Music of the Common Tongue

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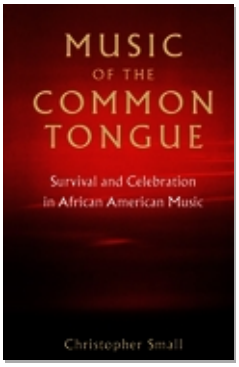

Chapter 8

ON LITERACY AND NON-LITERACY

Let us now consider further a matter which has already made some appearances in this book: the question of literacy and what it means to be literate — and, indeed, what it means not to be literate. It is a topic which is beset by any number of unexamined assumptions, not least concerning the automatic and unqualified benefits conferred by the ability to read and to write; I believe, and shall argue, that, like all technologies (and literacy is, to use Jack Goody's term, a technology of the intellect) it exacts a price for the benefits it brings. The best-known, and certainly the most controversial, study of literacy in recent years was that of Marshall McLuhan, who drew attention to the alteration in human consciousness that takes place when a culture becomes literate; his attention was focussed on a particular kind of literacy, that which uses a phonetic alphabet, as opposed to that, such as Chinese ideograms and Arabic numerals, in which each written shape corresponds to an object or an idea. In alphabetic literacy, each written shape represents a sound, and the sounds are assembled to form words and utterances. McLuhan maintained that such literacy has been responsible for the breaking up of the intimate tribal experience, for the apparently inbuilt western bias towards logical, sequential thinking and for its 'technique of transformation and control by making all situations uniform and continuous'.[1] One does not have to go along with this, or with his assertion that with literacy the 'hyperaesthetic and delicate and all-inclusive' auditory sense is replaced by the 'cool and neutral eye' or that 'phonetic [ie alphabetic] culture endows men with the means of repressing their feelings and emotions when engaged in action'[2] to agree that there is a marked change in consciousness when a person

learns to read and write, and, not least, when he learns to read and to write music.

McLuhan was not the first to worry over the effects of writing; Plato in *Phaedrus* has Socrates point out that writing is a reminder only, not an improver of memories, and that it can make knowledge rigid and inflexible: 'Any work is a matter of reproach to its author . . . if he regards it as containing important truth of permanent validity,'[3] and, by implication, that it makes it appear as if knowledge existed outside of and independently of the knower. He maintains that knowledge can best be passed on by oral means, with a dialectic of question and answer of which the written word is incapable: 'The writer's words seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them about anything they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you the same thing forever.'[4] In traditional African societies even though literacy was more widespread than is generally supposed, it was, according to Dennis Duerden, fear of that rigidity from which it seems to be inseparable that made them resist the idea of general literacy, and in particular the use of written records. 'The society's memory must be controlled by a natural process of dying and rebirth . . . Structures must be subject to continual change. Harmony in the society is not achieved by stability of structures. Rather it is ensured that no structure will last too long, and it is therefore important that the memory of a particular structure should not persist in the society when it starts to destroy the equilibrium achieved by competing groups.'[5]

It is worth considering what it is like not to be literate in a culture where literacy is not considered the norm. In the first place, all communication takes place face to face; all knowledge, apart from what one can perceive for oneself, comes from what one is told, directly from another human being, and is thus filtered through memory, with all the changes that such filtering implies. The knowledge may not necessarily be verbal, but may be in the form of musicking, dancing, or of visually representing, such as painting, sculpting or masking (I use the verbs rather than the nouns to remind us that it is the artistic act rather than the art-object that communicates). Memory, on the other hand, is greatly

cultivated, often to a level that members of a literate culture find hard to credit; the feats of non-literate Yugoslav bards in remembering and reciting days-long epics have been amply recorded, while Elsdon Best tells of the New Zealand Maori: 'An old man of the Tuhoe tribe recited to the writer no less than 406 songs from memory, while another old fellow recited from memory the genealogy of his clan, a task that necessitated the repetition of over 1400 personal names.'[6] Such feats of memory are no doubt facilitated by the fact that the unit of speech is not the word, or even perhaps the sentence — both of these are concepts that belong to writing — but the utterance, whether statement, question or exclamation; it is only with the coming of writing that these are broken down into smaller units.

If the chief characteristic of the written word is permanence, then we may say that one of the central features of a non-literate culture is changeability. Everything, including the past, is subject to change since there is no permanent record against which to check it. Of the past, only what happened within living memory can be recalled with any pretence to reliability (even then, human memory being what it is, there may be doubts), while what happened before any person now living was born is turned into the stuff of myth, outside of historical time, or at any rate out of historical sequence; a non-literate Europe might well tell stories of the mighty battles between Napoleon and Julius Caesar, while the great bard Richard Wagner sang his songs in praise of the heroes. Secondly, much, if not most, of what happened in the past becomes forgotten, its memory slowly fading with the memory of those who took part, since nothing can be recalled more than what an individual can retain in his mind. This, as Duerden says, can be an advantage for peace and for social happiness, since not only do people tend to remember what he calls 'creative events', that is, events which will be of use in preserving the harmony of the society, while forgetting 'destructive events', but they also 'deliberately refuse to adopt symbols which will last long enough to be destructive of the existence of those societies.'[7] But, in addition, this 'structural amnesia',[8] this constant process of elimination of unwanted memories, enables all individuals to participate fully in the

culture, since its total content, being no more than any one individual can carry in his head (though, of course, different people will carry different things), is available to all in a way a literate culture is not.

