WHY WE NEED ONLINE ARCHIVES OF RECORDED POETRY

Abigail LANG

ABSTRACT • This article argues in favor of online archives of recorded poetry. While poetry has always been recited, the possibility of recording the voices of poets provides poetry with a new medium. Sound-recording technologies have existed for over a century and the recordings accumulated are numerous and extremely heterogeneous, both in terms of carriers and sources. But too little has been made, at least in France, of these vast resources some of which will be lost if they are not soon digitized. This disregard has had historical and generic consequences. It has distorted the recent history of the genre and restricted our view of the poem. The paper begins by considering how sound recordings modify our conception of what a poem is. In the United States, where the revival of the poetry reading dates back to the mid-1950s, the creation of online archives of poetry from the 2000s has been changing how poetry is researched, taught and encountered. North-American scholars have suggested some of the uses to be made of recorded poetry but European scholars are beginning and must continue to contribute other approaches based on their own poetic and scholarly traditions. The bulk of the article presents and contextualizes some of these uses. It ends by briefly presenting *Archives sonores de la poésie,* a scholarly project begun in 2017 for an online archive of French and francophone poetry.

KEYWORDS • Recorded Poetry; Online Archive; Close Listening

Introduction

While poetry has always been recited, the possibility of recording the voices of poets provides poetry with a new medium. Sound-recording technologies have existed for over a century and the recordings accumulated are numerous and extremely heterogeneous, both in terms of carriers (mechanical, magnetic, optical, digital) and sources (phonographic collections, radio and television broadcasts, reading series, private collections…). Too little has been made, at least in France, of these vast resources. Until the recent interest in performance poetry, recorded poetry was almost entirely disregarded by scholars and even recordings given authorial status by the poets—such as Jacques Prévert or Louis Aragon— tended to be omitted from their general bibliography. Things are changing, and poets like André Velter and Christian Prigent see that their recordings are mentioned in the bibliographies (Pardo 2017). This disregard has had historical and generic consequences. It has distorted the recent history of the genre and restricted our view of the poem, urging us to consider how sound recordings modify our conception of what a poem is.

In the United States, where the revival of the poetry reading dates back to the mid-1950s, the creation of online archives of poetry from the 2000s has been changing how poetry is researched, taught and encountered. Started in 1996 by poet, artist and enthusiastic collector Kenneth Goldsmith, UbuWeb documents twentieth century avant-garde movements with an impressive gathering of sound, film and text archives, digitization helping to set poetry in

dialogue with other artistic fields[1]. Founded in 2003 by poet and scholar Charles Bernstein and scholar Al Filreis at the University of Pennsylvania, and now holding over 40.000 audio files and 1000 video files of primarily American poets, Pennsound totals over 6 million downloads each year. Created by and for poets, scholars and teachers, the website also aims to provide the necessary information to contextualize and make sense of these documents. These North-American pioneers of the field have suggested some of the uses to be made of recorded poetry but European scholars are beginning to contribute other approaches based on their own poetic and scholarly traditions.

In 2010, the Library of Congress and the Council on Library and Information Resources published a report entitled "The State of Recorded Sound Preservation in the United States: A National Legacy at Risk in the Digital Age" which pointed to a vicious circle endangering the preservation of sound archives: "If cataloguing and collection descriptions do not exist, potential users cannot become aware of materials of research value and will not make use of the collections. Low use statistics may argue against obligation of resources to the collections by library and archives administrators, and so on[2]." In 2015, after a national audit of sound archives around the country to identify threatened collections (UK Sound Directory), the British Library launched an ambitious 15-year Save our Sounds program to preserve Britain's sounds and make them available online[3]. In 2016, with two scholars of French poetry, Céline Pardo and Michel Murat, I organized an international conference at the Sorbonne in order to promote an awareness on the part of French institutions of the need to preserve and make available this oral heritage of poetry, to engage in the identification and inventory of collections, their analysis and digitization[4]. We brought together scholars and library and archives administrators to discuss this project in very practical ways: the scholars' needs, the archives' financial, legal or human constraints. After the conference we launched a project for an online archive of French and francophone poetry[5].

