of difficulty of a piece was one factor affecting the learning accuracy. Another equally important factor was the learning

⁴ Lit. “take.”

⁵ *mustawīyan*, lit. “straight.”

speed. Some virtuosi needed to hear a piece once or twice only to memorize it accurately (XII:48; XIV:187-89; XIX:221). Others required very many repetitions before they could learn a piece. One such musician was Zalzal (d. after 842), the famous virtuoso lutenist who accomplished the singing of Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (d. 804) (the father of Iṣḥāq) at the court of the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809). Zalzal was also the lute teacher of Iṣḥāq al-Mawṣilī. The latter described his teacher's slow learning speed as follows:

Until he knew and understood a new song, Zalzal was slow [to learn it], so that if he and his *ghulam* [slave boy or servant] accompanied a song neither of them knew from before, his *ghulam* would be the better [accompanist]. Yet when he [Zalzal] comprehended it he would come up with a performance none could attain.

(V:275)

Short of a minimum required number of repetitions, musicians in Zalzal's category could not learn a piece accurately, though they were outstanding in every other respect.⁶ For this reason they often had recourse to musicians with a proverbial memory, those who could learn a song after one or two hearings only. Muḥammad al-Zaff (d. ca. 809), °Abd-Allāh ibn al-°Abbās al-Rabīʿī (d. ca. 861), and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥarīth ibn Buskhunnar were renowned as quick and accurate memorizers (XIV:187-189; XII:48; XIX:221).

Muḥammad al-Zaff was so skilled as a quick memorizer that he made a lucrative profession of it. Musicians paid him to steal songs which performers attempted to monopolize. Conversely, Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī bought him off with a monthly stipend in order not to divulge his compositions. The following anecdote, describing events that took place in the *majlis* of Hārūn al-Rashīd, illustrates Muḥammad al-Zaff's skills at stealing a newly composed song of Ibn Jāmi° (d. before 804) in front of his nose and then accusing Ibn Jāmi°, the original composer, of plagiarism. The humor of the episode much delighted the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd:

I was informed by Ibn Ja°far Jaḥẓah who said: We were told by Ḥammād ibn Iṣḥāq on the authority of his father who said: One day Ibn Jāmi° sang in the presence of al-Rashīd:

Bold to forsake me, cowardly about union with me/
 Habitual liar, one given to following a promise by procrastination.
 Setting one foot forward towards union but withdrawing/
 The other, he mixes seriousness in this matter with jest.
 He is concerned for us, but whenever I say "He has come close [to us]/
 And shown generosity," he turns away and leans toward avarice.

⁶ It is worth noting here an important musical concept which transpires from this anecdote as well as from many pages of *KA*, namely that slow learning speed was not regarded as poor musicianship.

His abstention becomes greater as my passion grows/
And my desire intensifies as he grudges giving.

[Ibn Jāmi^c] went on to excel and beautify his rendering in whatever way he wished. At this point I [Ishāq] made a sign about him to the singer Muḥammad al-Zaff, who immediately understood my intention. Al-Rashīd liked Ibn Jāmi^c's singing, drank to it, and asked for two or three encores.

I then got up to pray, made a sign to al-Zaff who followed me, and I motioned the singers Mukhāriq, °Allūyah, and °Aqīd, who also joined me. I asked al-Zaff to repeat the song: he not only did but performed it as if [Ibn Jāmi^c] were singing it. Al-Zaff kept on repeating it to the group until they sang it correctly.

I then returned to the *majlis*, and when my turn came to sing, I started first of all by singing the aforementioned song. Ibn Jāmi^c stared at me blankly whereas al-Rashīd turned to me and said: "Did you use to transmit this song?" I replied: "Yes, my Lord." Ibn Jāmi^c then said: "By God he has lied, he got it from none other than me just now!" I said: "This song I have been transmitting for a long time, and every singer attending this *majlis* once learned it from me.

I then turned towards al-Rashīd, and °Allūyah sang it, then °Aqīd, and then Mukhāriq. Ibn Jāmi^c jumped up and sat in front of al-Rashīd, swore by his life and at the risk of divorcing his wife that he had composed the melody only three nights ago, and that it had not been heard from him till that time. Al-Rashīd turned to me and said: "By my life, tell me the truth about this whole business." I did and this caused him to laugh and clap and say: "Everything has its fated end, and Ibn Jāmi^c's is al-Zaff."

(XIV:187-88; Sawa 1984:41-42)

(c) *Memory Erosion*

Whether one deals with an accurate or inaccurate performer, a fast or slow learner, or an easy or difficult repertoire, memory erosion was bound to set in, especially when a musician had not heard or performed a repertoire for a period of time. In one anecdote, Mukhāriq asked the singer Muḥammad ibn Ḥamzah to refresh the memory of the slave girls whom Mukhāriq had originally bought from Muḥammad. The slave girls had been out of practice for a while and needed to hear a repertoire of songs which their former teacher had taught them (XV:360). In another anecdote which occurred in the *majlis* of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 833), the memory problem is mentioned in a figurative sense. Mukhāriq had performed a song in front of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn, but Prince Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī, who was present, was not pleased with the performance, so he asked Mukhāriq to repeat it. Mukhāriq repeated it and did better, but his performance was still wanting. Prince Ibrāhīm then, at the request of the Caliph, performed it himself, thus enabling Mukhāriq to come up with a better performance. When asked by al-Ma'mūn what was the difference between the performances, Prince Ibrāhīm said that there was much difference and turning to Mukhāriq observed:

Your example is like that of a superb garment: if its owner forgets about it, dust sets in it and its colors change [and become dull]. If shaken [however] it will return to its original state.

