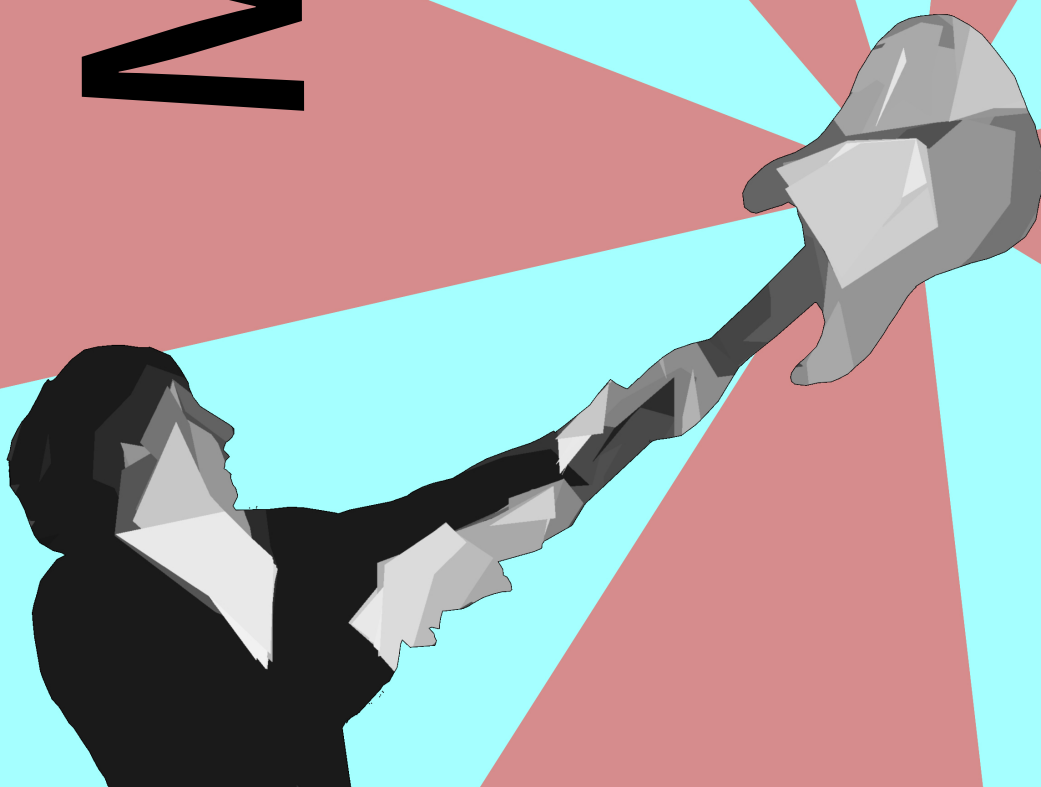


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## Oral performances in a (post-)literate society

*Av Giuseppe Sanfratello*

### **O. Introduction**

The attempt of the present paper is to introduce the following question: *How is it possible to still talk about “oral performances” in a literate, indeed “post-literate” society?* In order to stress the relevance of such a topic, I will examine some achievements in research fields both dealing with literary studies and musicological enquiry. Taking into account some instances of oral musical traditions gathered during ethnomusicological fieldwork, e.g. the singing of *mandinàdhes* (couplets of improvised rhymed verses) from Crete and the Byzantine liturgical chant of the Albanians of Sicily, I will analyse the process both of (re)writing a poetic-formulaic tradition by adapting itself to the modern multimedia technology (i.e. the “media literate poets” case on Crete) and developing techniques of oral safeguarding without the usage of musical notation (i.e. the case of the Sicilian-Albanian community). This very last example will show how one can talk about “aliterate” performers, who choose, on purpose, not to write down their own singing tradition, although they do know how to read and write.