1. How does recorded poetry modify our conception of what a poem is and the history of the genre?

One of the oldest literary genres, poetry has lived through and successfully adapted to the invention of writing and of print. The invention of sound recording technologies constitutes a similar media change (Bernstein 2011: 91-105). Apollinaire felt that change. We know he was deeply impressed by the experience of recording some of his poems for Ferdinand Brunot's Archive de la parole in 1913. He foresaw a great future for the phonograph and predicted the advent of a "machined poetry" and, with less foresight, the end of typography[6]. Murat has argued that Apollinaire's understanding of the stakes of recording shows in his anthological

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[1] http://www.ubu.com.

[2] *The State of Recorded Sound Preservation in the United States: A National Legacy at Risk in the Digital Age*, commissioned for and sponsored by the National Recording Preservation Board of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., August 2010, http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub148/pub148.pdf.

[3] https://www.bl.uk/projects/uk-sound-directory.

[4] The program of the conference with abstracts is here: https://www.fabula.org/actualites/les-archives-sonores-de-la-poesie_76366.php.

[5] The project, carried institutionally by Michel Murat, is described here. http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.site/projets/le-patrimoine-sonore-de-la-poesie.

[6] "Ils [les poètes] veulent enfin machiner la poésie comme on a machiné le monde". (Apollinaire, 1918: 385-396). I thank Céline Pardo for drawing my attention to this expression.

choice of poems, his modulated use of diction and in his request for new sounds in the poem "La Victoire":

> Ô bouches l'homme est à la recherche d'un nouveau langage
> Auquel le grammairien d'aucune langue n'aura rien à dire
> [...] On veut de nouveaux sons de nouveaux sons de nouveaux sons[7]

Murat reads this as a request for a new lyricism, in which all expressive resources of the body as sound source are used to convey affects. (Murat 2019: 195)

Acknowledging recorded poetry as a new medium for poetry, i.e. a new means of storing, circulating and sometimes composing poetry, questions "the common presumption that the text of a poem—that is, the written document—is primary and that the recitation or performance of a poem by the poet is secondary and fundamentally inconsequential to the 'poem itself'" (Bernstein 1998). For where is "the poem itself"? Textual criticism has shown a poem exists in various forms (drafts, magazine publication, various editions and reprints), so many print instantiations which Bernstein proposes to call verbal performances. Together with the various oral performances (live or recorded, by the author or someone else) they constitute the poem. Arguing that "a poem does not exist if it has not entered a single mind", French poet Jacques Roubaud supplements these external, interpersonal instantiations of a poem with strictly internal personal ones: "They are in the mind of the reader-listener; essentially non-transmissible from one person to another; they are always in movement within memory: movement of images, of thoughts" (Roubaud 2009: 19).

As Pardo points out, the history of recorded poetry and that of oral poetry cross paths but do not coincide (*La poésie enregistrée en France* 2017). Oral poetry predates the invention of recording technologies and all oral renditions are not recorded. Recordings usefully supplement the testimonials of listeners in documenting performances, as ethnomusicologists understood early on[8]. Because sound recording technologies enable storage and playback, they are a form of writing, providing us with audiotexts. Recorded poetry "is not an alternative to textuality but rather throws us deeper into its folds", warns Bernstein (2011: 112). Only recordings enable us to parse performance. Paying increasing attention to recorded poetry rematerializes our approach to poetry. Like textual criticism recorded poetry directs our attention to issues of production, edition and distribution, and to the social inscription of the work, encouraging recontextualization.

