

Musical  
America

INTERVIEW WITH PAULINE OLIVEROS  
February 12, 1975

E: You mentioned in your (New York Times) article about a directory that was being put together -- a directory of women composers. Would that be a good source?

P: Yes, that would be a good source -- whatever it was that I said. I can't remember it at the moment.

E: I have it written down -- the address and so on.

P: ~~But there are other people who...~~ See, what you should realize also ~~is~~ that I am besieged with requests like this. Now.

E: You are! Oh!

P: So that ~~it's~~ <sup>THE SUBJECT IS FEEL LIKE</sup> beginning to ~~be~~ a dead horse with me in a way.

E: I see.

P: I mean that ~~should go into your consideration~~ <sup>IN WOMEN COMPOSERS ALREADY.</sup> that plenty of interest has been generated. ~~And there are two things. One is that the subject~~ <sup>KNOWING</sup> ~~people have heard it, and that as far as resistance from the male side of this business-- there are many many men now who are very sensitized to the situation and there are very sensitive men who are trying in various ways to work out solutions. There are always dyed-in-the-wool sexists everywhere, both men and women, where the attitudes are so cast that it's~~ <sup>NEARLY</sup> ~~impossible to break out of THEM.~~ So, you have to realize that both men and women are working toward solutions and both men and women are resistant.

E: Hmm, that's interesting. I was really curious about why in music-- I mean, almost every field I can think of women have broken through. The average person has heard of people and certainly in teaching and performing in music, of course, women have excelled. Why <sup>NOT</sup> in composing?

P: <sup>THESE ARE MANY EXCELLENT WOMEN COMPOSERS NOW AND MANY EMERGING.</sup> ~~because~~ <sup>WOMEN WERE EXCLUDED IN THE PAST</sup> because composing is telling others what to do. So is architecture, which is also a field which is very limited as far as female participation. This is true of any of the arts or professions which require that a person supervise in various ways or tell others what to do, because the traditional role is to be receptive, not ~~to~~ <sup>ACTIVE.</sup> ~~be delivering the goods.~~

E: Who would you say would be the main problem? Would it be the people playing the music or the publishers, or other people in the field? Is there one type of group that is most resistant or is it the females themselves that are ...



P: I'll say yes to everything.

NEW YORK TIMES

E: I noticed you mentioned specifically in your article about critics. It seemed like you made a direct attack against critics, or a little jab or whatever.

P: Well, they deserve a little something. After all, hardly anybody ever questions them.

E: Yes, that's true. I wonder. You wouldn't say any one group is most resistant?

P: No, I couldn't because I don't have that kind of statistic at my beck and call, but, I mean, all I have is my own experience. In my own experience, I find resistance sometimes in one area and ~~SOMETIMES~~ in another ~~time~~ <sup>AREA</sup>. ~~I mean~~ Conditions are always in flux. So I mean I wouldn't want to put the finger on anybody and say, but I'd always include myself and say the most resistance is within the person and not <sup>from</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>side</sup> ~~out~~. Let me modify and qualify that a little bit and say that conditions can create tremendous resistance for an individual's growth and development. You can compare it to a plant -- to a seed. You say every individual ~~has certain~~ has many different potentials or everyone does have potential. And I believe that that's true. I believe that capacities can be expanded and abilities can be developed and encouraged and they can flourish if they are given the right conditions. Now if you plant a seed and chances are all the conditions are right, very likely the seed's going to come up unless the seed is defective. On the other hand, nature provides lots of seeds because the conditions are precarious, and changeable and in constant flux. And I think that's true with people of course in their ability to develop -- and if you have conditions which constantly legislate against what a person's development might be, I would say the outside world is really not reinforcing the potential and then I would lay some blame there. For instance, if the gardner didn't water the seed or planted it in a place where it was not conducive to its growth, for instance, planting a seed in the side where there was never any sunlight, it might not work too well unless it was that kind of plant. So...

E: It's a complex problem.

P: Right, that's what I'm trying to convey. ~~It's not~~ -- you can't just categorize everything -- remove this and say this will happen. But, ~~by and large~~, from my own point of view, it's me that ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> the the problem, not <sup>out</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>SIDE</sup> ~~side~~ world. ~~there~~. Although I can find problems out there. I can project myself out there and tell the other guy he's the



one who's giving me the trouble. But it's me who has to cope and if I'm not coping with it, then I'm the problem.

E: Are things getting better? You mentioned that there's a lot of interest now in finding out who's doing what and this sort of thing. Is this going to help the situation?

P: What situation are you referring to?

E: Well, with more women's music being played and recorded and known about.

