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GENERAL CATALOG

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO



Pauline Oliveros

Music

Sounds which defied traditional musical interpretation first came to Pauline Oliveros when she was a teenager in Houston, Texas. She says she began hearing musical sounds in her mind which excited her, but which did not conform to the constraints of conventional composition.

Oliveros followed her own creative instincts, and as a composer and performer she developed the techniques through which she could best express the music of her imagination.

Professor of music at UC San Diego and a member of the faculty since 1967, Oliveros today is recognized as a pioneer in the development of experimental music. She served as director of the University's Center for Music Experiment from January 1977, to September 1979, and during that time she helped establish the facility as a world-renowned performance and research center.

After working for years with electronic music, Oliveros now has turned to more basic forms of expression. The noted composer's latest works are sonic meditations, some of which are basically the release of long tones regulated by breathing cycles and the natural action of the vocal chords. Other meditations have a different kind of focus.

She is studying karate to learn about movement, body language and consciousness, and she is said to have an affinity for elephants because they are natural meditators.

"My house is surrounded by a lot of vegetation and lots of birds that make beautiful sounds," says Oliveros. "More and more I desire to be in natural environments, away from the sounds of technology. I like the rhythms of natural forces..."

Q: When did you begin to develop an interest in music?

A: During my teenage days I was very interested in country-western music because I was living in Houston, Texas. There were ice houses all around where you bought ice and cold drinks and so on, and very often in front of those ice houses there would be a little string band sitting and playing for pennies or whatever we would give them. Every

once in a while I would go down and sing with them, and my mother would come and take me home. She was the piano teacher in the neighborhood and she felt that this was not exactly the right thing for me to do. Nevertheless, a girl friend and I used to sing together all the time during my high school years. We learned all the old hillbilly songs around and sang them very loudly on the bus going to football games and generally had a very good time. At the same time I was always going to symphony concerts and learning to play my accordion, and also the French horn.

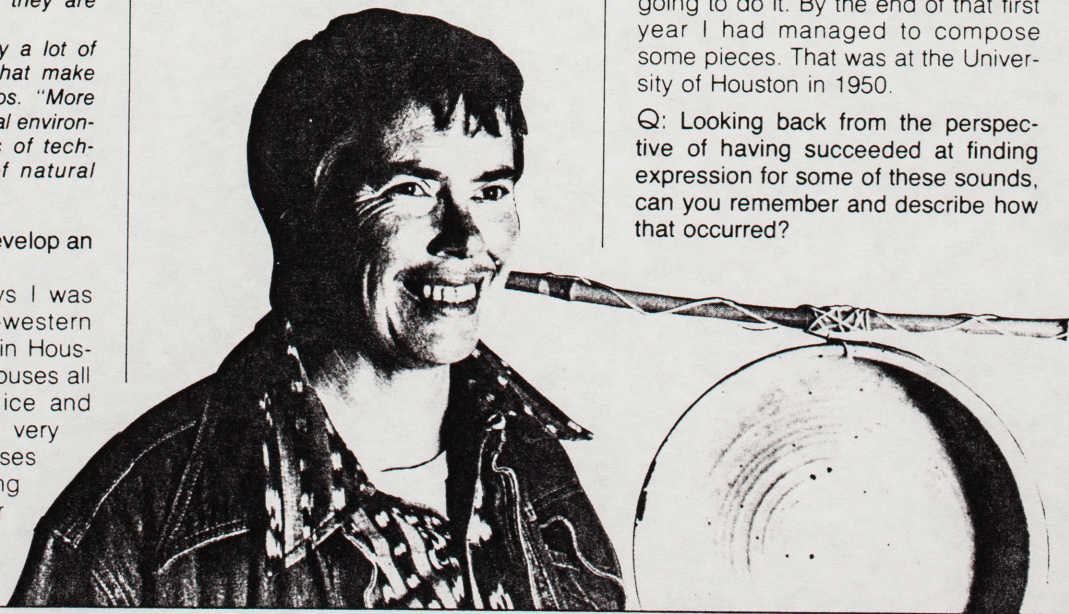
When I was about sixteen years old, my high school English teacher assigned creative projects to be completed in one semester. We were free to do any project that we dreamed up. It happened that we were reading some poetry by Tennyson — I don't remember which poem it was — and I heard sounds in my mind. I think that was the first time that I was aware of imaginary sounds being triggered in me. They came in an involuntary way. I got very excited and told my teacher that I wanted to

compose music for this poem, and that would be my project. However, I didn't do that because there was no way for me to do it. There was no way for me to make accessible in any written form what I was hearing.

Q: You couldn't play it on the piano?

