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Deep and wide

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by Miya Masaoka
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Pauline Oliveros, the Bay Area's godmother of sound, talks about her life's work and the world it's helped shape.

FOCUS ON YOUR breathing, focus on the sounds of you rummaging for a pencil to mark your calendar. Memorial Day weekend will feature a series of performances and other events honoring the 70th birthday of the grandmother of sound, Pauline Oliveros.

Oliveros is a seminal figure in new music, having emerged when you couldn't find women composing music using technology. Spanning five decades, her career encompasses performances, recordings, scores, books on sonic meditations, a practice she developed called Deep Listening, an arts center, and a musical legacy that offers new identities for composers, improvisers, and the hybrid composer-performers. Spawned in the fertile California ground that produced John Cage, Henry Cowell, Lou Harrison, and Terry Riley, Oliveros's music comes from a world that is vastly different from and yet in some ways frighteningly similar to that of the '50s and '60s.

Racial and cultural segregation, then as now, set up musical barriers that place her California contemporaries like Horace Tapscott into a world that might as well be another planet. For her part, Oliveros has provided herself with a role model where none existed: herself. Those of us who follow are the beneficiaries. And as the upcoming birthday tribute to this septuagenarian will attest, she remains a fierce champion of independent thinking and creating, swimming upstream against a culture of conformism.

The current revival of analog electronic music, modular synthesis, and noise has sparked interest in the inventors of the early synthesizers and the composers who used them. One of the inventors is Don Buchla, who worked closely with composer Morton Subotnik at a place called the San Francisco Tape Music Center, which was to have enormous influence on the musical life in the Bay Area. Subotnik, Oliveros, and composer Ramon Sender helped establish the center and bring it to its fruition. Oliveros was appointed the first director of the center (currently the Center for Contemporary Music) in 1966 when it moved from San Francisco to Mills College in Oakland.

Starting in the early ’60s, her work with tape, sound, and scored compositions won international prizes that brought her important recognition. Her early, more intricately composed compositions yielded new ways of thinking, listening, and responding to music. Her musical evolution was gradual, reaching a critical moment in 1988 in Washington state, where, with Stuart Dempster, she made a recording in a cistern with extreme natural reverberation. It was the beginning of what she calls Deep Listening.

While many artists, musicians, and composers bear a resemblance to cult leaders who lack a following, Oliveros is an artist who — in the best sense of the word — has actually garnered a minor cult following. Her Deep Listening retreats welcome nonmusicians to participate in listening activities that draw from Eastern spirituality practices and sonic awareness.

San Francisco composer-performer Brenda Hutchinson describes Oliveros's work this way: “If you engage in any of her pieces, like meditative practices, you can talk about them forever and ever and not get it. But if you perform her pieces, you get it. Her scores provide access to that kind of experience — wonderfully designed invitations to participate in that meditative experience, paying attention to your own breathing, thought processes, and being aware of what’s around you and being in the world.”

Hutchinson goes on to describe how Oliveros's generosity helped her own career. That same open, sharing spirit was evident in a recent conversation I had with Oliveros.

Bay Guardian: *Do you feel good compositional skills are necessary to be an effective and versatile improviser?*

Pauline Oliveros: From my point of view, if the impulse to improvise weren’t suppressed in childhood by educational institutions, the understanding of patterns would emerge quite naturally. During a lifetime skills would increase. The schools enforce classical forms as a training device, so it’s favored in institutions over creative work. Creative work really comes naturally to kids; they are creative and improvising all the time. Then when you start to learn symbolic notation to form traditional music, then you're discouraged from improvising. There doesn’t need to be a conflict. One doesn’t need to be favored over the other. You can learn this through experience. As far as counterpoint goes, you can have sound against sound and have more than one line going at once. Two parts, 16 parts, or a 100 parts.

BG: *You’ve said before that you think of composition as a slowed-down improvisation and improvisation as a speeded-up composition. My experience is the opposite. In constructing a piece of music, I am forced to work out in advance the entire form and what will happen from one section to another. In improvising, I don’t have to wait until the very end of actually stopping the playing to finalize the form; I can put it off indefinitely.*

PO: I hold to my statement. You can’t change your mind in improvisation, whereas you can change your mind in composing. That’s the real difference as far as I’m concerned.

BG: *How do you encourage younger artists to realize their inner vision?*

PO: Deep Listening. I give workshops every summer, and now I’m teaching Deep Listening at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. The most important, basic thing is listening. We do listening practice, which is very related to sitting practice in Buddhist meditation, but the focus is listening — inclusively as well as exclusively. An illustration of listening inclusively is to take in all of the sounds that one can perceive, which includes all the external sounds in the environment and beyond and anything that one is experiencing in memory and imagination, and having that as a sphere that is constantly expanding and fluctuating. Exclusive listening, within that inclusive form, is the sound that attracts one's attention and makes you want to follow it all the way to the end. After that you are back into your original field of sound. People think listening is passive, but it’s not; it’s active.

BG: *Similar to writers talking about their readers and the act of reading a novel. The readers have to create maybe 50 percent of the novel in their imagination, in their brain. So in music, the listener must create as well.*

PO: Exactly. You're creating whatever it is you perceive in the brain. And you can become conscious of that. It is not

just about projecting something for people to listen to; it's about developing a listening practice. This is why it is radical. It is changing something at its root.

BG: *Do you believe in sounds after death?*

PO: Yes, the ear doesn't shut down. The ear is still taking in sound waves.