P: Well, I'll put it this way. There's more women's and men's music being played now than ever before in any time in history.

E: Especially American music.

P: Yes, and there's more orchestras, there's more everything, everywhere than ever before because you have to realize that the population has increased.

E: Sure. I guess more and more interest is being shown in what's going on in America today just in general.

P: That's right.

E: So this of course should help the situation.

P: So, that anyone who wants to develop in a certain direction certainly can but it takes a certain willingness on the part of the individual. Now, somehow it hit me in the head that I wanted to compose music when I was about 16 years old, and from that point on that's what I wanted to do and that's what I prepared myself to do. And I didn't know that women weren't supposed to compose or that there were problems that legislated against my becoming a composer. I didn't know that and there was no women's movement around to tell me that or to support me. So now at this point, okay, I have a certain amount of recognition and achievement and performance of my work and all of that, and now there is a women's movement and the women's movement tells me that I have a problem. Now what do I do about that? ~~Now see this is a personal individual.~~ So in other words I don't have a problem or else you wouldn't be sitting here talking to me. Right?

E: Well, I wouldn't have even known about you.

P: That's right. That's what I mean. That's my point. So actually we're talking about something else. I mean, I don't have the problem.



E: Right..

P: So we're talking about other people that have the problems. ~~but it's their problems and from all that I've said to you so far.~~

E: Are these women's movements going to help other people that haven't made the grade yet or haven't been recognized yet?

P: Well now you're asking me questions that I can not answer very reliably. I can only speculate. I can say that certainly there have been some very valuable and interesting efforts made by various kinds of women's groups and as you know, when you say a women's movement, you are speaking of a very complicated network of agreements and disagreements, and so that you have to be very specific about what you're talking about. You can't just say I have this big amorphous women's movement -- is that going to help? Yeah, it'll help and no, it won't help.

E: It's up to the individual..

P: In relation to that -- how the individual finds certain aspects of the women's movement nurturant, and encouraging and reinforcing, but you have to pick it. You have to pick the part of it that helps you..

E: How about in educating the musical audience or performers -- people who may be recipients of this music? What do you think the feminist movement interested in music per se would help in that situation?

P: Well, anytime you have a movement, that movement has to create its own recipients or audience. ~~I mean education is always important, and I've always, for myself, personally, started from a place where...~~ I always wanted to hear my music. I never wrote for anything that I couldn't guarantee myself a performance. That's been a basic principal or part of my philosophy and part of my education -- to write my music for my friends or for people who are sympathetic to my work so that I'd always hear it, because I needed the feedback. So, I never wrote for some organization that was remote from me unless I was asked which meant then I would hear it. Now, that's been very crucial and very important and at the same time, it builds an audience because you are working with people you know and you gradually include people you don't know and the circle expands -- keeps expanding -- but when you are writing for your friends, that's a sympathetic environment. And the same is true for a woman who wants to compose -- to find herself in a sympathetic environment is important, and that's where the women's groups of various kinds can be very helpful.



- E: That makes a lot of sense. I never thought of it that way. Is the situation in the United States any different or better in terms of the amount of music that's being played by women and the number of women composing today? Is it any different than in Europe? Of course, Europe's a big place -- let's say Western Europe.
- P: Let's narrow it down to Holland because I don't know. I don't know how to answer that. The generalization is so sweeping.
- E: I realize that, but I don't know how to limit it really.
- P: Well, let's limit it to Holland -- to Amsterdam. In Amsterdam there is a lot of activity. Feminism is a very strong movement in Holland, and in Amsterdam particularly. There is a lot of compositional activity and from what I hear (I have no evidence that this is true) but I've been told that there is a great deal of activity among women there in composition and performance and everything else.
- E: I was speaking with <sup>4</sup> <sup>composer</sup> (I can't think of his name) at San Diego State, and he said he thought you were more well known internationally - or in Europe - than in the United States. I was curious about his comment.
- P: Well, see that's ~~another~~ <sup>another</sup> one of those generalizations which ~~I don't approve of~~ <sup>UNDERSTAND.</sup>
- E: Right, but I was interested in the fact that that could possibly be true.
- P: I wonder how he got his evidence?
- E: I don't know. I really don't know. He teaches composition and I've never met him. I spoke with him on the phone. ~~He's~~ - I think he did some work out here and I was just curious by his comment -- not that he would have any evidence.
- P: I would too. I'd like to know how he could support that comment.
- E: It just made me wonder. Well, is it more difficult...
- P: If you see him again, would you tell him I'd like to know how he knows that, and if it's true, would he let me know? How would I know? I don't know. How does he know?
- E: Sure, I don't know how he could have made a statement like that specifically, but I was interested in the fact that he did make it.



