

## ***Cura vocalis*. An interdisciplinary exploration of voice care in service of preaching**

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### **Abstract**

In this article the fields of speech and language pathology and of homiletics join hands to explore the theological and spiritual aspects of preaching in combination with the aspects influencing voice production in the (South) African context; this is done to highlight the importance of reflexivity/self-awareness and the self-care of preachers. The main aim of the article is to promote the need for a distinctly (South) African *cura vocalis* by exploring factors that influence preaching and use of voice in this context. This aim is pursued by firstly describing preaching as a performance that involves the whole human body. The article then describes and discusses the challenges that preachers face in the (South) African context. These homiletical and contextual insights are augmented with insights from the domain of speech and language pathology, which includes a brief description of the main organs involved in voice production and how voice works, along with factors that have an impact on voice production and vocal quality. The final section presents the need for a *cura vocalis* in the service of a *cura homiletica*, which promotes early intervention to deal with voice pathologies related to the practice of preaching as well as methods to prevent such pathologies from developing.

### **1. Introduction**

The theological practice of preaching as *Viva Vox Evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel (Cilliers 2004; Hermelink & Deeg 2013:5)<sup>1</sup> entails biological voices in which air flows over vocal cords to produce sounds that can be heard by others. There are many variables that can impact

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1 Hermelink & Deeg (2013:5) write: “*Viva Vox Evangelii*: the Living Word of the Gospel is what Luther expected to be heard in sermons, hymns, and services. Of course, it is God’s word, and it is the Holy Spirit’s transforming of the preachers’ words into a living word that creates new faith.”

on the theological quality of preaching as the living voice of the Gospel. These theological variables continuously receive attention in homiletical reflections, also currently in Southern Africa (cf. Cilliers 2021; Fenga & Wepener 2018; Laubscher 2017; Pieterse 2020; Tisdale & De Wet 2014; Wepener 2020; Wepener & Nell 2022; Wepener & Steyn 2022; Wessels 2021). However, there are also physiological variables involved that are often neglected in practical theological and homiletical literature. These theological and physiological variables should not be viewed separately, as human beings are no longer viewed in a dualistic fashion as body and soul but as integrated or holistic beings. As Shuster (2008:28) writes: “human bodies and souls or spirits cannot be disentangled, and both are involved in all normal communication.”

Fundamental to a healthy voice for preaching are healthy vocal cords. The Zentrum für evangelische Gottesdienst- und Predigtkultur has a course with the title “Cura vocalis”. With reference to this name, they write: “The Latin word contains aspects of care, concern, and affection. With this basic attitude we would like to help pastors to cultivate their voice as a working tool and personal means of expression.” Their work also involves a research project in which theologians cooperate with scholars from the Phoniatics Department of the University of Leipzig in evaluating pastors’ voices.<sup>2</sup>

A systematic review by Vermeulen et al. (2022) highlights that numerous studies report the positive impact of vocal hygiene education programmes on the voice quality of professional voice users, especially when combined with direct voice training. This review did not include any studies on vocal hygiene education programmes for preachers and only one study on worship leaders, possibly highlighting the lack of research amongst this population. Ibekwe (2019) found that preachers in Nigeria had poor knowledge of vocal misuse or abuse and the importance of voice care and a scoping review by Buckley and Carey (2022) on the vocal health of faith leaders also highlights limited voice awareness amongst this population. Several training institutions in (South) Africa include guidance on the performance aspect of preaching, but this does not necessarily include vocal hygiene. With the strong emphasis of the World Health Organisation

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2 See <https://www.predigtzentrum.de/Seiten/Predigtcoaching/Cura%20vocalis.html>

(WHO) on health promotion and disease prevention, a profession relying heavily on vocal use should be informed of risk factors and vocal care guidelines. In (South) Africa, preachers face severe and also partially unique challenges as well as opportunities regarding use of the voice.<sup>3</sup>

In this article the fields of speech and language pathology and of homiletics join hands to explore the theological and spiritual aspects of preaching in combination with examining the aspects that influence voice production in the (South) African context to highlight the importance of reflexivity/self-awareness and self-care by preachers.<sup>4</sup> Self-care on the part of the preacher is not limited to these aspects and should entail caring for their overall mental, emotional and physical health, but also and importantly devoting attention to the preacher's spiritual well-being, her theological maturity and growth as well as a certain authenticity and congruence between the public person of the preacher and her person in the pulpit (see also Cilliers 2004:188, 192). In this regard on-going theological training and ministerial development are critical. Preachers who are experiencing spiritual or theological challenges in their career may be prone to perform preaching in ways that are out of sync with their personalities and theological convictions, and such preaching may in turn (in)directly place a strain on the bodies and vocal cords.