It is this 'structural amnesia' that gives to the outside observer the impression that non-literate societies are static and unchanging, because there is no unchanging standard against which to calibrate them. But it is likely that non-literate societies actually change much more, rather than less, rapidly than literate ones, even if the process of change is not always recognized. David McAllester says that a colleague of his, discussing an Australian Aboriginal people, told him, '"Every time I go to Hermannsburg I find the Aranda have invented a different culture from the one they had when I was there before,"' and he comments: 'He went on to say that it was the same for the language they spoke, and that all this change was not the function of the European ideas taking over, it was change for practical reasons or for the sheer pleasure of it . . . New gods and ancestors are coming up all the time. Just as the ethnographer starts to write down what he sees (and this goes for the musicologist too) the clear outlines of the culture as it was a moment ago begin to get wavery.'[9]

We also notice that this amnesia does not mean that the society is out of touch with its past; on the contrary, as we have seen with African societies, the relation is organic and intimate, but the past is retained only so far as it is able to serve the present. History is pursued, if at all, not for its own sake but in order to give meaning to the present, to legitimize or to criticize it. It is common, for example, for members of non-literate societies to learn extensive genealogies; these are not merely a matter of family pride but tools for the maintenance of social order. As power relationships shift, as they did frequently in West Africa with the 'precolonial competitive, shifting, fluid imbalance of power and influence', it is common for genealogies to be revised to legitimize the new set of power relationships. This is done not dishonestly or even necessarily deliberately, but simply in order to preserve social equilibrium, which is regarded as a more important consideration than any historical accuracy. Similarly, myths, which, as we have seen, are prescriptive as well as descriptive,

and their associated deities, may change their character or even disappear (as we can see in the history of Greek mythology, for example) with every shift of power, and with them the 'timeless' rituals with which they are associated.

Finally, a non-literate society and culture is likely to be much less centralized than a literate society. Without the ability to read and write the growth of bureaucracies is inhibited, and even when large kingdoms and empires do develop, as in pre-Columbian South America and in the medieval Sudanese empires, their organization tends to be very loose, with a great deal of local or regional independence, and with even towns and villages being more or less autonomous, paying little more than lip service to the central authority. Lévi-Strauss is interesting on this matter; having pointed out that what is probably the greatest scientific achievement of human history, the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution, took place without benefit of literacy, he maintains that the principal function of reading and writing in history has been for the tightening of central control:

> 'It seems to have favoured the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment . . . Although writing may not have been enough to consolidate knowledge, it was perhaps indispensable for the strengthening of domination. If we look at the situation nearer home, we see that the systematic development of compulsory education goes hand in hand with the extension of military service and proletarianization. The fight against illiteracy is there connected with an increase of governmental authority over the citizens. Everyone must be able to read, so that the government can say: Ignorance of the law is no excuse.'[10]

But it is not only politically that a lack of centralization can be found in non-literate cultures; also absent are metropolitan standards of taste and fashion. Rather than a metropolitan centre which dictates taste to the 'provincials', there tends to be an interlocking network of communities which watch and listen to one another, now one, now another becoming a temporary centre as patterns of political, artistic, commercial and religious activity and dominance change.

Further, since in non-literate societies communication

takes place face to face, this clearly means that the individual is completely dependent upon the community and upon its intricate and subtle network of relationships for his or her very survival. For the most practical of reasons, then, non-literate societies are close-knit societies, through which information spreads rapidly and which respond rapidly and in unified fashion to events. This may point to a further reason why the powerful prefer us to be literate, since reading is by contrast a solitary activity — McLuhan pointed out the temporal coincidence of widespread literacy and the invention of the concept of privacy — so that individuals receive messages from remote sources in a solitary condition, and a solitary individual is likely to be more docile than a group. This may be less important today as television takes over much of the earlier control function of print; a nation of nuclear families watching a political address each in its own living room will inevitably have a higher flashpoint than an assembly. But in any case both widespread literacy and television are a boon to centralizing governments.