These cases might seem a bit more complicated to look at if one just considers that, in the so-called Facebook Era, it has become increasingly difficult to define a clear border between orality and literacy. Indeed, we should observe the striking switch from the relationship of “writers and readers” to that one of “bloggers and followers”.

Finally, by studying such musical phenomena, it is possible to deduce that – since the systems of oral performance have significantly changed over the last century – we can still find a relevant bond between techniques of oral musical transmission and written safeguard in a (post-) literate society.

### **1. Reading, writing and transcribing music**

“Written notation is a phenomenon of literate social classes. In all societies it has developed only after the formation of a script for language, and it has generally used elements of that script.”<sup>47</sup> In diverse social and cultural contexts in which music, either vocal or instrumental, has been orally performed, a developed notational system has been involved in the transmission of the music of that specific group of people, as part of its cultural heritage and folklore. Only to give an example, in the chant tradition of Byzantium and Eastern Europe, the neumatic notation was written and used mainly for sung texts, and used principally as an *aide-mémoire* for the skilled performer, who already knew a chant by heart because he was trained under processes of “aural” (often seen as a more efficient term than “oral”)

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<sup>47</sup> “Notation”, entry in Grove Music Online.

transmission.

Bruno Nettl, quoting a Charles Seeger's article on oral tradition in music, observe the impact that the development of audio recordings has on the "existence of aural traditions"; in addition, he also quotes Curt Sachs and his reflection on four different kinds of musical culture, sustained by aural, written, printed, and recorded settings. What is relevant of such a study is not just to refer to the differences between oral and written forms, rather to a sort of "continuum of relationships among composers, performer, and listener".<sup>48</sup> In this respect, if one looks at Sachs's model, s/he could be able to notice that the written tradition seems to be closer to the oral than the printed one. However, by saying "written" music, it is necessary to draw a clear distinction between a prescriptive and a descriptive approach. In fact, if one refers to the score of a Beethoven's piano sonata, this would be the case of a "prescriptive" model of how this piece of music should be performed, unless one looks at such example of music as "aurally" composed in the mind of the musician, who would have then used the notation "just" to sketch a first musical draft.<sup>49</sup> Here, for practical reasons, I will not discuss any of the matters related to the way of performance as such (e.g. the dynamics or the interpretation of the piece). Certainly, one might also take into account some example of music written on paper only to give a "skeleton" or main idea of its melodic and rhythmic features, whose rendition is often given through improvisational processes, i.e. as in the case of the performance of standard jazz music.

On the other hand, if referring to the instance of ethnomusicological fieldwork, the act of simply transcribing music from its "aural/oral" form to a written one is considered to offer a "descriptive" setting of the musical performance. The academic approach to the use of musical transcriptions in dealing with the study and analysis of traditional music has changed a lot during the last century. Nowadays, the involvement of such methodology may be considered not so important or even necessary as it once was at the dawn of the ethnomusicology as a separate discipline.

## 2. Literacy and post-literacy

In our contemporary society, communication among people spread all over the world is heavily mediated by technology. This might be registered as a huge effect on the worldwide community if one just considers that in the mid-nineteenth century, "only 10% of the world's adult population could read or write, whereas at the dawn of the twenty-first century, UNESCO estimates that over 80% of adults worldwide can read and write at some minimum level."<sup>50</sup>

On the vast phenomenon of literacy, hundreds of studies have been offered. For instance, Marshall McLuhan's sociocultural analysis dealt mainly with the effects of mass media, as in the case of the printing press industry, on