2. Uses of recorded poetry

For readers, recorded poetry is a source of enjoyment and understanding. Listening to poets thickens our experience of their work, sometimes providing access to a work one didn't "get" on the page. The recording verifies or refutes what we read on the page, complexifying meaning. For the poet, public readings are unique opportunities to test the vocalic properties of a newly composed poem and its ability to engage the reader. When recording technologies became widespread and portable in the 1960s, American poets used them not only as

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[7] "O mouths man is in search of a new language / No grammarian of any tongue will have nothing to say against / [...] We want new sounds new sounds new sounds". (my translation)
[8] See, for examples, Lord 1960; Sterne 2003: 311 ff.

compositional devices (e.g. Ginsberg and Burroughs) but also as vocal mirrors to improve their vocal and performance skills. As early as 1981, poet, scholar and first curator of the Mandeville Department of Special Collections (UC San Diego) Michael Davidson was pointing to the numerous scholarly uses to be made of recorded poetry. Like manuscripts or magazines, a recording may contain textual variants or indications as to compositional organization. A recording of a poetry reading, for instance, may reveal groupings of poems which differ substantially from the printed text. Listening to a 1984 reading of Charles Reznikoff at the end of his life, Bernstein noticed the aged poet was mixing poems and stanzas from across his œuvre into a radically non-chronological and non-thematic reading-program. This led Bernstein to posit a hypothesis about the cubo-seriality of Reznikoff's work (Bernstein 1999: 204 ff). Poetry readings, interviews, seminars, conversations can offer biographical or compositional information: "These includes all of those marginal comments and asides made between and, in some cases, within the reading of the poems. Here, the critic learns the details of composition, dates, places, associations mentioned, characters referred to" (Davidson 1981:105-120). A 1973 reading of "Memorial Day" by Ted Berrigan and Anne Waldman, for instance, includes substantial contextualizing introductions by both poets[9]. Recordings of poetry readings contain much information about these social occasions. Recorded readings may contain information about the formality of the event, its atmosphere, its length and structuring, the size and attentiveness of the audience, sometimes even mention some of the attendees. Daniel Kane's history of the Lower East Side poetry scene is significantly based on such recordings (Kane 2003).

Recorded poetry is crucial when it comes to prosody. Audiotexts may prove initially challenging to the prosodist because "the sonic profusion of a reading" complicates, challenges and may eventually defeat the "regularizing systems of prosodic analysis" (Bernstein 1998): an audiotext is a record of the real where prosodic notation, like a score, only records those features that can be symbolized. Historically, some of the earliest poetry recordings were made by pioneering phoneticians in the hope of uncovering scientific criteria for traditional meter. Listening to the *Archives de la parole* recordings made by Ferdinand Brunot, both Céline Pardo and Michel Murat note that most of the thirty-odd poets do not respect the notation and read alexandrines as if they were free verse, while professing otherwise. Murat's hypothesis is that these Symbolist poets, writing in the wake of the *crise de vers*, follow the rules of French prosody when they compose but that of stage actors when they read (Murat 2015). David Nowell Smith has argued that G. M. Hopkins initiated, within the English tradition, a complex prosody that required performance to sound it out (Nowell Smith 2017). And several contributions given on March 21, 2019 at the University of Turin on the occasion of a one-day conference hosted by the Laboratory of Experimental Phonetics as part of the "Voices of Italian Poets" project testified to the quantity of information that computer technologies provide for visualizing vocal parameters and to the variety of theoretical assumptions they help examine.

Recordings are as important for non-metrical poetries. Meter ensured the movement back and forth between print and voice, the transmission between poet and reader. With the demise of meter at the end of the nineteenth century, prosody became increasingly individualized, requiring each poet to make his formal protocol and preferred delivery known. Which is why recordings by the poet have such authorial value[10]. The public reading is an occasion for "public

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[9] "Anne Waldman and Ted Berrigan read their poem 'Memorial Day' ca 1973", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjfWeiTTvnw.