It will be clear from the above that there are advantages as well as disadvantages in living in a non-literate society; to be non-literate in a society where literacy is the norm may, of course, carry considerable practical difficulties, but even so some advantages persist. One is reminded of the visitor to Las Vegas who, on being shown the city and its sky-signs by night, remarked on how much more beautiful they would be if one could not read. But there are in practice very few societies where literacy is completely unknown. As Goody says: 'At least during the past two thousand years, the vast majority of the peoples of the world (most of Eurasia and much of Africa) have lived . . . in cultures which were influenced in some degree by the circulation of the written word, by the presence of groups of individuals who could read and write. They lived on the margins of literacy, although this is a fact that many observers have tended to ignore.'[11] The point is that, even if they were well aware of writing, and may have appreciated its quasi-magical powers, the great majority of the members of those societies were not dependent on the written word, which impinged only slightly, if at all, on their lives. For them the traditions of the society came orally and were stored in memory, or not at all.

Conversely, it is by no means true that members of ostensibly fully literate societies such as our own are divorced from the oral tradition. In the first place, for even the fully literate (who probably compose less than a majority of the population) the principal mode by means of which the culture is transmitted remains oral, through family, peers and elders; a surprising proportion of that oral culture is in fact opposed in its values and relationships to the official literate (that is to say, scientific-rationalist) values of our society. It is full of archaic visions of life, superstitious no doubt and even logically absurd, often traceable back, had we the means, to heaven knows what remote ancestral experience, and clinging on with the tenacity of a spider, but nonetheless an essential, if undervalued, part of our very humanity.

Nor is our written history necessarily so much more reliable than that of non-literate culture; the human tendency to mythologize does not disappear when we write down our version of events. In some ways in fact deceptions and obfuscation are even easier through the written word because of the sheer weight of authority which it carries, a fact which Henry VII, first of the Tudor kings, exploited as his chroniclers blackguarded Richard III, the last of the displaced Plantagenet dynasty, to create a myth which has proved remarkably resistant to the power of demonstrable historical fact. We have seen how the great figures of western classical music have become in the minds of most music lovers very akin to mythological figures, despite the abundance of documentation, while, in another field, we have seen the resonances of such recently mythologized words as 'Dunkirk', 'blitz' and 'El Alamein' and 'The Falklands' in the collective British mind. Military and musical historians may know, or think they know, the 'real' truth about such matters, but the great majority 'know' otherwise, and it is their 'truth' which matters politically — and which is manipulated by politicians.

For most of the world's people, then, as neither total literacy nor total non-literacy is the norm, it might be more helpful to speak of a state of reliance or non-reliance on writing. The modern industrial state would certainly fall apart were all its inhabitants suddenly to develop dyslexia, as, indeed, would the classical-music culture. On the other hand, it does seem

easier to avoid the literate culture than the oral, even in our society, as can be seen from the surprisingly large number of non-literate people, many of them living apparently perfectly successful lives, which a survey taken in Britain a few years ago proved to exist.

In most of the world's musical cultures non-literacy is the norm. This may or may not mean that improvised performance is also the norm; I shall discuss improvisation fully in a later chapter, but here we notice that notation is by no means a prerequisite for full and formal composition. Both the Balinese and the Chopi of Mozambique, to name but two, compose and rehearse pieces for a long period before bringing them to performance with every detail worked out, and yet the entire repertory is carried in the musicians' heads. In both these cultures, however, there are two interesting features: first, rehearsals do not take place in private but go on before the eyes and ears of the whole community, all of whom are free to offer suggestions not only *how* to play but also *what* to play (this is in line with the low value placed upon privacy in general), and, secondly, change does take place in a composition over a period of time, so that there is no such thing as a final and definitive version of any piece. Curt Sachs tells us:

> 'There is in primitive [*sic*] and oriental music no silent composing with paper and pencil. Dreamily humming and strumming, composers create their melodies, and, even after polishing ragged passages, they do not pen a definitive version. On playing in public they are not bound to any authentic form — there is none. Producing and reproducing fuse into a delightful unit; the well-wrought, mentally definitive form and the indefinitive momentary impulse reach a perfect balance. Any notation would spoil this equilibrium in the undue interest of finality; it would destroy the possibilities of free-flowing melody in favour of a stagnant impersonality.'[12]

A composition, in fact, is a living organism; any performance of it shows it not in final form but only at a particular stage in its development. To such non-literate composers the final written form of a western classical composition is dead, the

score its sarcophagus, while the non-literate composition remains as full of an infinitude of possibilities as does any other living creature. If a musician wishes to learn and to play such a piece he has to listen carefully and to understand it; as John Coltrane once said of the way Thelonious Monk taught him his tunes: 'He would rather a guy would learn without reading because you feel it better and quicker that way.'[13] The receiving musician will of course hear the piece in his or her own way, and, without necessarily even meaning to do so, may well give it a new twist, even a new character, but this is the way in which the work of creation is kept on the move.