(X:102)

The odds against accurate oral transmission were too high and seriously impeded the survival of a repertoire. The process of change within a large repertoire is inevitable because of the following compounded factors: performance creativity, musical capriciousness, musical dispositions (taste, style, performing and learning abilities), relative difficulty of songs, intoxication, economically motivated alterations, and, most seriously, memory erosion. By the time al-Iṣbahānī compiled his anthology in the middle of the tenth century, total memory erosion had taken over, so that both accurate and altered versions of the Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsīd repertoire had been obliterated (X:69-70).

The Modern Era

In the modern period, the transmission medium varies according to the musical category being transmitted. In rural music the transmission is oral, in urban music it is a mixture of written and oral transmissions and a reaction to them.

I. Rural Music

Folk singers and instrumentalists learn orally through many years of apprenticeship in an ensemble. Singers often start as chorus members; then, if endowed with a good voice and with general musicianship, they become virtuoso vocalists. Likewise, an instrumentalist starts as an apprentice in a *tutti* backing up a virtuoso singer, or virtuoso instrumentalist such as a *rabāb* (spike fiddle), *salamiyyah* (end-blown flute), or *mizmār* (oboe) player. In the case of the *ṭabl baladī* ensemble consisting of three *mizmārs* and a double-headed drum, there are three levels of sounds and proficiencies: a high-register melody performed by the lead virtuoso, the same melody but less ornamented and played in unison or an octave lower, and a drone by the apprentice who learns circular breathing and slowly increases his repertoire and musical abilities by listening to the musicians of the first and second level. As in the case of the medieval era, alteration is due to performance creativity, disposition, and memory erosion.

2. Urban Music

In her 1982 article, Salwa el-Shawan “documents the changes throughout the twentieth century in the processes of transmission of musical compositions from composers to performers in the Cairene musical category of *al-mūsīkà al-‘arabiyyah*” (54).⁷ The repertoire in this category includes late nineteenth-century compositions: the *dawr*, an Egyptian vocal genre; the *muwashshah*, a vocal genre of mainly Syrian origins; and an instrumental repertoire that is predominantly Ottoman. The repertoire also includes early twentieth-century vocal genres, the above-mentioned *dawr* and *muwashshah*, as well as other vocal genres such as *qaṣīdah*, *ṭaqṭūqah*, *ughniyah*, and so forth.

(a) *First Half of the Twentieth Century*

Salwa el-Shawan informs us that direct repertoire transmission predominated throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and that it occurred on three levels:

(i) The composer (*mulaḥḥin*) was at the same time the vocal soloist (*muṭrib*). In this case he transmitted his work orally to the chorus and instrumentalists.

(ii) A professional singer or songstress (*muṭrib* or *muṭribah*), who was not a composer, learned the song directly from the composer. In this case the singer worked together with the composer and the poet to adapt the work to the singer’s preference and vocal abilities. The adaptation included the following changes to the composer’s work: “increase or decrease of range of the *lahn* (melody); the addition, elimination or simplification of ornaments and cadential formulae; and changes in lexical items” (el-Shawan 1982:56). When the song was thus consolidated the composer then taught it to the instrumentalists and the chorus.

(iii) A professional singer learned from a recording made by a singer or composer/singer, should the composer not be available. Since the music product was set in the recording, the singer had little freedom to alter the song as in case (ii) above (*ibid.*:56).

(b) *Second Half of the Twentieth Century*

Since musicians—especially instrumentalists—performing urban Egyptian music are a product of conservatory-type training, a short

⁷ The term *al-mūsīkà al-‘arabiyyah* used in Egypt since 1930 “signifies all musical idioms that are composed and performed by Arabs, provided that these idioms do not transcend the boundaries of Arabic musical styles as perceived by native musicians and audiences” (el-Shawan 1982:54). The term also refers to an Egyptian category of secular urban music which was the subject of el-Shawan’s study.

introduction to this training is in order here.