[10] Alessandro Mistrorigo's hypothesis is that the author's delivery retains traces of the compositional process. (Mistrorigo 2018)

tuning" (Bernstein 1998), as exemplified, here in the paratext, by Clark Coolidge's opening remarks to his reading of "Machinations":

> I might say beforehand these works are written in a very different way than most poetry you've probably heard and I think it'll be easier for you if you don't try to hold on to a whole lot of things in your mind as I'm reading them, or try to understand as you would other poetry, but just let it go through your mind because they're written very much according to the changes from one word to the very next word sort of like single frame movies. (Kane 2003: CD track 29)

The pedagogical uses overlap with those mentioned above. Recordings invariably help students apprehend the poem's meaning and formal features. They help them understand tone and voices. They cue them as to pronunciation and provide them with a wide variety of models for reading aloud. Listening to a poem set to music helps students understand the use of stanzas and meter.

Since Michael Davidson first listed some of the scholarly uses to be made of recorded poetry in 1981 and these were taken up and supplemented by the contributors to Charles Bernstein's 1998 *Close Listening* collection, a growing number of anglophone scholars have made exciting use of these resources, exploring issues of voice, presence, community… But the French, British or German scholars I heard at the 2016 Sorbonne conference and the Italian scholars convened by Valentina Colonna in 2019 in Turin are approaching recorded poetry with yet other questions, grounded in their own poetic and scholarly traditions. Such questions include the historicity of poetic declamation, listening to poets listening, or prosodic and phonetic analysis. I realized, by contrast, how much the US approach to recorded poetry was generally grounded in the "New American" oralist poetics of the 1950s and 1960s which, in opposition to the New Critical tenet of autonomy, embraced open form and the social and cultural inscription of the poem.

In the 1960s, when the poetry reading was sweeping across north America bolstered by the counter-culture, French poets would primarily be heard on the radio. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, Jean Tardieu and Claude Royet-Journoud, two poets working for the French radio urged researchers to analyze "voice lines" and "how writers read":

> Tomorrow, teams of scholars will no doubt be closely examining these priceless documents in order to study the voice lines of great writers, the way we now study their writing. […] it is the fate — and it is the duty — of great writers to hand on their secrets to posterity and it is ours to receive their legacy. (Tardieu 1969: 58; quoted in Pardo 2015: 263)

While we have methodologies going back to ancient rhetoric and poetics to describe and discuss texts, and while we have evolved a vocabulary and grammar to discuss moving images, we find ourselves rather helpless when it comes to describing the speaking voice. And we therefore tend to settle for judgments of taste, discarding such rendering as declamatory or flat. Jean-François Puff has picked apart the variety of dictions ordinarily lumped together under the derogatory heading "lyric diction" (Puff 2019). Céline Pardo in her book *La poésie hors du livre: la poésie à l'ère de la radio et du disque* and Michel Murat in his seminars have tried to establish a descriptive vocabulary and criteria of analysis for all types of voices, inspired by studies in phonostylistics. While Jean Cohen distinguished between expressive and non-expressive diction in his 1966 *Structure du langage poétique,* Pardo posits four criteria for analyzing poetic diction. Listening closely to vowel lengths, pitch, tempo as well as silences,

she proposes to distinguish between (1) a musical diction and (2) a spoken diction. Listening closely to intonations suggests a second distinction between (3) an extrapoetic diction, aiming to act on the listener, and (4) an intrapoetic diction, aiming only to bring out the formal data of the poem. Pardo holds these criteria need to be complemented, in particular for performance poetry where timbre is key, but they are a first step away from simply normative evaluation and towards an objective and historical description. They also help summon and assess a *vocabulary* to discuss the infinitely fine-grained data our ear perceives and computer-assisted voice analyses confirm visually, and to devise pertinent questions in the process. Pardo is calling for a collaborative endeavor with specialists of various vocal objects—recorded poetry, slam, rap, song, operatic recitatives, religious chanting and cantillation as well as ethnomusicologists, linguists and phoneticians specializing in oral collections—to compare our practices and tools and to achieve, if possible, a shared descriptive language as well as an operational phonic notation method for all types of phonotexts. (Pardo 2017)