<sup>48</sup> "Recorded, Printed, Written, Oral: Traditions", in *The Study of Ethnomusicology, Thirty-one Issues and Concepts*, pp. 291-301, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>50</sup> "Education for all. Literacy for life", in *The making of literate societies*, pp. 189-213, UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 2005, <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/gmr06-en.pdf>

human consciousness.<sup>51</sup> Particularly, McLuhan – by presenting his book as to be “complementary to the *Singer of Tales* by Albert B. Lord.” – focused his study on a kind of “new orality” provided by mass media within his more general idea of a “global village”.<sup>52</sup> In this context, he also discussed a “pre-Gutenbergian Era”, by defining a period in which oral-hearing expressions and forms of communication were involved (i.e. “oral society”) *versus* another one characterised primarily by hand-written and reading features (i.e. “literate society”), as well as transformed afterwards by the involvement of printing technologies. Accordingly, the way of composing music, since the innovations in the staff notation associated with Guido of Arezzo (11<sup>th</sup> century) up to Ottaviano Petrucci’s *Harmonice musices odhecaton A* (RISM 1501) in 1501, and even beyond, has been surely influenced by the development of writing technologies.

When McLuhan talked about a “new orality” he referred to the situation of a “post-literate” society, which – even after the invention of print technologies – may return to the orality by means of technology (e.g. the mass media). Indeed, these different periods can not be seen in discrete and successive units, but rather as overlapping stages over a continuous transition. In this respect, the studies conducted by Walter J. Ong<sup>53</sup>, McLuhan’s former student, concentrated on such “second orality”, which deals more with the relationship between oral and written forms of communication as they were representing the phenomena of “collectivity” and “individuality”, respectively.

Nevertheless, although these premises might seem very much focused on “techno-cultural” and literary studies, this sort of remarks might be included in a wider musicological enquiry. In particular, on the basis of what have been said so far, the question I would like to address is: *How is it possible to still talk about “oral performances” in a literate, indeed “post-literate” society when it comes to music?*

### **3. Beyond musical literacy: a case from Sicily**

Generally speaking, written or transcribed music may be given as a “text” which can be studied and analysed, as well as performed, even outside its original context of composition or communal creation. Moreover, bearing in mind that “aural transmission is the world’s norm”,<sup>54</sup> although music can also be transmitted “on paper”, the way it is taught it is most of the time related to hearing/listening processes of aural/oral transmission, and this happens everywhere, even in a so-called literate society.

The core of this paper is then focused on the short presentation and analysis of two repertoires of vocal music, a sacred one and a profane one. In this section, I will deal with the first one, which is a chant repertoire coming from Sicily. The so-called “Sicilian-Albanian” oral liturgical chant tradition is a repertoire consisting of chants in ecclesiastical Greek for the celebration of the

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<sup>51</sup> *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1962.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, see the “Prologue”.

<sup>53</sup> Ong, W. J. (2nd ed. 2002), *Orality and literacy: The Technologizing of the World*, Routledge, London, 1982.

<sup>54</sup> Nettl 2005, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

daily services and feasts of the Byzantine rite. In fact, the communities that have preserved, or rather developed such musical tradition, i.e. the *Arbëreshë*, established the village of Piana degli Albanesi (25 km south-west of Palermo, in Sicily) at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century when, in their flight from the Ottoman Turks, they reached the Sicilian coasts.<sup>55</sup>

The main hypothesis regarding the development of this chant repertoire, taking into consideration an original nucleus of chants coming from southern Albania, focuses specifically on some later musical influences. Some of these “contributions” to the historical development of the chant tradition may have been carried by some Greek monks who were afterwards hosted at the Basilian Monastery of Mezzojuso (close to Piana degli Albanesi) since the very beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, it is already possible to identify other chant traditions or “circulation” coming from other places in centre-southern Italy, as in the case of the *criptensi* melodies from the Abbey of Grottaferrata in Rome.<sup>56</sup> As from the beginning, there were no musical manuscripts or other types of sources of this genre sustaining the memory of the performers, they started to use a specific system based on the organization of chants in melodic formulae. This particular way of formulaic singing gave the possibility to the priests and cantors of the community to preserve, or rather to continue and develop the chant tradition, by also creating specific melodic variations when needed (e.g. in the case of different texts having the same melodic contour).

