

PAULINE OLIVEROS INTERVIEWS JOE CELLI

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PO: I was really interested in what you're saying about the group you're working with. I wonder what it is your interest in your work right now, what's holding your interest?

JC: Well, unfortunately the group experience is not a part of my work right now, and I'm sure that's a real lack, a personal lack, and I miss it. But it's so hard to find people to work with. The relationships seem to be of a much more casual and transitory nature in that two or three people put together a small tour and they go out for a short period of time. And maybe each of them individually does their work and there may be some corresponding relationships. That's what happened, for instance, in October when I was able to go out with David Beerman and Niblock, in that we really didn't spend a whole lot of time but we brought together maybe various facets of our work and and did programs together and then stopped right there. So that's one level of group activity. But I'm really lacking the kind of thing that I used to feel in playing with jazz musicians when I was in high school, in which there was a real sympatico kind of thing that existed between individuals. The only time I've really had that experience in recent years was working with this group 2 years ago who all happened to be students, in which I was hired to work with. They were not 5 or 8 or 10 professional people, in a sense, people who were already out there doing it. But maybe that's okay. Maybe the professional people all bring those kind of ego things to it.

I went recently and participated again after a two-year absence in "Sound out of Sound Spaces" with Phil Corner and Mel , and all of those people. And it was interesting to see how they've evolved over a two-year period of time, where that's basically a group of professional people, in contrast to what you and I were talking about where we were working with students. That's a radically

different kind of situation. But the students bring something different to it. That's an interesting thing to have to deal with.

PO: You're working as a composer-performer these days. What is your main interest, say, in that area.

JC: That's been a really hard transition. How it eventually evolved is that more and more the pieces that I was working on, I was responsible for such a high degree of the realization aspect of it and what I was receiving were, in a sense, structural limitations. In a sense, an existing clothesline that I hung my laundry on. This was particularly true of pieces like some of the Stockhausen pieces that I was doing in '73 and '74, in which there was a structural kind of thing that in a sense gave you certain amount of leeway in which to work but a very, very high degree of the work was my own work in the realization end of it. I started to become really disenchanted with those structures. I found some of them very artificial in some of the pieces that I was getting. Even though a high degree of it was mine, I never felt that the realization could come to real fruition because there were structural limitations being placed on it, within which I had to work because, in fact, conceptually they belonged to another person. So the number of pieces that I'm getting from other people has declined radically in the last two years. And the number of pieces of my own has increased radically. I've always--in the last 2 years it has been very difficult to, you can very matter-of-factly say you're working as a composer-performer, and yet I've been extremely apprehensive about utilizing the word composer, because in fact as a sound organizer, I've never had any of the kind of background that all of the people that I respect as composers--I mean I've never really studied composition with anyone. And the most helpful thing that happens now is being able talk to people like Malcolm Goldstein that I feel very close to, and to be able to get back feedback on those kinds of works. So, that's been a very difficult transition

for me. But I'm beginning to organize pieces that interest me that deal with my trying not to manipulate sound, but trying to have the sound/^{evolve which--}in a way that seems very natural for the forces that I'm using. The forces might be, for instance, the antique cymbal piece. In that particular piece what's happening is that I could have played the antique cymbals in such a way--well, first of all I was very enchanted with the sound and still very basically very ear-oriented. The timbres and the qualities of those instruments were so remarkable to me, was the thing that was almost sensual to me to be experiencing the sound. I found myself continually just playing with them. From there I had the options of deciding if I would like to utilize the antique cymbals in a highly controllable situation. You notice that when I was playing them they were suspended on cords which allowed them to swing fairly freely. I could have held them on a different way as you would traditionally hold larger cymbals, which would have allowed me to articulate the sound as precisely as I could as a performer. The decisions that I made was to allow them to swing freely. The generation of that sound, then, changes according to the weight and the swinging of the instruments. Because then I had to make the decision if I would like to suspend them in some kind of a way, which would now bring in any of my human element and kinds of things that I can't really control. For instance, holding the cymbals in that kind of way for long periods of time. There are certain human that end up happening: my hands shake, my body moves a little bit, all of those kinds of things. And as perfectly as I try to hold the cymbals, things end up happening, and they begin articulating each other. And their articulation of each other, depending upon the swinging pattern, the beat patterns change, so that if in fact they are swinging directly towards each other, the beating pattern is different than if they are both swinging in a circular motion, for instance. The time lapse of the beats changes, the amount of beating changes, and so forth and so on. And my imperfections in a