P: Maybe he means that the people he talked to in Europe knew me more than the people he talked to here or something like that.

E: How can you measure something like that?

P: How can you then accept his statement?

E: I agree with you. I was just wondering what your feeling about that would be because it depends on whom you talk to of course.

P: Right. I think people are very careless with remarks like that. ~~You know~~, it's a very careless remark, and it's those kind of remarks and those kind of generalizations that put you in a box.

E: That's true. If you don't have any feeling definitely about it, then I don't know how he certainly could.

P: I don't know. ~~I've been there.~~ I've been to Europe twice and both times my music was performed and the circumstances meant a lot of publicity, and my music has been on tour in Europe many times with <sup>M&RCE</sup> Gunningham's Dance Company, with performers. Stuart Demster has played one of my pieces all over Europe, everywhere. ~~I don't know.~~ But it's happened here too. Gunningham Dance Company's all over the country and so is Stu Demster and so am I and so, you know, what... I don't know how...

E: I'm glad you clarified that anyway. It is a rather sweeping statement. Is there any difference in -- and again, this a generalization -- is there any aspect of composition which has been more accepted, as far as women are concerned, in terms of folk or popular or traditional, classical, or you're working in electronic music, or children's music? Is there any particular aspect of music where women have become more known or more accepted so far, or again is that just a hard statement to pin down?

P: Is there any area where women have become more well known?

E: Or more easily accepted?

P: As composers?

E: As composers, yes.

P: Well, ~~I mean~~, women universally have always sung lullabies. That's acceptable.

E: Have they been published?



P: Sure, certainly! There are <sup>MANY OF</sup> ~~all kinds of~~ those kinds of songs, published ~~all over the place.~~

E: Right. All these obscure women I was reading about in one particular book, and about practically everyone it said wrote lullabies and songs. I just wondered -- did they get beyond their own household?

P: No, I don't think so. I think that it's just one of those areas and that's it, because all women are considered to be potential mothers. The role is very strong -- strongly reinforced, and I have nothing against being a mother or others being mothers. I'm not one, and I don't intend to be one. And it's not true of men -- that all men are considered to be fathers - potential fathers. ~~because it's not true.~~ Because the son has a clear cut role -- the hero son -- the one that goes off and slays the dragon, but the daughter is always looking for a toad that will change into a prince, but the daughter is always a potential mother. ~~(inaudible)~~ <sup>HER POSSIBILITIES FOR SELF REALIZATION ARE LIMITED BY THIS ATTITUDE EVEN THOUGH SOME WOMEN CERTAINLY FIND FULFILLMENT IN THE ROLE OF MOTHERHOOD.</sup>

E: What's your feeling about what's going to happen in the future? (I have all these very specific questions for you). Again, you're widely recognized; you've been successful and this is, like you say, other-people's problems, but do you think if you were just growing up now, with your same motivation and so on, do you think you would have had an easier time?

P: I probably would have had an easier time in certain respects in that there's just more of everything, but then that might have been harder in another respect. The plant gains strength when it pushes through the earth, and it's then got it's head above the ground. Okay, then there are ways of helping the plant. The ground is softened by its consistency and by ~~the moisture of the ?~~ so it makes it easier for the fledgling to get through. But, if you support the plant's growth, like maybe tying a stick there to support it, it can be very healthy. Say you tied the plant with a stick, and it's supporting it at a time when it needs it, but then the plant grows faster than the gardner's perception. By the time you remove the stick, well then the plant is limited by its aid. So I would say that development of an individual and strength is very important, but the only way to develop that is through resistance so that I would hate to think that the women's movement's objective was to remove all resistance, because then it's not possible to grow and develop without resistance. It's sort of a natural law. You can find it in say electricity - in circuits. For instance, if you've got no resistance in a circiut, well then the power of that electricity is wasted.



E: As long as you're a strong enough individual so you won't get beaten down.

P: The attention should not necessarily be focused on the problems but it should be focused on developing individual strength and as I say, it's your problem, it's my problem not ... The person who goes to throw a brick through the window in a store front downtown doesn't have any problem. It's the people who own the store who have the problem.

E: Can you lead me to any other periodicals besides "Paid My Dues?"

E: "Women's Spirit" is one.

E: Is that a periodical?