For instance, by collecting documentary material (i.e. audio and video recordings) during ethnomusicological fieldwork in the Cathedral of Piana degli Albanesi (see fig. 1), I have been able to observe some development in the techniques of oral safeguarding without the usage of musical notation. This example shows how one can talk about “aliterate” performers, who choose, on purpose, not to musically write down, nor to read their own singing tradition while performing it, although they – of course – do know how to read and write. In fact, when they sing during liturgies, there are no musical transcriptions in their hands, but only booklets reporting the lyrics of the chants they are performing. Actually, they also know by heart which is the right modal attribution of every chant, so that by reading the title of that psalm or another hymn they have just to start in the specific modal intonation pattern, which usually includes a particular set of melodic formulae.

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<sup>55</sup> In order to get a full description of the history of the Diocese of Piana degli Albanesi and the development of its cultural identity, see the contribution by Girolamo Garofalo, “I canti bizantini degli *Arbëresh* di Sicilia. Le registrazioni di Ottavio Tiby (Piana degli Albanesi 1952-’53)”, *EM. Rivista degli Archivi di Etnomusicologia dell’Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia di Roma*, II/2, monographic issue on “Musica e religione”, 2006, 11-65.

<sup>56</sup> These hypotheses are included in my Ph.D. project as the core of its comparative analysis.



**Fig. 1** The Cathedral of "San Demetrio Megalomartire" in Piana degli Albanesi (detail of the *iconostasis* from the side of the choir, while the first singer – papas Jani Pecoraro – stands on the right, and sings). Own photo taken in April 2015.

Certainly, it is possible to find some “modern” musical transcriptions of this chant repertoire, as I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> Here, I will just say that in 1899 the very first musical annotation of a *corpus* of chants appears, which has later inspired the first scientific article on this tradition published by father Hugues-Athanase Gaisser in 1905.<sup>58</sup> Henceforth, several priests and monks started to make and/or collect musical transcriptions on staff notation. The interesting element is that, even if such transcriptions could have been accessible to the young students of the Greek-Albanian Seminary in Sicily (and even in Rome!), they have never been used during performances, nor during classes in which the young members of the choir learnt to sing by heart the whole repertoire, by listening to the “first singer” or conductor of the choir. This is an extremely relevant feature of the Sicilian-Albanian chant tradition: the so-called “*forma mista*” (i.e. a “mixed form”, consisting of partially syllabic and melismatic melodic phrases), thereby the priests of the community were, over the centuries, and still today are, able to sing different liturgical texts characterized by diverse metrical structures just by using this sort of “free-rhythm *andamento*”.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Giuseppe Sanfratello, “A Byzantine chant Collection from Sicily: a Collaboration between Copenhagen and Piana degli Albanesi (Palermo)”, in *Kulturstudier*, article reviewed and accepted (2016), <http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/fn>

<sup>58</sup> “I canti ecclesiastici italo-greci”, in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Scienze Storiche*, Roma, 1-9 aprile 1903, VIII: pp. 107-123.

<sup>59</sup> For an introduction to the concept of the so-called “*forma mista*” see Matteo Sciambra, “Caratteristiche strutturali dei canti liturgici della tradizione degli Albanesi di Sicilia”, in *Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici*, N. S., 2-3: p. 309-320 (with musical examples), Roma, 1965.



#### 4. Poetic improvisation in the Facebook Era: the Cretan *mandinàdhes*

The *mandinàdhes* are monodic (homophonic) songs based on couplets of often improvised verses, which constitutes a considerable vocal repertoire in the Cretan musical tradition.

This particular poetic form made by distiches of rhymed verses represents a notable cultural element of the Cretan identity. A *mandinàdha* is an extemporaneous form, and it can also be accompanied by an instrument. It is usually created on the spot, clearly improvised on the basis of the context and, for instance, with a focus on the specific celebration for which a group of people has gathered around a table (see fig. 2).