sense, in not being a permanent music stand that I could attach them to, the relationship of height also comes into it in that sometimes they articulate each other perfectly on the rim, so that you get the perfect overtone structure of it. But sometimes they articulate slightly above the rim, and then you get those very, very minor but certainly very distinctive timbral differences in the cymbals. Then also the force of the articulation, of course, brings out various kinds of overtones, and some of them sustain longer or shorter, depending on the articulation point.

PO: How has your attitude then towards performance changed, when you say of course less manipulation, direct manipulation of sounds now. But/^{do}you seem to have an attitude about performance that's developed more recently?

JC: There is in a sense two facets of it. One of it is when you are performing other people's works, and that's a different situation, because if you accept the work and you're going to do the work you have to allow yourself to go with the rules and conditions and guidelines and concepts that are presented you you. So I've become a little bit more selective in accepting works,, things that I feel that within frameworks and guidelines that I can function without in a sense constantly having this struggle going on internally that I don't believe in something being a particular one. So that's one whole element of activity. For instance, Alvin Lucier is doing a piece for me now. I feel after last year creating a show of his and going through a very extensive body of his work fairly intimately with him. I feel that if he designed a piece for me that I can function within that framework, and that I can be true to it in a sense.

With my own personal kind of work, performance has had an affect in that I don't any longer try to think of myself as just Joe, the oboe player. But in a sense I try to think of myself maybe as more of an intermedia performance person who can do many different kinds of things. And as I actually look back

over the--historically that was true anyways, I was doing pieces of a high theater content, Ben Johnston Costa piece, for instance. Now I try to present pieces on the program, performance-wise, that I just happen to be interested in at that particular time. I mean, all the pieces that I brought out here, I could have brought a full program of oboe pieces, but there were works that, if I was home practising now they would be works that I would be playing and that still interest me and enchant me. Most of them happen to deal basically with sound-generative processes that are not highly controlled and that go with the sound. For instance in the solo improvisation that I'm doing, what's happening in those kind of situations is that there are a lot of factors that are not highly controllable in playing an instrument like the English horn. For instance, saliva gets in your reed, your reed starts closing after periods of time, your chops depending upon where you happen to be that particular day, how much time you've played it, etc., etc., etc., are always variable. Your breath control is highly variable. You can continue to work it to any level of sophistication, but it still has variability as a part of it. In other words, my reeds can constantly be improving as my tools, but they have still a much higher degree of variability than, for instance, a synthesizer would have with amount of AC current that you're getting out of a plug, etc., etc. So consequently, when new information comes out because of that--for instance, I may be playing a harmonic cluster, a multiphonic of some kind, and I might be repeating that over a long period of time. But because of maybe the reed slightly closing and my embouchure getting slightly tighter and an increase in air pressure, I might start getting a unique overtone out of that cluster. That becomes new information that I try to utilize within the performance. One of the most difficult personal kind of things is constantly trying to fight what I know would be making selections along the way, instead of trying to see what's

coming out of the one by just repeating it over a long period time, and having those variables influence what's happening. Does that...?

PO: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me.

JC: It's a very hard thing, because you know playing for audience that if you get to that high note right at the right time, you know that it's a very dramatic gesture. And it's very hard to avoid all those kinds of things, to just play something over a long period of time and to be so tuned in to what's happening on that horn, that when new information starts coming out of it, you know. I think that the performance, for instance, after I had gotten to a particular high tone, something cracked, something broke and I went to a lower pitch, which I then used in the piece, and I just kept repeating that lower pitch, just diminishing the amount of breath over a period of time.

PO: Going with the material.

JC: But it's hard. Because when you're there on the moment, you can start making choices. And how do you get to an improvisational situation in which you don't consciously set up making choices, but you just flow with what the sound is doing.