Notation must have originated as an adjunct to memory, to remind the musicians of what had been played, or perhaps as a second-best for learning a piece when personal contact with its creator was not possible. As it has developed over the centuries the use of notation has undoubtedly proved of value, which can perhaps be summed up by saying that it makes it possible to play without first understanding. To play a piece 'by ear' it is necessary to understand it, but with notated music one simply follows the coded instructions; understanding, it is assumed, will follow with repeated playings-over. Thus those who have never heard the piece played have the opportunity to learn it, not only perhaps half a world away from where it was previously performed but also several centuries away in time. Through notation it also becomes possible to gain access quickly to a wide repertory — though as I write this I remember the Maori elder with his repertory of over four hundred songs. And, apart from modern professionals for whom time is money, who really *needs* to be in a hurry to learn a piece? It is in the learning that enjoyment principally lies.

But although the notated score may be necessary for such performance, it is not sufficient, since there does not appear to be any notation system which by itself can convey the entire essence of a piece of music; the performer needs to obtain a good deal of information from non-literate sources as well. These precise notations of pitch (precise, that is, assuming an agreed tuning of the scale), of duration relationships, and those less precise ones of dynamics and tempo, if followed precisely and literally would result in a performance that was

dismissed as lifeless and unidiomatic. It is from oral-aural sources that performers learn how to interpret not quite precisely those two-to-one durational relationships, how to inflect the pitches and move around them, how to make small but vital changes in tempo and articulation; they learn this from teachers and from other musicians in that historical continuum we call the performance tradition. The limits of distortion to which performers are expected to subject the written notation are variable, being all but infinite in the Afro-American tradition but very narrow in the classical. The limits can also change over time; for one generation what is thought of as a tasteful and expressive realization of the classical composer's text might for another be regarded as over-the-top, even tasteless — a further indication that even the most literate of performers are much more dependent on oral traditions than is generally realized, and that non-literate traditions change faster than literate ones. Since about 1945 the European classical tradition has been intolerant of any liberties whatever with the composer's notations (this accords with the great amount of time and energy which gets spent these days in discovering exactly what those notations were, down to the last semi-quaver, the last ornament and grace), but at no time since about the end of the last century has it been permissable to add or subtract a single note of the composer's text or to make any substitutions within it. So tied to the notation has the performing musician become in the classical tradition that it might almost be possible to define classical music today by reference to this dependence.

We saw earlier, however, that the precise limit of classical music is extremely difficult to define, and thus it is not surprising that the limit of literate musicking proves equally difficult to define. You might, for example, teach me a simple song by Schubert, say *Heidenröslein*, by singing it to me from the printed text and accompanying yourself on the piano, remaining faithful in every detail to that text. I might learn that song from you 'by ear', by imitating every nuance of your performance, and then, as I sing it over and over I might make small changes which are not only my 'interpretation' of it (which in the classical tradition is legitimate, up to a point) but even adding melodic and rhythmic material of my own (which

is not legitimate). Being unable to read music, I would have no way of knowing at what point my changes had passed the limit of the acceptable — acceptable, that is, to present-day performers and critics. Where Schubert himself might have drawn the line is a matter for conjecture; as we shall see later, a composer of the early seventeenth century such as Monteverdi would actually have expected the performers to take an active creative hand, while, conversely, a performing musician of the time would have considered a notated text that told him in every detail what he was to play an insult to his skills.

One is tempted to surmise that the boundary between classical and vernacular music is as much a matter of attitude to the text as it is of the nature of that text itself, or even of degree of dependence on the text in order to be able to perform (since while a notated text, as we have seen, is not a sufficient condition for a classical performance, it is a necessary one). It might be more appropriate to speak of notation-dependent and notation-independent performance were the terms not so clumsy and ugly. In any case, musicians who are dependent on notation are inclined to underestimate the power of the human ear and memory and to wonder incredulously at, for example, the accurate, poised and idiomatic performances by the Trinidadian steel band, The Gay Desperadoes (the 'Despers' to their fans), of popular pieces from what is generally considered the classical (and thus by definition literate) repertory — such pieces as Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D minor* (the idiom in this case being more that of the Stokowski transcriptions than of the purist organists of today), Sibelius's *Finlandia* and Delibes' *Naïla Waltz*, the last with an exhilarating command of the nuances of waltz rhythm — all without the musicians needing a sight of a score or parts. Or at the non-literate performance of the *Hallelujah Chorus*, by the mainly black London Community Gospel Choir, whose precision, brilliance of tone and emotional intensity have to be heard to be believed — again, learnt by rote, and perhaps all the better for not having had to be mediated through the written notes, as John Coltrane noted. Both Coltrane and Thelonious Monk were, of course, perfectly capable of reading and writing music when it was of use to them; in the same way, we cannot assume that the members of the choir, or

of the steel band, because they choose to carry out an extended performance without recourse to written music, are unable to read. It is simply that for a number of reasons they find they can perform more satisfyingly without it.