A: No. The sounds that I was hearing were not ordinary. That was the beginning of a long struggle for a translation into reality of what my imagination was saying. There wasn't anything magic about it. It was simply the struggle of finding out how to do this. Musical training is aimed for the most part toward making performers and listeners, but not composers and instrument makers. So I had a long and frustrating time. I went to college and took traditional theory, which didn't help me a bit. I took a composition course which led to a long series of confrontations with the composition teacher. I would take the assignment and go home and struggle with it in my own way, looking for what I was hearing, and he would say, "Don't do that, you have to do this." He finally gave up and let me do what I was doing because I just simply had in mind what I wanted to do and I was going to do it. By the end of that first year I had managed to compose some pieces. That was at the University of Houston in 1950.

Q: Looking back from the perspective of having succeeded at finding expression for some of these sounds, can you remember and describe how that occurred?



"I don't think I hear in the way I heard when I was sixteen. That was a very open state. As you get older your experience weighs what may happen. I hear that way in my dreams."

A: I can relate it this way: I played solo instruments until I was in junior high school and then in junior high school I learned to play the tuba. I had to go off in a room by myself to learn how to play it. When the teacher thought I was ready, I came into the band. Sitting down with a group of fifty people playing instruments is a very extraordinary experience if you've never done it before — to sit in the middle of it and then to try to fit yourself in. The sonic impression that I had those first times was of a wall of sound. There were not many openings, so I didn't know that what I was hearing was differentiated until I began to fit myself in gradually. The sounds that I heard in my imagination were not exactly that either. They were heard more as an overall experience not as a succession of discrete events.

It wasn't until the sixties when I was working with electronic music that I came close to the things that I really was hearing in my early years. It was an interesting connection because it was the electronic sounds that I was beginning to get hold of and get out instrumentally. The attitudes and the goal were different than the music that I was familiar with at the time.

Q: What has been and what is now the experience of women in music, particularly in the U.S.?

A: A lot of the younger women aren't experiencing the blocks and difficulties of my generation. Some of the role casting is breaking down, although not entirely. It's going to take a long time, but there is an opening and more interest and encouragement. There are a lot of young women that are interested in composing and conducting. In the past, women were actively discouraged from those roles.

You can look into the nineteenth century at the case of Fanny Men-

delssohn, Felix Mendelssohn's sister, who was apparently as talented, if not more than Felix; she was told by her father that she wasn't to compose, and she actually gave some of her themes to her brother. I didn't encounter that; nobody tried to discourage me from composing. I ran into a few people who used omission, which is a very powerful kind of discouragement, but no teacher that I had ever told me that. There was only the French horn teacher, who thought I should be doing something else. I just quit taking lessons from him very quickly.

Q: How would you say that the concept of experimental music has changed during your career in composing?

A: In the 50s attention was centered around formalistic principles embodied in neoclassicism and serial technique. Serial technique was the attempt to organize every aspect of the composition through serial processes. Pieces almost composed themselves through logical systematic procedures. This came out of Schoenberg's twelve tone technique. Neoclassicists such as Stravinsky looked to the formalisms of the classic period. When I began composing in the 50s, my work resembled in sound some of the pointillistic serialized music of Webern but it wasn't serialized. I only wrote down what I heard. I would listen, and when I would get the next sound I would put it down. That was my note to note procedure. Then, as I advanced, I would be able to get a whole gesture down, but I didn't use a serial system. The next influence was John Cage, whose work seemed very much opposite of serial organization, but it was another kind of organization. People get nervous and say, "Isn't that just random organization," and I say, "Well, people are sort of chance

operations and you seem very organized." It's like two sides of a coin, in a way, a very complicated way of working. You could say that Cage represents yin and the serial technique represents yang. Those are two strong influences on the shape of music. The inclusion of electronic instruments made a tremendous impact through the 60s, so that today we have an elaboration of both with the aid of electronic means. There is also the reaction of leaving technology and going back to a very radical point. I do that with my sonic meditations, in which I often work without any instruments or any technology whatever.

Q: How has your approach to composing changed over the years?

A: Now it's more conceptual because the group work has been so deep. There is more of an instantaneous understanding of an activity and what the result will be. If I give an instruction like "color your breath with sound" I know what will happen. I certainly still hear things but I don't think I hear in the way I heard when I was sixteen. That was a very open state. As you get older your experience weighs what may happen. I hear that way in my dreams.

Q: Does everything that you do have a musical component in your mind?

A: Since 1972 I've been studying karate so now I'm a third level brown belt. It's not supposed to have anything to do with music, but it does. I've been studying karate for attention and consciousness, as a tool, rather than as self-defense. I wanted to learn a body language, and I wanted karate for the dynamic language that it is. I have translated things that I learned in karate and used them in meditation techniques and musical events. I guess it's almost impossible not to make those relationships.