PO: Well, there's always some choice. You have the instrument, which is a choice, and you yourself, and your ambience, and so on. I have a meditation which I do which is similar in that I'll sing and play and I wait until every decision has been decided mentally, all of the things that I hear that I would like to do. And so it's come to a complete resting point, and then the material seems to change on its own, so that there's a kind of involuntary change. But it's a similar idea.

JC: Over that period of time is there long degrees of stasis and very little changes?

PO: The fact is that the sound is dynamic and is changing all the time. It's learning which I think to tune into those changes, /that's what you're saying as well.

How about your emotional states when you're working? Are you aware of those?

JC: One of the most difficult things, I think, in our society, in the kind of life that we try to lead is trying to somehow tune ourselves so that we go through the ability to integrate our lives with our work. And one of the very things that happens in our society is this tremendous kind of separation between what people do as their work activity, because that's what they do to make money, and then their living life. Do you know what I mean? And one of the big things that I've been trying to do is to try to integrate my life; and that's a very common thing for many people. But really also through the whole playing thing and performing thing and through our activity. That's very different, because some of them are so absolutely incongruent in that there's such a small market, in a sense, for performing and doing work and presenting your work. There's that constant demand to society to have money to go through the exchange process, to be able to live your life and so forth.

On an emotional level there's a serious attempt to try to be constantly closer in contact with what an emotional state is and to be true to that and not to be, in a sense, ashamed of it. As a male within our society, the sublimation of emotions is a prerequisite to succeeding. In any kind of a business situation or corporate situation or any of those kinds of things where males basically are employed. So there are all of those years of backlog which you try to overcome and which you shouldn't begin with those on a day-to-day basis. That's a thing that I'm aware of; I am conscious of it and I am aware of it. I do exercises to try to be in tune with it; that's part of my work and my practice and preparation for things. I don't know how successful it is (laugh). It's a hard question, because it's hard to make qualitative judgments in that way, to say that in that particular day whatever the anxiety level may have been at that particular moment of the concert that you were completely in tune with, because there were so many other considerations. I feel that I'm closer to it now than I've ever been before, but I don't feel that--

it's a thing that I sort of have to, that all of us have to work on all the time. Do you think so?

PO: Yeah, I think so. How long have you been aware of this; when did you become aware of this attitude?

JC: Again, between '73 and '75 things really started really changing in that I was constantly gearing myself for to being like a "great oboe performer". And then the realization in doing these pieces that technically I've^{gotten} to a certain proficiency to be able to play most of the kinds of things I was interested in playing at that time. And yet I realize there's something really lacking. It was almost like being a show-off in a sense. And there's a big difference, I think, between the kind of instrumentalists that many of the American musicians are becoming in contrast to the European concept of the so-called virtuoso. And I think it's a great virtuosic skill to be able to blend in with four speakers so that you become the fifth speaker in a sense. And that it doesn't take any kind of the gymnastics that we used to see with fast tonguing and all of the fingerings and all of those kinds of things that I still see with many of the European new music virtuosi. It takes a different kind of sensibility, I think, and if you have to talk about it in terms of virtuosity, it takes a virtuosity to be able to blend in well with a speaker and to project the same kind of ambience and presence, etc., etc., etc. And tuning the space, to achieve the sound that you are trying to achieve.

So anyways, between '73 and '75 I started to become aware that I was playing a lot of music that wasn't doing anything for me in the spiritual sense. It was music that was allowing me to become technically more proficient and to play more pieces and to play them faster than I had ever played them before, and all that kind of stuff. And things started changing.

PO: Do you have a kind of philosophical position that you are aware of?

