

Miller Theatre Program Notes
Columbia University School of the Arts
William Schuman Award Concert honoring Pauline Oliveros
Saturday, March 27, 2010 at 8:00PM

Origins: Pauline Oliveros was born in Houston, Texas, in 1932. Electronic music was born in the 1940s. Oliveros, who was at work creatively in the field from the time she was a student, is one of its rare pioneers. But though this is a relatively new area for music, it is also a very old one. The cables trail back as roots into human prehistory—into an acuter awareness of sound, a sense of its power, a feeling for the long reverberation of eons.

Listening: As Oliveros has often emphasized, listening is not the same as hearing. We hear while doing something else. When we listen, we are doing that alone. Hearing a sound, we notice it as outside us. Listening, we draw it in. Music, for Oliveros, is made first of all by listening to what is there, and by listening to what is not there—yet.

Improvising: The classical tradition of western music is a written tradition, transmitted through scores that allow us contact with the past. In improvising, performers are in contact with the present: with fellow members of their ensemble and with ambient noise. Oliveros came to improvisation as being more natural with the non-standard, hard-to-define means of electronic music. It became a way of life.

Values: These slowly revolve, like the movement of the earth. Listening brings forward acceptance before assertion, quietness before attack, stability before change. Improvising means connection—listening. Collaborative projects, such as Oliveros has most often preferred, whether in working with fellow musicians, with non-professional groups, or with theater people, imply a confident release of ownership. But some things stay the same, like the poles: the primacy of the ear.

Education: Having studied at the University of Houston and San Francisco State College, Oliveros has been on the faculty of Mills College, University of California-San Diego and (currently) Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and has also been invited to many other colleges as a visiting professor or composer-in-residence. Her music is close to teaching in the best sense: it is not about imparting information so much as giving tools.

Revolution: Oliveros' achievements—as composer, improviser, teacher, and listener—challenge us to rethink what we mean by music, which is to rethink what we mean by life.

Organization: With the goal of providing a model for artists in disseminating their work, Oliveros in 1985 established the Pauline Oliveros Foundation, which 20 years later became the Deep Listening Institute. This body manages performances, publishes books and recordings, and arranges courses. For more information, see www.deeplistening.org and paulineoliveros.us.

Sound: *“Every sound is a piece of intelligence, no matter what.”* (Pauline Oliveros)

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Deep Listening: Lear

“Deep listening is listening to everything all the time, and reminding yourself when you’re not.” (Pauline Oliveros)

The trigger, Oliveros has recalled, came in 1958, when she placed a microphone on her window ledge to record sounds in the room where she was. She listened attentively while the recording was being made, but even so, when she played the tape back, she found that the microphone had picked up sounds she had not noticed, because of her unconscious filtering of the sonic environment. Her

listening had been close, but not deep. A whole part of a musical life—perhaps the central part—was to grow from that lesson.

Thirty years later, in 1988, she made some recordings with Stuart Dempster and Panaiotis in the decommissioned cistern at Fort Worden, north of Seattle—an underground chamber close on 200 feet across and 14 feet high, having a reverberation time of 45 seconds. That was the origin of the Deep Listening Band, in which she and Dempster have performed from time to time ever since, latterly with David Gamper as third member. Some of those first cistern recordings were released on the New Albion CD *Deep Listening*; the track *Lear* was used in Oliveros' continuous score for a Mabou Mines production of Shakespeare's play in 1990.

Fed Back II

"Our society, our American society, is innovative technologically. Why shouldn't that be reflected in the arts?" (Pauline Oliveros)

In 1962, Oliveros and other musicians working in the Bay Area, including Morton Subotnick and Ramon Sender, pooled resources to establish the San Francisco Tape Music Center. There, during the next several years, Oliveros produced numerous pieces and developed techniques so that they could be made not by splicing lengths of tape together but in real time—a revolutionary approach by which electronic music became a performance art. The four-minute recording we hear now was made in 1966, the composer recalls, "using oscillators producing difference tones and feedback through a patch bay."