P: Yes. You can write to ~~(gives address)~~ Box 263, Wolfcreek, Oregon 97477 There's a community of women who live there in Wolfcreek, and they have a lot of meetings and get together and ~~stuff, and~~ They're doing a lot of interesting things as far as rituals and all sorts of artistic activities, and they're publishing this magazine which has got lots of things in it. So I mean, you can't just focus on the music aspects. You have to focus on the thing as a whole and understand the dynamics of the feminists and the movement. I don't particularly think of ~~something as a phenomenon just such~~ as women's music, even though there may be women writing it. Women are writing music, but men and women are doing a lot of things which is not necessarily defined as ~~one or~~ MALE OR ~~the other~~. In fact, if you sat down to judge it, you wouldn't be able to tell.

FEMALE ACTIVITY

E: It's like saying, I'm doing a project on everybody with the last name beginning with "C".

P: There's a couple of people you could write to, and they're going to have been besieged with all sorts of ~~requests~~ so you might try to think of a way how it would be interesting in view of the fact that so many people have been ...

E: I wasn't aware of that.

P: ~~(Tamar Read's address.)~~ DR. TAMAR READ <sup>OF</sup> She's associate professor music AT THE UNIV. OF there at N. Dakota, and she's done a lot of research in various ways. You might ask her. ~~Judith Rosen's address.)~~ JENNIFER She's writing a book on the whole subject. She's probably got the best collection of "women's music" that exists, cause she's got ~~stuff~~ from the past as well as now. And she's really the person who has done extensive research. If you aren't aware of her research, then ...

CHAMPONIX IS

E: I'm not aware of what's going on. I've got to get out of the library.



P: Right, exactly. Oh there's a concert of music on Sunday - not here, it's in L. A. at Mount St Mary's - Sister Nancy Fierro. She's got a record out that you can get there -- a concert of her playing other women's ~~(songs)~~ <sup>MUSIC.</sup> ~~HERE~~ <sup>ORDER FROM</sup>  
 There's an ~~organization~~ <sup>ORGANIZATION</sup> in New York called Women's Music Network (address). 215 W. 92ND ST, #14, NEW YORK CITY, 10025

HOUSE OF STUDIES  
 11999 CHALON RD.  
 LOS ANGELES, CA 90049

E: How about the Association of University Composers? Would writing to them be of any help?

P: It might.

E: Are you a member?

P: No, I've never been very much of a joiner.

E: I just thought that other women composing would naturally be at universities - that would be a good avenue ...

P: The only reason that that would be so is that the university ~~is sort of the outfit for new music.~~ <sup>SERVES</sup> That function ~~which~~ <sup>used to be served by the church and the courts. WE HAVE SOME GOOD</sup> ~~(names of grad students who are composing)~~

GRADUATE WOMEN COMPOSERS: HEIDI VAN GUNDEN, DEBORAH KAUSCH, GRACE CHEN, SUSAN PALMER.

P: I do think you ~~really do~~ <sup>IN ORDER TO FIND ANSWERS TO YOUR FIRST QUESTIONS</sup> have to take the attitude that ~~there is a~~ <sup>THAT THERE IS A</sup> you have to treat it as a network. ~~in that you have to locate~~ <sup>find out</sup> key persons who are operating in the movement and who are knowledgeable about what's happening in various places, or else you just are duplicating efforts which really don't need duplicating, ~~and you want to try to get~~ <sup>try to get</sup> onto some aspect that's more needed. Now I've suggested maybe several times that something which is more necessary ~~than another~~ <sup>THAN ANOTHER</sup> is to try to find out what's happening right in your own community - what's happening in your own yard for one thing. You know like, for instance, what's happening to encourage growth your own community. ~~See~~ <sup>THE</sup> danger in the university always is to generalize before you have the specific information you need, because the generalization is something that you're supposed to learn how to do. It gets the cart before the horse. It's a good way to not know anything.

Directory  
 and development in

E: I can see from the questions I've asked you and the things that you've said that it's very easily done.  
 (thank you)

P: The other thing you might look into is what foundations are making any effort toward supporting the work of women at this particular time. A directory of that would be invaluable - and how to apply! In other words, a directory of resources for support of women's efforts in the arts -- in music, specifically.



ADDRESSES OF PEOPLE IN INTERVIEW

Page 8.

"Paid My Dues"  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

"Women's Spirit"  
Wolfcreek, Oregon

Tamar Read  
615 N. 38th Street  
Room 103 C  
Grant Parks, N. C. 58201

Judith Rosen  
16613 Oldham Place  
Encino, California 91316

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Sister Nancy Fierro  
11999 Chalon Road  
Los Angeles, Ca. 90049

Women's Music Network  
c/o Kay Gardner  
215 W. 92nd Street #1 H  
New York City, N. Y. 10025