JC: There is a personal philosophy that has to do with my work and then there is the philosophy that has a lot to do with my work in relationship to my work at Real Art Ways, for instance. The work at Real Art Ways has a lot to do with that, in a sense if it's a public performance space that our responsibility is to present all of the existing avenues of new music activity and to present them as professionally as they possibly can be presented, even though aesthetically I might not advocate or be willing to cross the street to hear a particular being done. That in fact that's not my choice; that the choice has to be made that someone along the way has said this person's work is important and that it is vital, and that it should be heard, and therefore the responsibility of the space is that the work should be presented as well we possibly can present it. And then it becomes the responsibility of the audience and the composer to work out any of these kinds of problems that evolve with acceptance or the aesthetic and so forth. That, I think, tends to be not true of a lot of places. A lot of places have, for instance, a very definite aesthetic that they promote. There are places, for instance, that will only present new jazz music, improvisational music and black music. We have attempted to integrate all of that as being part of the total sonic experience. It is important for people to become acquainted with--myself personally. I'm working continually with trying to find out what generates sound and what sound is being generated. Both the bag piece and the antique cymbal piece are things that deal with sound. What are the premises for generating sound? Why is that sound being generated? And is it being done in an artificial kind of way or is it being done in a fairly organic kind of way. For instance, the bag piece, in the bag, deals with what I find is a great disenchantment between music and dance. In music and dance the thing that I see happening most often except in the Cage-Cunningham situation is that there is an artificial juxtaposition of two things

that are highly unrelated. What happens is that a choreographer comes along and takes a piece of existing music and says, oh, I'll put a choreography to that music, and there is a long period of time in which they try to choreograph the music, they try to beat out the patterns, they try to figure out, etc., etc., etc. Cage and Cunningham have decided that in no way are the two things related, that they just exist, they co-exist in a period of time. And the bag has to do with I think is a more--for myself personally--a more intimate kind of relationship. Instead of a juxtaposition, instead of a patchwork, try to glue two things together, it deals with a movement person being the sound generator. And the sound generation implying a very direct next movement. In fact, the movement person is encapsulated in such a way so that they cannot move without generating a sound. And it has to do with how in tune that person then becomes to the sounds that he or she is producing that will order them to then react to that sound. So it's a cyclic kind of thing; every movement precipitates a sound, every sound--yeah. In that symbiotic relationship it is impossible for the dancer to artificially contrive a situation, in that they cannot move without precipitating a sound. In the initial period of time in which there is a great period of silence, if that procedure, that process is already taking place, it just does not happen to be projected to an audience. In other words, the initial sound that the dancer usually hears in that bag is the sound of her breath or his breath against the bag. And that's the initial sound they begin reacting to. It's impossible to be in the bag without hearing your breath. So that becomes the initial action that you respond to. And it only has to do with how in tune, in fact, that movement person is with the sounds that they're creating. I mean, you can say, well they can do something of an extremely artificial nature; that's true. So it becomes a performance problem; it doesn't become a compositional problem. So I don't know if that has to do with philosophy

or not. But it has--I mean, where the hell are the sounds coming from, and why are we doing it? What contrives it? My original with that bag piece was that it was going to be an airtight bag, which would necessitate a person beginning to movement in order to get out of it. It's a very difficult bag to get out of. And then I thought that that would be--I thought that I wouldn't want to have to control the person in that kind of way, that in fact there is enough of an air supply in there so that the person in fact can take quite a leisurely time in beginning to respond to the sounds and measuring the way they're going to respond to it. So I don't know if that has to do with the philosophy.

PO: How do you produce the creative event or process which you work with?

JC: It seems to--that can be an individual thing, for instance, like creating a piece. But it also can be considered as an ongoing thing in creating an event in which the piece exists. And that seems to be ongoing in that you write letters to people and you talk to people with the hopes that they will create, in a sense, a container within which you can bring hopefully this integrated life style within which we can exist for a period of time. Usually an hour and a half to two hours. That is an ongoing process of greeting people and talking to people and having them become interested in your work for whatever reasons. That's also a very difficult kind of thing because in a sense there are some people who are interested just because it deals with sound, and there are other people who become interested and usually not in places like this because it sells tickets. And those are radically different kinds of things. You have to then put yourself in contrast to your situation where you receive support from a university. There are a number of people who are not involved in that kind of situation. And that makes a radically different kind of level of activity, and is a thing that--maybe you could redirect that question.

PO: It had to do with creativity in your own work. How do you come to that, how do you make it happen, or what do you consider to be--you've talked about it in an earlier question and how you were relating to the material, new information. New information which comes out is usually a creative aspect, how things combine in new ways--this creativity.