The main aim of the article is to articulate the need for a distinctly (South) African *cura vocalis* by exploring factors that influence preaching and use of the voice in this context. This aim is pursued by firstly describing preaching as a performance that involves the whole human body. This is followed by a description and discussion of the challenges that preachers face in the (South) African context; this account takes its lead from the Zimbabwean homiletician Eben Nhiwatiwa, but also from South African scholars such as Hennie Pieterse. These homiletical and contextual insights are augmented with insights from the domain of speech and language pathology, which include a brief description of the main organs involved in

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3 See in this regard the work of Nhiwatiwa (2012a) on the realities of many African preachers.

4 The authors of this article are also respectively a trained speech therapist with specialisation in alternative and augmentative communication, and a practical theologian specialising in liturgy and homiletics.

voice production and the way the voice works, along with factors that have an impact on voice production and vocal quality. The last part presents the need for a *cura vocalis* in service of a *cura homiletica*, which promotes early intervention regarding voice pathologies related to the practice of preaching as well as the prevention of such pathologies.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Preaching as bodily and theological performance

According to Meyer (2015:92), religion is especially something people do, practices in which they actively engage. And for Grimes (2010:77) “A religion is a style – a choreography of actions, values, objects, experiences, places, persons, institutions, words, thoughts, memories, fantasies, hopes, and feelings.” Different religions and different traditions within, for example, Christianity emphasise different actions, or bodily performances, and these practices performed by bodies are related to beliefs as well as to the character of those engaging in the practices (cf. Resner 2008:225–227). Grimes (2010:77–88) shows how sitting is a core gesture in Buddhism, whilst in Christianity eating is a core action in Roman Catholicism. He remarks further that the main difference between Methodists and Anglicans is that “the latter spend more time on their knees” and that differences such as these point towards the fact that “the relationship between bodily and theological differences should be considered” (Grimes 2010:87).

In many Protestant traditions, such as the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, but also younger Christian traditions such as the African Independent, Pentecostal, Charismatic and neo-Pentecostal traditions there is a strong emphasis on speaking and hearing. When people speak as part of their religious practices, they communicate with their whole bodies. Farley (2008:117), in a chapter on the use of the body in the performance of proclamation, talks about “the body that re-embodies ink.” Long (2009:52) writes that “speaking is a necessarily embodied act, and the voice an instrument of proclamation and prayer. Effective presiders, then, understand the voice theologically and well as practically ...”

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5 Pertaining to method, the article employs an interdisciplinary literature study in which the literature from the fields of Practical Theology, Homiletics, Performance Studies, Ritual Studies and Speech and language pathology is reviewed and insights integrated in the service of a *cura vocalis*.

This article focuses specifically on speaking and hearing as religious practices and it is important for preachers to realise how their bodily performances are the enactment of, amongst many aspects, their life and ministry experience, personality and theological convictions as well as their ecclesial and homiletical traditions. It is important for preachers to be aware of these variables and the fact that these variables impact on their use of voice. There is an on-going discussion in Homiletics about whether a preacher should just do what comes naturally, or whether the act of preaching as an embodied practice should be based on explicitly articulated principles (cf. Childers & Schmit 2008:13).