In addition to the ability to 'feel it better and quicker', there is a very important difference betwen notation-dependent and notation-independent musicking; when the performer is not tied to the written notes, he or she has the power not only of interpretation (which, admittedly, classical performers insist is creativity of a kind) but also of original creation within the framework of the idiom and of the given material. The performer may not always choose to exercise the power but it is always there, and through it the nature of musical performance is changed crucially. For, however much it may be denied by the propagandists of the classical tradition, even the greatest of notated musical masterpieces — the Passions of Bach, the symphonies of Beethoven, the operas of Mozart — are not infinite in their interpretative possibilities, but are ultimately as finite as the individual minds that brought them into being. The world inhabited by the performer in the notation-dependent tradition, however much he might try to conceal the fact from himself and from his audiences, is a closed one, which can be opened up once more to infinite possibilities of the communal intelligence only by freeing himself from dependence on notation.

Non-literate performance, then, is not necessarily a sign that the performer is unable to read music but is in many if not most cases a matter of choice, a choice that is not necessarily conscious and deliberate but simply arises from the performer's relationship with what he is playing and with those with whom and for whom he is playing. The skills of reading and writing traditional western notation are not difficult to acquire, especially for anyone who plays an instrument and moves in a musical environment, and it can be said in general that musicians are as literate as they feel they need to be. There is no reaon to consider non-literate performance either inferior or superior to literate; the two are just different modes which are suited to different kinds of musicking, and thus to the celebration of different sets of social and musical values (we may esteem those values differently, but that is another matter).

Two obvious points follow: first, many musicians have been and are capable of working in both literate and non-literate modes; as we shall see, the great masters of the European past were equally at home in both. One might go so far as to maintain that the present-day western classical musician, who almost uniquely among the world's musicians is capable of working in the literate mode only, is seriously deprived in terms of both musical skill and musical experience. And, second, there has always been a great deal of interplay between the two modes. Afro-American musicking has been no exception to this; certainly it is not possible to make any neat equation of black equals non-literate and white equals literate. The most one can say in this regard is that black musicians have historically *tended* not to rely on notation, and also, somewhat more tentatively, that an increase in dependence on notation indicates a tendency towards the aesthetic and the values — and the implicit higher social status — of European classical music. We shall see something of the way in which this operated in the history of Afro-American music in the next chapter. (Another point to mention is that even the conventional vocal categories of soprano, alto, tenor and bass are really no more than conveniences for the purposes of literate composition; when a singer is free to invent his or her own part there is no need to confine the voice in this way, and we find many fine singers in the Afro-American tradition, both male and female, whose treble is as striking and as expressive as their baritone.)

There can be no doubt that any divide which exists in western musical culture between literate and non-literate musicking is as much social as it is aesthetic; the former does have a higher social status, but, again, it is a matter more of mode of performance than of musical material itself, since, as we have seen, the same composition can cross and recross the literacy line. Apart from the instances mentioned, we need only consider those thousands of folksong and folkdance arrangements made by musicians famous and obscure for the benefit of middle-class performers who are, it seems, incapable of either singing or playing them without a score to read from — with in addition the implication that these humble tunes are being somehow dignified and honoured by

bringing them into the drawing-rooms and concert halls of middle-class music lovers. If within the Afro-American tradition it is possible to find every shade of dependency upon notation from complete dependence to complete independence, and if, when notation is used, one finds that the written text is generally not master but servant, it is because the Afro-American musician does not regard the music object as central; it is the performance that counts, and the score is to be used when it is useful, and discarded when not, as a means to that end. It is a means of dissemination of the material, to be treated as strictly or as freely as the performer requires, not as a means of fixing it for all time. Musicians in that tradition, in fact, use notation in two ways which we may call 'springboard' and 'mnemonic'.

In the first case, the performer uses the notated music as no more than a guide upon which he or she will build a performance, and does not regard him or herself as in any way tied to it. The degree of divergence from the text will vary greatly from performer to performer, and even perhaps from performance to performance; one performer may do no more than add a few graces, while another may completely reconstruct the melody from the basic harmonic progressions, as Charlie Parker rebuilt *How High The Moon* as *Ornithology*, or as John Coltrane remade Richard Rodgers' innocuous little waltz *My Favorite Things* (jazz musicians in particular seem to take delight in seizing upon the most unlikely-looking material, even of the most banal quality, as raw material for their art).