This collaboration must extend to computer scientists, in order to adapt software to the study of recorded poetry. In recent years, the Institut national d'audiovisuel has developed SpeechTrax, a software which performs voice recognition, noise identification (applause, cough, sighs ...), automated word transcription and sound visualization—but is currently ill-adapted for poetic audiotexts[11]. In the US, the High Performance Sound Technologies for Access and Scholarship (HiPSTAS) project is using high-performance computing technologies to "listen" to thousands of hours of audio in a condensed period of time, in order to make claims at scale, across an archive or corpus—establishing, for instance which poets get the most applause. Such distant listening (as it has come to be used) culls through massive amounts of information and suggests synchronic or diachronic patterns, notes Chris Mustazza, associate director of PennSound. Mustazza is devising an exciting third way which he terms Machine-Aided Close Listening.

> Machine-Aided Close Listening aims to juxtapose, without necessarily harmonizing, three dimensions of the poetic phonotext: the text of the poem, a performance of it, and a visualization of the audio of that performance. These dimensions form the 3D phonotext. In making sound visible, a reader-listener can discuss aspects of the sonic form of the poem as an extension of its textual content. (Mustazza 2018)

In support of this methodology, Mustazza has devised a new digital tool that aligns these three dimensions and conducted experimental digital analyses of poetry audio and edits (Mustzza no date). As part of his PhD on *the birth of the poetry audio archive*, Mustazza has also been digitizing and contextualizing early collections of poetry recordings made at Columbia University in the 1930s and 1940s and recorded on aluminum records.

3. Archives sonores de la poésie

As I mentioned in the introduction, the aim of the Sorbonne conference was also practical and aimed to promote an awareness on the part of French institutions of the need to preserve and make available this oral heritage of poetry. While the Bibliothèque nationale has made pioneering recordings (such as les Archives de la parole) available online and while many contemporary poets can be seen and heard on Youtube, a very large number of historical

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[11] Speechtrax, Suivi vocal des locuteurs célèbres du Paysage Audiovisuel Français, http://speechtrax.ina.fr.

recordings of poetic readings or interviews are currently neglected, promised to oblivion or slow destruction, even in major national institutions. Since 2017, Michel Murat, Céline Pardo, Jean-François Puff and I have been working to create an online archive of recorded poetry hosted and supported by the OBVIL program at Sorbonne Université. We started by identifying major collections and making contact with the institutions or individuals they belong to. During our preliminary investigation we found out that only some of the +3000 recordings of events held by the Revue Parlée at the Centre Pompidou were properly inventoried and digitized, thus remaining inaccessible for researchers. Founded in 1977 by Blaise Gauthier as the Centre Pompidou's oral review or reading series, the Revue Parlée hosted major writers and intellectuals, from France and elsewhere, for lectures, readings, performances and debates. We found out that many recordings of the first institutional weekly poetry reading series run by poet Emmanuel Hocquard at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris between 1977 and 1991 were lost. Broadcasts of poets reading or speaking on national radio and television are safeguarded by the Institut national d'audiovisuel but can only be consulted onsite, at the Bibliothèque nationale, so that they cannot be used in class or at conferences. Establishing partnerships with such large institutions is a long process but we have begun cataloguing, digitizing and contextualizing print and audiovisual material from smaller collections and are currently developing our projected website which we hope to launch soon. A collection of essays and founding texts on the issues raised by recorded poetry and their archive will be released in 2019[12]. In this context, attending the "La musica della poesia" conference in Turin furthered my reflection on the uses to be made of recorded poetry and convinced me of the potential for fruitful European and international research networks.

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ABIGAIL LANG • is Associate Professor of American literature at Université de Paris and affiliated with LARCA CNRS. She specializes in American poetry and issues of cultural transfer and intermediality. A collection of essays on recorded poetry is forthcoming in 2019: Abigail Lang, Michel Murat, Céline Pardo eds., *Archives sonores de la poésie*, Dijon, Presses du réel.

E-MAIL • abigail.lang@wanadoo.fr