### **3. The preacher in the preaching event**

Awareness of character and personality and that they affect preaching is important for any preacher. McClure (2007:12) defines character in relation to a preacher as: “The personal integrity of the preacher as it influences the reception of the sermon.” According to McClure, it is important to distinguish between the character and the personality of a preacher. McClure (2007:102) defines personality as “The psychology of the preacher in the event of preaching” and refers to earlier research on the personality pathologies of preachers that were researched. Childers and Schmit (2008: 13) write: “Personality shapes pulpit style, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill.” With regard to the performance of a sermon, Shuster (2008) explores truthfulness in relation to character and shows how truthfulness is intricately related to the embodiment of the sermon by the preacher. Preaching always remains to a certain extent a bodily performance in which the ethos of the preacher plays no minor role. Manipulation and hypocrisy will quickly be picked up by the hearers; however, “just being ourselves” will also not do, as there is always necessarily some element of performance involved in preaching (Shuster 2008:33). Schuster (2008:35) refrains from providing any easy answers but comes to the following conclusion: “The point is seeking a certain wholeness in what we do, never forgetting that we are doing it, first and foremost, before the God who cannot and who will not be mocked.” Pathologies in relation to

both the character of a preacher and her personality can potentially impact negatively on her use of voice in the pulpit.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4. Theology of/and preaching**

Apart from personality and character, theology is also an important factor that impacts on the preaching performance. McClure (2007:136–137) distinguished between “theology and preaching” and “theology of preaching”. The latter refers basically to a preacher’s understanding of preaching as the W(w)ord of God. We will come to this important aspect shortly. The factor “theology and preaching” is a reference to the fact that every preacher “has an operative or functional theology” and that it “represents the preacher’s individual take on the Christian tradition as it shows up in preaching” (McClure, 2007:136). Every preacher has certain theological and biblical themes that she emphasizes, which over time develop into a canon within the canon. On a theological and homiletical level, it is important for preachers to be aware of this operative theology and to challenge their own emphases, as they can unwittingly expose their hearers to only their own limited theological and biblical convictions and preferences. To return to the scope of this article, awareness of their own practice can assist preachers to realise that they are, for example, prone to theological emphases that are reflected in their voice.

Leonora Tisdale (1997, 2008) has shown in her work that, in addition to the operative theology of the preacher, there are also operative theologies in congregations to which preachers respond. She has shown, for example, how a preacher, by looking at their homiletical contexts in the way that a cultural anthropologist looks at cultures, can come to realise that their hearers are like all other people, like no other people, and like some other people. This insight can, like an awareness of their “theology and preaching”, assist preachers in varying their homiletical content to serve the diverse needs of the hearers and provide them with the opportunity to vary their use of voice in the pulpit, thus avoiding excessive strain on their vocal cords.

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6 Steyn (2008) has conducted valuable research in which he explored the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator in relation to preaching styles in South Africa.

Preaching as a practice entails the embodiment and performance of a preacher's "theology of preaching" through the use of vocal cords and bodily gestures. McClure (2007:137–140) identifies four main theologies of preaching, which he calls (i) existential (preaching as answers to the crises of human existence), (ii) transcendent (announcement of the divine Word solely dependent of biblical testimony), (iii) ethical-political (a new vision in the light of injustices, oppression etc.), and (iv) organic-aesthetic preaching (connecting to the already present and whispered word of God within creation). Underlying these theologies of preaching is an overarching theology of Scripture which any preacher should bring to the surface from time to time.

Thomas Long (2004:18) writes that: "Most ministers have in their minds a general understanding of who they are and what they are doing as they go about the work of ministry." This also specifically holds true for preaching and, in order to explain the ways in which preachers generally view their role, Long uses three so-called primary metaphors, the first of which is the herald, which is closely connected with what McClure calls a transcendent theology of preaching. According to this metaphor the preacher is like the herald of a king (God) through whom the king speaks, and the herald should bring the message clearly but, importantly, "God actually does the proclaiming" (Long 2004:19). This is a rather high theological view of the event of preaching in and through which Godself is speaking and which can and often does impact on the way in which the preacher not only embodies the herald theology and metaphor but also performs this religious practice with the concomitant use of the voice. Long's second metaphor, the so-called pastor-preacher image, refers to the preacher who usually addresses the hearers' existential and more pastoral concerns and one can imagine the accompanying pastoral tone and bodily performance of the sermon. Even though the pastor-preacher is speaking and the only one speaking, she performs the speech in such a way that the hearers experience the speaking as an act of listening and responding to their felt needs. The third metaphor, that of the storyteller or poet, refers to aesthetic approach, which is also closely linked to a narrative approach to theology and preaching.