**Fig. 2** Men singing *mandinàdhes* after a festive meal in Palea Roumata (Chania, Crete). Own photo taken during fieldwork in June 2010.

Thanks to an ethnomusicological survey that I carried out in the field during a research stay on Crete, it was possible to observe what *mandinàdhes*, together with another relevant vocal repertoire strictly connected with the latter (i.e. the so-called *rizitiko*), mean for Cretans.<sup>60</sup> The fieldwork was held in two places around the Nomòs Chanìon, namely the prefecture of Chanià (i.e. western Crete): these were in Rapanianà and in Paleà Roùmata.

Such kind of vocal performance, reached through the engagement of the dynamics of improvisation, could be acknowledged as a “composition in performance”. As in the Lord’s *Singer of Tales*, it is a technique which imposes on the performer the mentally elaboration of a text, exactly in the same

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<sup>60</sup> In order to get a full description of both repertoires, see G. Sanfratello, “The songs of the roots: *rizitika* and *mandinàdhes*”, chapter reviewed and accepted (2016) in *Music on Crete. Traditions of a Mediterranean island*, Series in Ethnomusicology, Vienna, 2016 (in press).

moment in which it has been pronounced.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, as in the occurrence of the *mandinàdhes*, the moment of the composition coincides often with that one of the performance.

In addition, in the *mandinàdhes* it is possible to find an interesting morphology of the ‘verbal organisation’. This is characterized by the particular cantor’s performance, who subdivides the couplet – through the melody – into four separate segments. These latter are elaborated within two couples (i.e. two verses) that respectively retain the first and the second line. In the following, there are the four segments as an example of such kind of structure:

1° VERSE

1° segment: auxiliary element + first hemistich

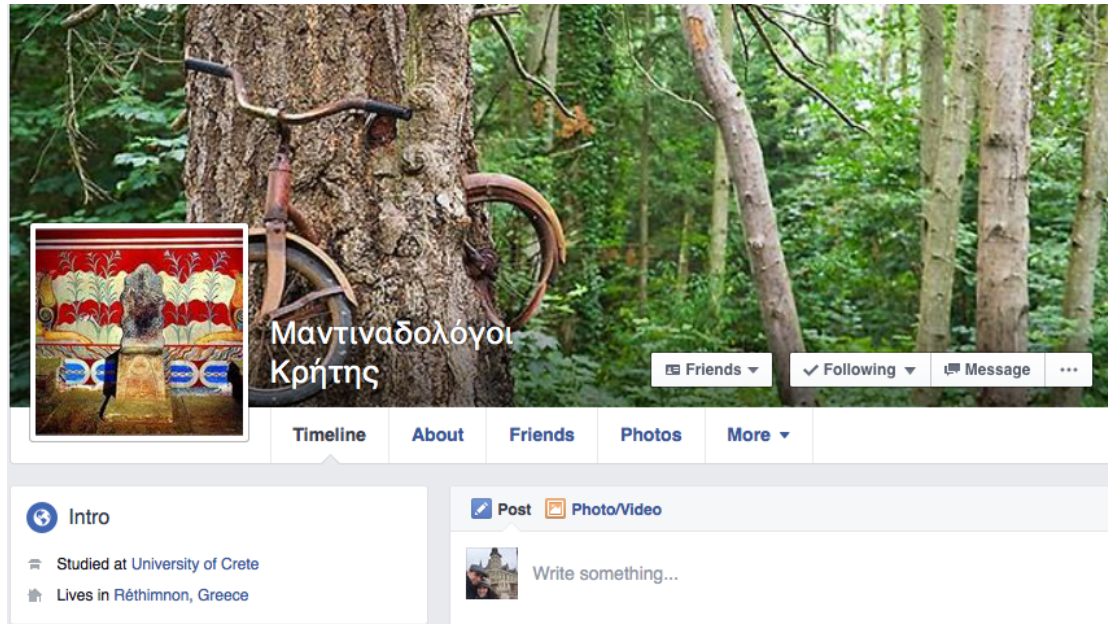
2° segment: auxiliary element + complete verse

2° VERSE

1° segment: auxiliary element + first hemistich

2° segment: auxiliary element + complete verse

Certainly, it is possible in modern times to find a huge repertoire of well-known *mandinàdhes* available on the Internet, or provided by the radio, which can be felt nearly like “pre-existing” or “traditional” *mandinàdhes*. In this way, Cretan people can create new *mandinàdhes* or just sing some of those they remember in the moment of the performance.