JC: I was thinking the other day when I was driving someplace about how absolutely naive we still are concerning sound, and how on a level--in a lifetime or really, I mean I've heard so many thousands and thousands of hours of various kinds of musics and sound, and how I still have this incredible fascination with this pair of antique cymbals that produce what most people would consider a remarkably luminant array of sound. I think the initial impetus has to do with just a kind of fascination with something, because in putting pieces together which is a fairly new experience for myself, again shying away from composing--you said the work composing--but in putting pieces together for myself it basically has to do with my becoming fascinated with a particular sound experience. It always seems to be ear-oriented, so that for instance with the snare drum piece that had a lot to do with just--my son plays drums--playing drums with him, beginning to realize that the snare drum had a whole element about it which people didn't seem to be very interested in. I hadn't heard any work and was kind of fascinated, it had to do with the ringing and the overtone structure of the snare drum, and how in fact that by playing on various parts of the drum the skin would start resonating without articulating on it. And we always think, we tend to think of the snare as an articulating instrument. So by negating the articulations to such a repetitious pattern that they completely lose their interest, the timbral aspects, the overtone aspects became sort of like the phasing technique that was used in it. At first I was really very guilty

about trying to do something with phasing nature, and yet that's part of our common language. It's like/^{what}if you knew some French and you were able to say something in French, wouldn't something that you were writing that really captured the essence of what you were trying to do, you would use that. And phasing has become part of our common language without having to be the originator of it. I don't know a lot of people who are doing phasing dealing with timbral aspects. And that drum piece at one level deals with timbral phasing. On another level it deals with sympathetic vibration and overtone structure and sustaining levels of drums that we tend not to be very concerned about either. That skin was in particularly bad shape because we had been playing the shit out of it. But I'm in the process now of trying to get another drum with different skins on it and also trying to think of the skin as being the diaphragm of a microphone system. I have tried to mike the drum in various kinds of ways so that the sustaining element of it, the continual humming that takes place, would be a little bit more prominent in relationship to the long articulation. Because the piece can be done with 2 to 4 players. It just has various levels of complexity depending upon the number of players. When there are 4 really good percussion players playing it instead of myself, it has a much more sophisticated nature of phasing taking place. But also it is a piece in which if you needed to, you could write the whole piece out. Yet I enjoy doing it on the level that I don't think it should be written out, that in fact the difference between that and some of the more articulated kinds of stuff like Phil Glass's music or Steve Reich's music, is that they are so very specific about exactly what's taking place over periods of time. I think that if a piece is then perfectly performed I would lose the interest in it in that perfect performance of it, that in fact the snare drum piece is very different every time it's performed. It's those subtle differences that kind of

make it interesting, that you'd want to hear it maybe lots of different times just to see how much you can do with it. So that piece exists then, just as I said, of instructions with some examples, a limited number of examples. But it had to again with the fascination that, well how does thing sustain, and gee, it's got some interesting kind of overtone capabilities too, and that you don't always have to be playing on the skin to get those overtones, there's quite a remarkable amount of timbral coloration by playing the various parts of the rim and rim shots, etc. Please continue with simplistic ideas.

PO: Let me ask you this. Are you aware of your own attention processes as distinguished from the content of the work when you are working?

JC: When I'm working in a performance situation I am

(Side 2) ...of activity is that I never really think of myself as not playing, not having the horn in hands or not producing some sound in some kind of way. And that in fact the most comfortable situation for me is when I'm at home working, in my studio working for long periods of time/ ^{just} continually playing, and then in the evening time just to do a concert. It seems very natural. Do you know what I mean? It's a continual extension. I can remember going and seeing John Coltrain, and I used to see lots and lots of times and hear him. And I always had this feeling when he would walk into a club to start playing that in fact his horn had really only been sitting in his case, it may have been sitting in his case for many, many hours, but that in fact he was just coming from one place where he had been playing all the time and creating his music, and that in fact he was just, he had just physically moved himself to another place to be doing the same level of activity. And somehow he would pick up the horn out of the case and it was almost as if a thought that had been running through from wherever he had been previously that