Each theology of preaching as well as the primary metaphors has its own implicit theological vision and conviction regarding what preaching is and therefore also what the aim of preaching should be, for example to

convince, persuade, entertain or comfort. None of these theologies of preaching or metaphors will necessarily impact negatively on the use of the voice in the pulpit; however, they do have the potential to put long-term strain on the vocal cords and therefore bringing to the surface their operative theologies of preaching and as such the creation of awareness in this regard is necessary. Cilliers (2004:196) aptly describes the relationship between the preacher's life and preaching practice by adapting the well-known liturgical adage *lex orandi lex credendi* to *lex orandi lex credendi lex vivendi lex preadiciandi*, namely that how a preacher prays is how she believes, how she lives and also how she preaches.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. Exegesis of the self

In the light of the above, what can be called “exegesis of self” (cf. Farris 2008:267–269) is important for all preachers. This kind of exegesis is necessary to become aware of theological preferences and hermeneutical lenses by way of which texts and contexts are approached. In the light of the aim of this article, such exegesis of self is also important as these theological and other preferences and the overall spiritual and mental well-being of preachers impacts on their use of voice. Farris (2008:267) writes that “Whatever else preachers take into the pulpit, they always take themselves”. Exegesis of self is thus just as important as exegesis of the text and context is for preaching. Farris (2008:268–269) provides advice for doing exegesis of self; for example, preachers should continuously examine their character; critically reflect on their identities (race, gender, economic etc.) to ascertain their blind spots; seek out those of differing backgrounds through personal encounters or books to challenge their own biases; review a number of their latest sermons and closely scrutinise their preferred themes, emphases and tendencies; and lastly, this kind of exegesis should not be done in isolation, but with advisors whom the preacher trusts. Troeger and Tisdale (2013:84–88) offer helpful advice for teachers of preaching on how to help students to bring to the surface their operative theologies.

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7 Kimberly Long (2009:3) makes a similar argument related to the person of the liturgist. She writes, for example: “... underneath differences in style and expression, there are theological convictions about who we are as worship leaders ...”

## 6. The (South) African preaching context

Zimbabwean homiletician Nhiwatiwa (2012a; 2012b) explores preaching in the African contexts in two books. He describes and explains the contexts, and concomitant challenges, in which African preachers work, for example, the importance of a spiritual ontology within which their preaching practice functions. With regard to the spiritual ontology, for example, he shows how the core image for a preacher in Africa is not the herald (see Long's work above), but the spirit medium (see also Wepener & Barnard, 2022). Such a spiritual ontology has implications for epistemology and the sources employed in sermon preparation and presentation. Wepener and Nyawuza (2017), for example, refer to a bishop who stated that “sermon preparation is dangerous”, meaning that preachers should not prepare sermons only during a designated time during the week, but that they should always be “in the spirit” for the whole duration of the week leading up to the preaching event and tap into the pneumatological ontology of Africa as a rich source for sermon preparation and performance. Important for this article are both the strengths that preachers in Africa possess and challenges they face, that Nhiwatiwa points out.

African cultures are moving cultures when it comes to worship and preaching (see Uzukwu 1996; Wepener 2014), which means that preachers need a certain level of health and fitness to participate and lead in worship. For some preachers this can become physically strenuous, with implications for the voice. In *Preaching in a context of poverty* Pieterse (2001) provides a general overview and analysis of the challenge of poverty in South Africa and how preachers can respond to the challenge. Pieterse's analysis and insights are also of value for other postcolonial African contexts in which preachers practise their art. Without generalizing and in the light of Nhiwatiwa and Pieterse's work, it can be stated that many African preachers often perform the practice of preaching under trying circumstances. They have few resources at their disposal, for example, Bible commentaries and theological books, and many of them receive little to no theological training.