This practice is reflected in the nature of much printed material — the commercial sheet music available for sale in music shops, for example, written for voice with piano accompaniment with guitar tablature. In these as a rule the harmonies and instrumental textures are simplified to the point of banality, the rhythms reduced to four-to-a-bar with only the most elementary of syncopations notated. The amateur singer-pianist who, having heard a song performed on the radio and bought a sheet copy, puts it on the music-rack of his piano and plays it as written will be disappointed and frustrated at the result. But to play it as written is to misunderstand the function of the notation, which is to give

the performer the material on which to work; melody, harmony, instrumental textures and rhythm must all be worked over if the song is to function as a performance. The experienced performer will do this automatically, without sometimes even noticing that he or she is doing it, and the result will be unlikely to sound much like either the notated version or the record that prompted the purchase in the first place. In order to make something of the song the performer needs first of all to make it his or her own, and will most likely soon discard the sheet music as of no further use, other than as a *aide-mémoire* should memory slip.

I have given this rather ponderous description of a common enough practice in order to make explicit what may not at first sight be clear: that the appearance of the notated music may resemble that of any classical song, but its function is very different. It is a springboard for the imagination, not a set of instructions for performance. In fact, if the melody is well known, the only help the player may need is with the harmonic progressions, whose notation is often reduced to a chart; here, for example, is the chart for a well-known and perennially popular 32-bar tune:

G^{m7}	C^7	F^7	$B^{\flat 7}$	$E^{m7\flat 5}$	A^7	Dm	Dm
Repeat first 8							
$E^{m7\flat 5}$	A^7	Dm	Dm	G^{m7}	C^7	F^7	$B^{\flat 7}$
$E^{m7\flat 5}$	A^7	Dm	Dm	$E^{m7\flat 5}$	A^7	Dm	Dm

This chart contains all the information needed for one or more musicians who know the tune to build a performance of *Autumn Leaves*. All that is needed is to set a tempo, and off they can go.

The second use of notation, as mnemonic, overlaps with the first, but does emphasise one characteristic of the creative act in the Afro-American tradition: it takes place generally not on

paper or in the silence and isolation of the musician's study, but in sounds and actions. If writing down takes place it does so after the creative event, and functions as a reminder of what has already been done rather than as a set of instructions for future action. When written notation forms the medium through which the creative act takes place, then only what can be written down can be composed at all — a restriction against which European and American composers of classical music must have been chafing for years and which has resulted in a remarkable proliferation of new notational symbols as they strive to extend the range of melodic, rhythmic and timbral material that can be brought under their control. In the absence of an agreed performance tradition, the composer's instructions to the performers need to be very detailed; but even whole conferences of composers have failed to produce an agreed or consistent set of graphic symbols to cover every possible sound, so that every composition that uses non-traditional sounds needs to be prefaced with an explanation of the symbols used, sometimes covering several pages. For the Afro-American musician, on the other hand, the notations can be quite vague and sketchy, just enough to remind him or her of what was done when the piece was first made; it need make no claim to being an authoritative text, and, like the oriental musician described by Curt Sachs, the musician is free to let the composition go on developing. Not only is there no need for the notation to transmit as much information as for classical music; it would be a positive impediment to the performance if it were to do so.

There are occasions in Afro-American musicking where a fully-notated score is used; but such scores, significantly called 'arrangements' rather than 'compositions' or 'pieces', still differ considerably in function from those used in the classical tradition. They have been used since the days of the Fletcher Henderson and Paul Whiteman Orchestras of the 1920s to guide the performance of big jazz and dance bands. Written arrangements are not necessary, as is sometimes said, in order to prevent the sound of a large group from degenerating into chaos — great bands like that of Count Basie were able to get along well without them — but they have proved of value in order to get the smooth 'streamlined' sound of bands such as

that of Glenn Miller or the subtle orchestral effects of Duke Ellington, not to mention the sound of show bands required to play the same thing night after night in the pit of a theatre or for floor shows (as the Ellington orchestra did in the Cotton Club in Harlem in the 1920s). These arrangements differ from classical scores in two ways: first, in that they make no pretence to being a final, definitive version of the piece, as can be seen from the fact that a well-known tune may inspire dozens, if not hundreds, of different arrangements over the years of its existence (some of these 'standards' have been around for anything up to eighty years and are still going strong), appearing in as many different guises — different harmonies, different variations on the melody, different instrumental combinations, even different kinds of emotional atmosphere. And secondly, there is generally space left in the arrangement for improvised solos by individual performers; at its best an arrangement will be written, not for a generalized ensemble like 'the symphony orchestra' or 'the string quartet' but for a particular group, and built around the individual characters of the musicians who will be playing it. This was one of the great strengths of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, for example; having selected his players for their individual qualities and disciplined them into a coherent ensemble, Ellington was able to call on what he knew they did best, and (not unimportantly) enjoyed doing, calling for suggestions from the instrumentalists as the arrangement was being put together. This is exemplified in his calling a trumpet showpiece, not *Concerto for Trumpet* but *Concerto for Cootie*, after Cootie Williams, around whose playing the piece was built.