In the Alexandria Higher Institute for the Studies of Arabic Music, where I studied between 1966 and 1970, music theory and solfeggio were taught, to student instrumentalists and singers alike, through the medium of adapted Western music notation. Instrumental instruction of *ʿūd* (lute), *qānūn* (psaltery), violin, and cello was achieved by means of written exercises, and notated pieces which belonged to the Ottoman and Arabic repertoire of *dūlāb*, *samāʿī*, *baṣhrāf* (all three acting as preludes), as well as *longā* (acting as a postlude), and modern pieces of “Franco-Arabic” character. The notated pieces were given in skeletal form; it was thus the duty of the instructor to teach ornamentation techniques idiosyncratic to each instrument. This was achieved orally, and in the absence of tape recorders, which many teachers would not allow in class, it was a case of “catch as catch can.” Students with quicker learning ability caught more ornamentation techniques than those who learned more slowly, and the problem was further compounded, much as in the medieval era, by the teacher changing his ornamentation constantly out of personal creativity and out of a desire to monopolize a set of ornamentation techniques. Vocal music, consisting of the *muwashshah* and *dawr* genres, was strictly orally transmitted up to 1970 in Alexandria.⁸ This was due to the fact that the voice teacher could not read Western notation. After giving the text of the song, the voice teacher sang to his own lute accompaniment and students repeated in chorus until the song was memorized to a certain degree of accuracy. Again, students who learned quickly had an advantage over the slower ones, and the creative voice teacher confused both, though to varying degrees.

Instrumentalists and singers trained in such a mixture of oral and written traditions took up positions in urban ensembles. One such ensemble that performed the conservatory-type repertoire was *Firqat al-Mūsīqā al-ʿArabiyyah*. El-Shawan informs us that the process of mediated transmission took place in this ensemble and involved one or more mediators between composers and performers. The mediators were the *ḥāfiẓ* (preserver), the *mudawwin* (music transcriber), and the *qāʾid* (conductor). The *ḥāfiẓ* is an elderly musician who has learned the repertoire directly from composers, indirectly from other performers, or

⁸ Most *muwashshahat* and *adwār* have been transcribed into Western notation, albeit in skeletal form, in a number of publications which appeared in the late 1960’s. I am not aware, however, if they have been used in the instruction of vocal music in Egypt. It seems unlikely, however, because, according to el-Shawan (1982:57), the chorus of *Firqat al-Mūsīqā al-ʿArabiyyah* still learns orally.

from old recordings.⁹ His job is to transmit selected compositions to the chorus. His interpretation—remarks el-Shawan—is influenced by his memory, vocal abilities, and musical tastes (not unlike his medieval predecessor). His interpretation leaves the skeletal melody unchanged, but alters the following: “ornaments, cadential formulae, pitch order, rhythmic values, phrasing, repetitions of phrases and sections, and lexical items. Some of the changes most frequently made. . . include: (1) assigning specific rhythmic values to *ad libitum* sections; (2) the simplification, standardization, or elimination of ornaments and cadential formulae; (3) assigning definite pitches to sections previously performed with indefinite pitches” (el-Shawan 1982:60).

A further factor causing change is that the compositions which were originally intended to be sung by a solo virtuoso vocalist are now adapted for large chorus singing. The music product thus altered is then transcribed by the *mudawwin* for the use of instrumentalists and conductor. Because of the constraints of Western music notation and because of instrumental limitations a further altered version is produced by the transcriber with the assistance of the *ḥāfiẓ*: “The rendition which lends itself best both to the notation system and to the capabilities of the vocal and instrumental ensemble is then chosen and consolidated in the transcriptions” (el-Shawan 1982:57). However, the chorus which learned the oral version will inevitably clash with the instrumentalists’ and conductor’s written version. The conductor settles the differences—often orally transmitting elements which Western notation cannot represent—and a final version is consolidated (57, 59).¹⁰

El-Shawan concludes that in the twentieth century, in direct or mediated transmission, the musical composition “is treated as a flexible entity which is reshaped by composers, performers, and mediators at every step of the transmission process” (*idem*). The three mediators play a dual role: preserving some elements of the tradition and reshaping others.

Concluding Remarks

Though this article treats music transmission in two different geographical areas separated moreover by ten centuries, it is possible to offer a few concluding remarks, albeit of a provisional nature.

The tradition of a *ḥāfiẓ* as memorizer and transmitter is a very old

⁹ For instance, my *muwashshahat* teacher, Professor Marghanī, had learned directly from the composer Ibrāhīm al-Qabbānī and from other senior performers.

¹⁰ The above situation obtains also in the category of urban music known as *mūstqā shā’iyah* (“widespread music”) (el-Shawan 1982:59, 73, n. 7), where the modern composer, and not the *ḥāfiẓ*, works closely with the transcriber and conductor.

one. Inevitably the transmitters—and likewise the receivers—will reshape a repertoire according to their memory, performing and learning abilities, taste, style, and creativity. The ensuing changes are manifold, and the modern seem to parallel the medieval, though for different reasons stemming in part from the differing medium of transmission.

Written notation appears to have been more precise in the ninth century than it is in the twentieth century. The latter can certainly help “preserve” some aspects of a tradition, namely its skeleton. Because of the skeletal limitation, the written medium needs to be supplemented by the oral one. Ironically, the written medium, besides preserving a tradition, has been a factor causing change in that tradition, not only because of its constraints but also because it added two extra mediators to the chain of transmission: the transcriber and the conductor.

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