According to Nhiwatiwa (2012), many preachers in Africa are naturally gifted speakers, which means that one strength which many African preacher possess can quickly become a challenge. They readily get up in

front of an audience to speak or preach, do so quite often in the course of a week, and also speak for long sessions at a time. This is not the case for all preachers in all church traditions in Africa, as in some traditions a minister or pastor will deliver only one or maybe two homilies of ten minutes each in the course of a week. Many preachers in Africa also preach several times every week, even several times on one given Sunday in different congregations that they must reach on foot. In the worship spaces where they preach there is often also no sound amplification, and they must depend on their natural voices to project their sermons (Nhiwatiwa, 2012). All these challenges facing African preachers have the potential to impact negatively on the preacher's vocal cords in the long run.

## **7. The voice**

Every preacher has a unique voice with which they lead a worship service, chair a meeting, or counsel a bereaved congregant. The vocal quality of the preacher depends on the structures of the vocal mechanism, as well as the functional use of these structures. For example, structurally women often have higher voices as their vocal folds are shorter than those of men. Functionally, the preacher may change the pitch, loudness, or resonance of their voice to convey a message more clearly, for example, or to compensate for lack of amplification in a large congregation. The preacher's emotional state may also contribute to changes in vocal quality as factors such as stress and anxiety affect the tension of the larynx (Schwartz, 2004:17). The structures involved in voice production give every preacher wide scope for vocal variation; however, healthy voice use is necessary for the vocal mechanism to remain healthy and function optimally. It is important to be aware of the way in which voice use affects the wellness of the structures involved as well as vocal quality.

Optimal voice use requires optimal respiration, phonation, and resonance. Voice is produced by the vibration of the vocal folds. These vocal folds are located in the larynx (voice box) at the top of the trachea (air pipe). The vocal folds are open to allow the air to pass freely when breathing and protect the airways by closing when swallowing. When speaking, the vocal folds open and close, producing sound. This vibration of the vocal folds is called phonation. Phonation is supported by air that is exhaled.

Sufficient breath support is thus necessary for voice production and a lack of expiratory airflow causes hyperfunction of the vocal folds (Schwartz 2004:12). Once the sound is produced by the vocal folds, it travels along the vocal tract, a resonator that shapes the sound into various speech sounds through movement of structures including the throat, palate, jaw, tongue and lips (Sundberg 2006:103–119).

The structure and function of the vocal folds can be affected by many factors, including medical, environmental, and personal aspects. Dealing with all the medical conditions affecting the voice are beyond the scope of this article; however, it is important to be aware of the possible link between medical conditions and voice disorders (Roy et al. 2005:1990). For example, infections and allergens result in excessive thick secretions which increase the weight of the vocal folds and may thus affect voice production. Medication taken for these conditions, on the other hand, may cause dryness of the mucous membrane of the vocal tract that may in turn cause irritation and straining of the voice. Environmental factors such as smoke, dusty or polluted environments may also cause dryness of the mucus membrane of the vocal tract. Chronic reflux, the backflow of stomach acids into the throat, causes irritation and swelling of the vocal folds, as well as changes in a person's vocal characteristics (Groenewald et al. 2022:7).

The speaking habits of the preacher are another factor that may affect the preacher's voice. Vocal misuse or abuse is the poor function of any of the systems involved in voice production (respiration, phonation and resonance) and may lead to changes in vocal quality and possibly structural changes to the vocal folds. As previously noted, a person's emotions and feelings are also reflected in their voice and may impact on voice production. Preachers may be at greater risk of vocal misuse or abuse as their occupation has high speaking demands. Extended periods of vocal use, inappropriate pitch and loudness, and throat clearing and coughing, hard glottal attacks (hard speech onset), tension and lack of proper respiratory support as well as lack of hydration, may strain the vocal cords and lead to changes in vocal quality. If these patterns of vocal misuse are sustained, the vocal cords may be damaged, which will then lead to further straining of the voice. Audible vocal fold disorders because of vocal misuse or abuse include hoarseness and changes in pitch (Colton, Casper & Leonard, 2011:41,46). Common examples of vocal fold disorders as a result of extended vocal misuse or

abuse are vocal nodules or contact ulcers. If addressed timeously, these disorders can be addressed with voice rest, life-style changes and good speaking habits.