The reader will notice that I have been obliged to call *Concerto for Cootie*, a 'piece', and it is true that over his long career Ellington did compose a number of pieces which he did think of as being in more or less final form, some of them ambitious in size and scope such as *Black, Brown and Beige*, *Liberian Suite* and the three *Sacred Concerts*, and these pieces must be regarded as an edging-away from jazz as it is commonly understood, to become more like classical concert pieces with jazz inflections. But then, as I suggested in the Introduction, what is classical and what is not may depend as

much on what is done with it as on what it actually is — and these pieces lack the impersonality and abstraction of classical concert pieces, being built around the abilities and the styles of specific musicians, as those who have tried to revive them away from the Ellington Orchestra have found to their cost. And we may note that Ellington was not averse to recycling the principal melody of *Concerto for Cootie* as a popular song — *Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me*.

In the main, however, the Afro-American musician is not dependent on notation, and treasures his independence, his ability to 'hear better and quicker' by ear rather than by note. I have earlier suggested several of the many ways in which a non-literate culture differs from a literate, and the Afro-American musical tradition shows many of these same characteristics. I suggested that a non-literate culture probably changes more quickly than a literate one, and this is as true of Afro-American music as it is of the language and the customs of the Australian Aranda. I have remarked on the staggering proliferation of styles within the culture, but also on the fact that, as soon as we examine them at all closely, our neat taxonomies of those styles break down into mere approximations and tendencies, useful only so long as we keep in mind that each flows into the others, and that the whole culture keeps reinventing itself as rapidly as that of the Aranda; certainly it has seen more changes in the last thirty years than the classical tradition has seen in the whole of this century.

The process of change is helped by another characteristic of non-literate cultures, the direct oral-aural assimilation of information, which not only gives the musician the ability to absorb from a wide variety of sources while preserving his autonomy, but also helps to keep the culture decentralized, a network of listening individuals and groups all working on equal terms with one another. Unlike the notation-dependent musician, who in reading from his score can receive messages from only one musician at a time (it would be unthinkable for a pianist to incorporate a little Stravinsky into the Chopin prelude he is playing), he is able to draw simultaneously on any number of sources; anything that catches the ear can be incorporated, whether it be melodic material, harmonies, whole solo or ensemble passages, tricks or rhythm, instru-

mental and vocal inflection, even stage demeanour — a performance may turn out to be a multi-layered fabric of any number of fragments from other musicians in any number of traditions, not excepting the classical. How successfully these are fused depends, of course, on the talent of the musician. Non-literate musicians tend to be very aware of the sources of their influences, not surprisingly since they are transmitted directly, without the intervention of written notes; indeed, a score, as we have seen, would be incapable of transmitting those nuances of performance which are vital elements of style in Afro-American musicking.

We have seen how non-literate cultures resist the development of centres of culture: they acknowledge no metropolitan tastemakers or arbiters, whose dominance would relegate non-metropolitans to the status of 'provincial', while at the same time imposing a uniformity upon the whole culture (one hears the same symphonies, the same quartets, in Reykjavik, Dunedin and Seoul, as in Paris, New York and London if perhaps not so expertly played); they remain networks of interaction whose centres, in so far as they exist at all, are small and temporary. The culture of the itinerant musicianers of the American south, and of the southwestern 'territory' jazz bands, were two examples of this decentralization, at least until the coming of records and radio.

Afro-American music came to maturity alongside the record industry, the history of which latter has been inseparable from it since its earliest days. It is customary to date the association of jazz with recording from 1917, when the Original Dixieland Jass [*sic*] Band made its first discs, and that of blues from 1920 with the records made by Mamie Smith, but ragtime pieces and the kind of instrumental and orchestral novelty numbers that formed part of the ancestry of jazz were being recorded and distributed widely as early as the 1890s. Records do form a medium by means of which a performance can be preserved and carried to the hearing of others who have never seen the performer face to face; they are documents of a kind, though different from scores in that it is performances that they preserve rather than pieces. In so far as they send performances out across the country and even the world, they have a decentralizing function, but in so far as they

attract musicians to centres of recording activity, they also act in the opposite direction. Although in the early days of recording, especially of blues and country music, record companies were prepared to send their recordists out to meet the performers, this practice soon became the exception, and recording tended to be centralized in a limited number of cities, of which New York in particular was already the music publishing centre, thus emphasising their dominance. It should be noted, however, that there did remain a number of recording companies in the smaller towns and cities which up to the onset of the Depression, and again after the second world war, managed to function independently of the large corporations, and these were to play an important part in musical developments.