Sounds from Childhood: Sonic Meditation

"I've found that the most receptive people were people who were not trained musically." (Pauline Oliveros)

In Oliveros' world, we are all musicians, sound-makers, as she has been demonstrating since the beginning of the 1970s in working with groups of diverse kinds on what she calls "Sonic Meditations." This example dates from 2002.

The Gender of Now: There But Not There

"Replication from a score? What do we need that for? We've got recordings." (Pauline Oliveros)

This piece was written in 2005 for tonight's performers. Characteristically, the score comprises verbal instructions that invite the musicians to draw the music from themselves, from their instruments, and from the circumstances of the performance. What must also count, though this is not stated, is the musicians' awareness of and sympathy with the whole body of Oliveros' work—with her concern for the unforced and the unconventional, for drones and microtones, and especially with her conception of performance as a kind of listening.

Listening is implied in the nine "identities" Oliveros gives her performers—e.g., "Hold keys down silently until you hear the end of a sympathetic resonance," or "Merge with the piano sound." By listening to each other—but also by expressing their distinctness ("Melodies inside a half-step with and without mute," "Soft bass clusters with sustain pedal")—the two instruments engage in a duet across the great distance separating them.

Variations for Sextet

"It's important for me not to throw away something: not to throw away conventional notation if I want to use it, or not to throw away written music, or constructive music, because one thing informs the other, and there is synthesis and exchange." (Pauline Oliveros)

Dating from 1959-1960, this is by some way the oldest piece on tonight's program, written toward the end of the time Oliveros was studying in San Francisco with Robert Erickson. As she has herself observed, her music of this period may suggest the serialism of her contemporaries, though she was working, as ever, intuitively. Especially noteworthy, among more flashing colors and some magical combinations, are long notes that seem to signal right forward to her later drone-based music, and that become increasingly prominent as other events become more sparse and splintered. The 15-minute composition is scored for flute, clarinet, trumpet, horn, cello, and piano.

Who's Playing What

"My accordion is tuned in just intonation and I like it, it's important to me, but I'm interested in all kinds of tunings. We don't have to be stuck with one system." (Pauline Oliveros)

"This piece," Oliveros has written, "is the result of work that we are doing at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. We are working on an intelligent agent that can parse our music, play back selected parts and create new parts as we play together. Triple Point (our trio) is the laboratory for the development of the intelligent agent. So far the agent is able to recognize textural aspects of our music as well as pitch and rhythms and make decisions about performing. The audience will see the three of us plus the laptop that delivers the agent output. Sound for each member of the 'quartet' will be localized from the stage. It will be hard to tell sometimes who is playing what as the agent makes decisions even with localization. The score will consist of minimal instructions."

"The accordion," Oliveros has said, "is my primary instrument. It's an old friend, comfortable and expressive. Symbolically it is aligned with 'the people,'—working people." She was fascinated by the instrument from the time she was nine, when her piano-teacher mother brought one home, and she has been playing it ever since. Besides retuning it, she often combines it with an Expanded Instrument System, providing electronic means of transformation and control.

Bye Bye Butterfly

"I have always loved performance. I wanted to be in contact with sound and moving sound in real time. It never interested me to cut and splice tape or to wait for numbers to crunch in a computer. I wanted immediate results." (Pauline Oliveros)

This eight-minute piece of 1965 is another sample of electronic music created at the San Francisco Tape Music Center in real time—in this case, using two oscillators, two amplifiers, a record turntable, and two tape recorders. As the composer has put it, the work "bids farewell not only to the music of the 19th century but also to the system of polite morality of that age and its attendant institutionalized oppression of the female sex. The title refers to the operatic disc, *Madam Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, which was at hand in the studio at the time and which was spontaneously incorporated into the ongoing compositional mix." The piece is included on a Paradigm Discs collection of electronic works by Oliveros from 1965-6 as well as on the compilation *Ohm+: The Early Gurus of Electronic Music: 1948-1980* (Ellipsis Arts).

The Inner/Outer Matrix

"Being aware of sound inside and outside of oneself as a practice can be growth-producing as it is a connecting force." (Pauline Oliveros)

Oliveros' score, dating from 2005, is another verbal guide toward a performance, again implying the priority of listening. Proposed for an ensemble of any size and/or a reader, the piece invites its performers to listen both inwardly ("for your own sound," "for a word to express") and outwardly (for a sound from the ensemble, for a word or phrase from a selected text). One person's inner sound becomes, when expressed, an outer sound for the other participants; and an outer sound may become, through listening, part of a performer's inner world. A 12-minute trajectory is suggested, embracing more and more silence, or less and less, but the duration does not have to be measured.