## 8. *Cura vocalis*

McClure (2007:104) emphasizes the importance of devoting continual attention to the “vocational identity, mental health, and spiritual formation” of preachers. Most homileticsians give this kind of advice as the person of the preacher, her character, personality and spirituality impact on the message and its delivery. We want to also emphasise this advice, but in addition to the theological and communicative advantages, this kind of attention will also benefit voice hygiene.

Studies on the vocal health of preachers report high complaints of throat clearing, as well as hoarseness and laryngeal irritation/pain and that factors such as length of sermons may affect their vocal quality (Palheta Neto et al. 2009; Reed & Sims 2017). Vocal hygiene includes increasing the preacher’s awareness of vocal health and minimizing possible vocal abuse and misuse (Schwartz 2004). Vocal health includes identifying aspects of the preacher’s lifestyle that impact negatively on their voice, as well promoting behaviours that impact positively on their voice. For example, excessive caffeine intake is not good for the preacher’s voice (as it is a diuretic), but water intake is very good as it hydrates and reduces irritation of the vocal folds. Nasal breathing instead of oral breathing also moistens the intake of air. Smoking is unhealthy for the vocal folds, and smoky and polluted environments, as well as exposure to allergens, can irritate the vocal tract. Vocal warm-up and cool-down are beneficial when a preacher is faced with high speaking demands and should be followed with periods of vocal rest. Preachers should also be aware of the side-effects of certain medications and inhalers and discuss these with their healthcare practitioner. If the preacher suffers from reflux, this should be addressed to limit harm to the vocal folds. Preachers should also assess the acoustic properties of the environments in which they speak and see if they can resolve problems of poor acoustics and inadequate amplification. As there may be financial challenges that limit the creation of ideal acoustic conditions, practical

solutions can be sought such as getting listeners to sit closer to the preacher in a quiet environment.

Preachers may not be aware of patterns of vocal abuse. Their work may entail prolonged talking demands, for example, a preacher who leads three different worship services on a Sunday, or a single service where the preacher continuously either sings or speaks over the time span of a few hours. The setting or the preacher's personal preaching style may mean that the preacher may need to speak very loudly or even shout. Poor vocal hygiene or medical conditions may lead to excessive throat clearing or coughing, which will in turn irritate the vocal folds that will lead to further throat clearing, and so the cycle continues. Throat clearing may even become habitual, and the preacher may be unaware of this habit.

The preacher may also misuse their voice, which means that they are not using their voice optimally. Every preacher should use their voice within their vocal range, this changes with age (Davies & Jahn 2005). The pitch of the preacher's voice, for both speaking and singing, should not be higher or lower than the optimal range for their age and gender. Monotonous speech is also not good for the voice as vocal variation places less strain on the vocal folds. Too little breath support is another factor that results in straining of the voice. Speaking under stress or when very tired is also not optimal for the voice. Behlau and Oliveira (2009:149) summarize vocal hygiene as “education regarding the vocal mechanism; identification and reduction of phonotraumatic behaviours and high-risk vocal situations; conservation of voice or vocal rest, controlling the amount of talking, monitoring vocal pitch and intensity; local lubrication and systemic hydration; optimal dietary considerations; controlling laryngopharyngeal reflux, gastroesophageal reflux and allergies; and minimizing the influence of medications, environmental factors, and lifestyle choices on voice” and emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to vocal health. A holistic approach is also advocated by Buckley and Carey (2022), who explore the need for an integrated systems approach to occupational vocal health for faith leaders.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to highlight the importance of the self-awareness and self-care of preachers, which entails caring for their overall mental, emotional, spiritual, theological, and physical health, as all these factors potentially impact on use of voice and the possibility of developing vocal pathologies. The (South) African context presents challenges that are experienced by preachers globally; however, there are also some additional and somewhat unique challenges in certain African contexts that put additional strain on some preachers. A first and important step regarding (early) intervention regarding voice care for preachers is developing awareness and the acknowledgement of the need for a *cura vocalis* in general, and specifically sensitivity regarding the interplay of a range of factors, from the theological to the physiological, that influence good use of voice in the pulpit. Creating this awareness in the service of intervention set out in this article will be augmented in supplementary articles in which a praxis theory and basic diagnostic instrument will be developed.

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