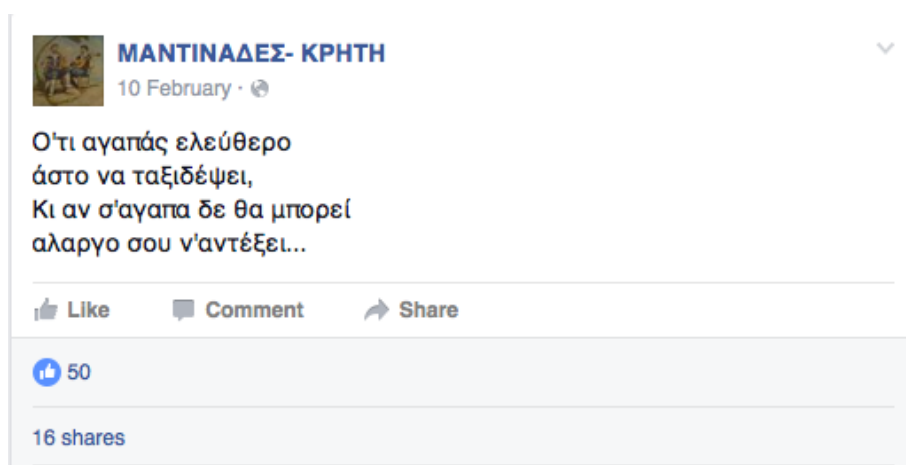


**Fig. 3** Screenshot of one of the several pages connected with the composition and sharing of Cretan *mandinàdhes*, available on the Internet and taken from <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100007488427415&fref=ts>

<sup>61</sup> Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1960.

In the so-called Facebook Era (see fig. 3 and 4), it is possible to find out how Ong's principle of a second orality is well "displayed" on the screen of a computer, where a singer or composer of *mandinàdhes* can just subscribe to a dedicated group (there are many) of such a social network, in which people share their "own" compositions by writing/typing them on the "spot", where the "place" is not a real, or rather a physical place anymore, but a "World Wide Web" place.

Indeed, this could be seen as a striking switch from the relationship of "writers and readers" to that one of "bloggers and followers", within a process of construction of places, in which it is still possible to strengthen and at the same time share one's own music identity.<sup>62</sup>



**Fig. 4** Screenshot of one of the several examples of Cretan *mandinàdhes*, available on Facebook (in the group "MANTINADES- KPHTH") taken from <https://www.facebook.com/mantinades.krete/posts/1117808624919313>

In figure 4, one find a *mandinàdha* which speaks of love written in a Facebook group. Its "composer" – or rather "media literate poet" in this case – wanted to express his/her feelings on freedom in a love relationship, as something which one should not be afraid of. One of the metaphoric meanings here refers to the great feeling of love, since who loves somebody "can not stay away" so long from his/her lover.

In conclusion, without aiming to reach any definitive statement on the topic, I think that these two musical traditions, the liturgical singing Sicilian-Albanian one and the improvisative poetic Cretan one, are just a few examples that here can open up for a first debate on the subject. Surely, since the systems of oral performance have significantly changed and developed over the last century, there is still something to say about the diverse techniques of oral musical transmission in a (post-)literate society. I argue that "yes" is the proper answer to the initial question suggested at the beginning of this paper.

<sup>62</sup> M. Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994.

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