IO and Her and the Trouble with Him: A dance opera in primeval time

"I don't think that being a lesbian or a woman has anything to do with my compositional ability." (Pauline Oliveros)

Presented at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in April 2001 as part of Oliveros' residency there, this theater piece grew from a collaboration with lone, with the aerial dancer-choreographer Joanna Haigood, and with students. The Greek myth of Io, a priestess raped by Zeus and pursued by Hera, is retold; we see a short sequence, "The Prison." A DVD recording of the whole work was released last year by Deep Listening.

Oracle Bones: Mirror Dreams

"My improvisation is based in listening to all that I can perceive inside and outside of myself before I make a sound—or silence. Maintaining that level of listening is basic to my improvising." (Pauline Oliveros)

Musicians and dancer perform in response to lone's text. The work received its first performance at the PhonoFemme international festival of sound art in Vienna last spring.

Lunar Opera: Deep Listening For_Tunes

"The project was coordinated all through the web and e-lists. We had two days for a walk through, and then a performance, and everybody knew what to do, and it worked really well. I think it's a new model for how to develop a project." (Pauline Oliveros)

Presented in August 2000, this was Oliveros' second commission from Lincoln Center Out of Doors, coming four years after the piece that follows it on this program: *Ghostdance*. It involved 250 performers, each of whom decided what cues to take as indications to make sound or stop doing so. The participants were to be inhabitants of one or other of seven cities imagined in lone's libretto on a moon circling a planet in a remote galaxy (Diva Nation, Sacred Fire, Dream City, and so on). "All are expecting a birth," as the composer describes the six-hour event, "but no-one knows who will give birth or where the birth will take place. When there is a birth, then there is celebration and conclusion, with a performance by the Deep Listening Band."

Ghostdance

"Whether the theater is narrative or non-narrative, I consider the music to be a field which hosts the text." (Pauline Oliveros)

Ghostdance came out of a collaboration with the choreographer Paula Josa Jones and with dancers from Mexico. Oliveros takes up the story: "Together with our host—composer/ethnomusicologist Arturo Salinas—we attended El Dia de los Muertos in Chalco to help inform our work. The beauty and depth of the ceremonies, ritual dancing, and music honoring the dead touched me deeply as did the dancers we worked with in Monterrey. I am grateful for the experience that was shared with me so graciously by the Nahuatl-speaking families of Chalco and the dancers of Monterrey. The *Ghostdance* soundscape begins with my recording of a flock of grackles who were roosting in the trees by my hotel in Chalco. I imagined the music to emanate from the voices of those birds with a transformation to a spirit voice created and sung by Julie Lyon Rose." A CD recording was released in 1998.

Njinga the Queen King: The Return of a Warrior

"I'm not terrifically interested in leaving so-called masterpieces; I think that more important is the work that I have done to facilitate creativity in others as well as in myself." (Pauline Oliveros)

In 1985 Oliveros met the writer-performer lone, with whom she soon began working on a theater piece based on Njinga, who, as ruler of modern-day Angola for 40 years in the 17th century, held the colonial powers of Portugal and the Netherlands at bay. Trampling on both racial and sexual stereotypes, Njinga asserted her command and is said to have maintained a male harem.

This recording was made at the world première performances of *Njinga the Queen King*, given at BAM in 1993, in a production that has been widely revived since. It offers a startling example of Oliveros' ability to submerge herself in collaborative work, not only with lone but also with the African musicians and dancers who take part.

DroniPhonia

"What I like to think about is living in a world of possibilities rather than a world of limitations." (Pauline Oliveros)

Oliveros conceived this piece in Belfast, Northern Ireland, last May. "The instructions are to listen to the multimodal drones and to gradually enter the texture. Listen for the other players and grow in intensity. Play at least one outrageous phrase. Otherwise emerge and blend with the drones."