In any case, it is arguable that recording has played a somewhat different part in the Afro-American tradition from the classical. In the first place, since for the classical musician the musical work exists apart from and independently of any possible performance of it, gramophone records provide only one exemplar, one attempt to measure up to the ideal entity; the transmission of the work itself takes place, not from performer to performer, with or without the medium of records, but from the composer to each performer individually through the medium of the score (though of course much of the oral performance tradition is today transmitted through records). In the Afro-American tradition, on the other hand, the record is a means, and frequently the only means, through which the music is propagated. A number of jazzmen's memoirs, especially those of early white musicians who came to the music without direct contact with black culture or black musicians, contain reminiscences like the following, from the trumpeter Jimmy McPartland:

> 'What we used to do was put the record on — one of the [New Orleans] Rhythm Kings', naturally — play a few bars, then get all our notes. We'd have to tune our instruments up to the record machine, to the pitch, and go ahead with a few notes. Then stop. A few more bars of the record, each guy would pick out his notes, and boom! we would go on and play it.'[14]

But even for those who were soaked in black American culture, records have played an important part not only in dissemination but in widening the choices available. As Harold Courlander points out:

> 'Records and radio introduced into the development of Negro musical tradition a new element which ought to be called "feedback". A traditional type of folksong was picked up by a recording artist and sung in a new way. If the record became popular, a new generation of singers began to utilize some of the personalized contributions of the recording artist. In time, this new version, or elements of it, became, once more, folk music . . . One result of this activity is that we may hear cowboy tunes that are reminiscent of Negro blues; blues that sound like songs of the Golden West; hillbilly tunes and instrumental combinations that gallop through mountainized versions of *John Henry* or *John the Revellator*, with jugs, jews-harps and washtubs; jazzlike treatments of old religious songs; Calypsoish skiffle bands in New Orleans and Mobile; and gospel songs with a suggestion of *Moon Over Indiana* in them. This sort of thing is, of course, not essentially new. Musical acculturation between deep sea sailors and Negro stevedores, between Negro churches and white churches, and between Negro and white railroad workers has been going on for a long time. But the pace and acceleration of cross-fertilizations in recent years has probably never been equalled.'[15]

That was published in 1963, and the process has accelerated and widened even further since then.

Albert Murray points out that black Americans have traditionally not been as concerned with the preservation of their past as have Europeans, a characteristic that he traces back to Africa; he is careful to make it clear that it indicates not a lack of awareness of the past, but rather a 'concept of time and continuity, or of permanence and change . . . [which is] . . . different, and certainly the concept of history, heritage and documentation was different.'[16] Accordingly, as he says:

> 'At the advent of the phonograph . . . the typical US Negro musician, not unlike his African ancestor, was clearly more

> interested in playing and enjoying music than in *recording* it for posterity. As a matter of fact, many Afro-Americans in general still tend to regard phonograph recordings more as current duplications (soon to be discarded as out of date) which enable them to reach more people simultaneously than as permanent documents. Euro-Americans, on the other hand, started record collections and archives, which eventually came to include the music of Afro-Americans.'[17]

The musician in the Afro-American tradition today still tends to resist the permanence and the idea of music-as-thing which pervades the classical tradition; to what extent this represents a survival of the African attitude noted earlier by Duerden, the deliberate refusal 'to adopt symbols that will last long enough to be destructive to the existence of their societies', is anyone's guess. But it appears true that the disc which can be held in the hand, is bought and sold like any other commodity and exists, at least potentially, permanently, is still, from the point of view of Afro-American musicians and their audience, including the vast contemporary audience for rock and pop music, only a way of disseminating the performance more widely; if anyone wants to put it in an archive, that is their business, but for them it is disposable, to be thrown away when its usefulness is finished, to make room for new creations.

Thus we return to the starting point of this chapter; that the preservation of music objects through writing down and other media is not necessarily the unequivocal benefit that we have been led to believe it is; not only does the very ephemerality of the performance in Afro-American musicking help to keep in motion the living process of musicking, unlike the virtual stagnation which is all too perceptible in the notation-dependent classical tradition today, but also the musicians' non-dependence on notation permits a much more open situation in terms of both musical techniques (in particular, rhythm) and of potential for continuing development and for the assimilation of multiple influences. Literacy is a good servant but a bad master, and if Afro-American musicians have in the main succeeded in avoiding becoming bound to their past it is largely because of their ability to keep the written

notes in their place, as classical musicians in our time seem fatally unable to do. The reasons for this state of affairs lie deeper, as I have suggested in an earlier chapter; we shall return to this discussion later.

NOTES

1. McLUHAN, Marshall: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, London, Sphere Books, 1964, p 95.
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4. *ibid.*, p 28.
5. *ibid.*, p 22.
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7. DUERDEN, Dennis: *op. cit.*, p 18.
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15. COURLANDER, Harold: *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1963, p 10.
16. MURRAY, Albert: *The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture*, New York, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970, p 184.
17. *ibid.*, p 185.

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