BG: *Even after the body disintegrates?*

PO: It is still perceiving.

BG: *Have drugs ever been a part of your exploration of sound and experience of sound on the individual?*

PO: In the '60s I did experience taking peyote, and it had profound effect on my perception. The trip was about 12 hours. I was alone and prepared my room very ritualistically. I can remember playing the piano, and each note sounded indefinitely, it was a complete universe in and of itself, and it was timeless. I felt great the next morning.

BG: *In your theater pieces, what has been your relationship or intersection with members of Fluxus?*

PO: I knew about Fluxus, and in the early '60s I read in the *New York Times* a piece by Yoko Ono, where it tells you to feel the moon and keep on feeling until there is no more moon, and I consider it an influence on my more conceptual work. David Tudor introduced me to some of the pieces by Takehisa Kosugi. We had a Fluxus festival at UCSD, we performed a number of Fluxus pieces, and I remember Dick Higgins being perturbed that I didn't know the tradition of Fluxus. Fluxus thrives on the formality of tradition, sometimes done in a tuxedo on stage, using the frame of formality — Allison Knowles making a salad, and Nam June Paik breaking a violin.

BG: *Were there factors in your childhood, how you were brought up by your parents, your family life, that somehow cultivated and nurtured your ability to realize your personal voice in your artistic endeavors?*

PO: Yeah, straight from my mother. She was a pianist and very creative. In the '40s she was playing for a modern dance class, and these women were doing modern dance and improvising, and my mother played little pieces that she remembered. At home we engaged in a lot of play, playfulness, animals, and gestures. It was fun. It continues to this day — having a sense of humor.

BG: *We can nostalgically look back and theorize what it meant to be a radical composer in the '20s, '30s, '40s. It is always more difficult to view our current decade without our strong personal biases and tastes. What does it mean to be a radical composer in this decade? What is radical now?*

PO: What's coming in terms of hybridization of humans and computers will be channeling. Sooner than we think, people will ingest nanoboxes and have enhanced their brainpower in one way or another, and that will be quite radical.

BG: *Earl Brown said decades ago, "You cannot grow up in America and not have a connection to folk, jazz, or rock." Do you feel this to be true for yourself?*

PO: I feel connected to all music. Rock and roll didn't come until the '60s, but classical, rhythm and blues were always there. There's been an explosion in the diversity. It is possible now to hear something new everyday — technology and mobility, the removal of a particular style from its context, a Tuvan throat singer in Carnegie Hall. It's been going on for ages — "the ten thousand things" in China — but it's faster.

BG: *Fifty years from now, what do you think your greatest contribution to music will be recognized as being?*

PO: Deep Listening.

BG: *Do you feel part of a continuous lineage, and if so, who came before you? Who comes after you?*

PO: I feel a connection with a continuum. Attempting to tune into the universe, music and sound, at any given moment. But I don't want to name names. They would be men, and I don't want to continue that patriarchal influence. No, I have more allegiance to Ruth Crawford Seeger. Her experimental work was groundbreaking, as well as her work with American folk tradition. Take quiltmaking, a bonding, collaborative communal activity. Because it is activity by women, the art of quiltmaking is devalued.

BG: *It's considered craft rather than high art. And would you say artistic work by women, whether it's a genre that is considered "women" or not, is also devalued?*

PO: Absolutely. I try to open doors for women; I try to work to change it, in my own work, despite the boy thing.

BG: *Name three milestones in your artistic development.*

PO: One: Finding my mentor and teacher, Robert Erikson; I studied composition with him; so did Ramon Sender, Terry Riley, Loren Rush, and Paul Dresher. Two: Reading that Fluxus piece by Yoko Ono was another. Three: Reading the *Scum Manifesto,* by Valerie Solanas.

BG: *Name three milestones in your artistic career.*

PO: One: Winning the Pacifica Foundation Prize in 1960; Roger Sessions was the judge, and it was written about by [a] critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle.* Two: Teaching job at UCSD, 1967; lasted for 14 years. Three: Guggenheim fellowship in 1970 that gave me confidence and free time, validation from the establishment, and helped my career a lot.

BG: *What do you think of electronica and the similarity to what composers were doing in the '50s, '60s, or even '70s? Several generations later, in a popular mass music, often commercial, is it stealing the thunder? Is history fair?*

PO: It's a natural outcome of the world. The fact that it's all out there. In the '80s the idea of ownership became even more pronounced. Music doesn't really belong to anybody; it belongs to the world. That's what I think.

BG: *How did the feminist movement intersect or influence your work?*

PO: In the '70s the woman's movement began to emerge and confirm things that I had been doing and stating all my life, and then I began to feel supported in things.

BG: *In "Software for People," you refer to critics who dismiss women based on one piece, and say that men don't have to commit sexual suicide to support their sisters. That's an interesting phrase, sexual suicide. What do you mean, exactly?*

PO: That was an article that I wrote that got published in the *New York Times,* and I was complaining about the lack of women included in a catalog. It is sexual suicide for men to support women. As little boys, they are molded by things like Don't be a sissy, like a woman. If they do something like a girl, they are called sissies. Men boost each other up to be more masculine and not to be like women.

BG: *Where does the suicide part come in?*

PO: If men support a woman, which is against the paradigm, that is suicide for them; it's breaking their code.

BG: *It's a risk of losing their status, whatever status they perceive they have.*

PO: Yeah. They lose their credibility in the boys' club.