he had somehow picked up that thought once again, and he was now continuing to work on that particular level, that in fact it was not going back to starting a piece and then creating that whole piece again, but that when the improvisation started there was always this continual level of starting extremely high. It's almost as if he had been working all day at that level and was just resuming that level in a different physical entity. And that was always remarkable to me, in / ^{comparing} to hearing other people creating sound, it was like they had to work up to a situation. / ^{And yet} that situation seemed to always exist for him every time I heard him. There was hardly a time that I didn't feel that, that he when he was in a cab he was probably doing the same thing, and that when he was home he was probably doing the same thing, and it was just a continual thing that he was always doing. And that was always a great inspiration.

PO: So how did you become aware of your own processes?

JC: I attempt to do that. It's physically very hard to do that because we have things again that block that kind of stuff. I mean working in an office is very hard to do that, and yet at a place like Real Art Ways where I have my own studio it's very difficult to do that because phones ring and people interrupt and that kind of stuff happen. So what I've attempted to do in that situation is that there are people who work there who are also trying to do similar kinds of stuff. And there's the level of people who are not trying to produce art but who work there because they are secretaries or they may be something else. And it's been trying to maybe expand that circle, to realize that that is a thing that's ongoing with all of us, that they're part of that also, and it's more difficult for them because their level of activity is not something that they--they live a life that is more separated in a sense. It's not an inherent integration. They do it because it is a job. We come

in contact with people like that all the time, I mean when you're on an airplane. People do that not because they love being a steward or a stewardess but because in fact it's a job. They may enjoy that job more than another job. Do you know what I mean? But they're not going to leave that job and take it with them and try to integrate that into a total cycle of activity. And yet you may be there trying to integrate it into a total cycle of activity so that that constant pressure from outside is a very difficult kind of thing.

JC: When did you become aware of your own process? I mean, at what time in your career or were you always aware of it, say before you met or listened to John Coltrain.

PO: Well, I think that maybe it's an evolving kind of thing. You know, when you say when did you become aware of your process, that my process now is different than it was a year ago. And that it was different. So I would think that, if in fact that wasn't the case, that it would tend to be less interesting. That in fact if I had all of a sudden come upon the instant karma of what my process was, at such and such a date, and had remained with that, that in fact it wouldn't be as interesting as to say, gee, the way that I'm proceeding with my activity is little different than it was 6 months ago or a year ago. And that you bring a lot of that stuff along and as it goes along some of it drops out, becoming less important to you, and that some of it becomes more important to you and might be a strand that's being developed simultaneously with several other kinds of strands. So, I mean along the whole way all of this baggage that you collect, some of it you discard and some of it you take. But the greatest influences in that way have been people like John Coltrain or Nick Coleman.

PO: Are you able to carry this process over into other parts of your life, or are there other activities that emphasize the kind of process that you're talking

about?

JC: To a very limited degree and only at the most intimate levels on a one to one kind of person thing with maybe the most intimate degree being the 2 or 3 people in a family, and then the 2 or 3 people who are as close to being a part of the family as it's possible to be. And then there are other layers beyond that, I think. But successfully to a very limited degree. And again I think it has a lot to do--it's so hard for me to find myself removed a society at large because I'm constantly dealing with it in trying to be able to do my work. Again, I don't have in a sense a university situation that I can say is my container, and there are certain amounts of things that I have to deal with there, like the bureaucracy that's being above you or whatever it is. For instance, a high degree of my work deals with Real Art Ways and, yes, I try to carry it over in all of the work that I do with Real Art Ways. But then there are whole other structures that I have to deal with that make Real Art Ways exist. It might be political structures in a community, it might be educational things that are linking into it. So, yes, I try to but the degree of success, I think, is highly limited just by the necessity of the society that we exist in. You probably can be more successful at doing that here, in that you can begin evolving. Well, I guess/at Real Art Ways that happens to a degree in that as this evolves here that probably happens to a certain degree, and you would probably always want that to continue to be one of the things that you would strive to do. And yet you probably have things outside of you that you have to deal with that don't allow that to happen. There are political structures and economic structures that control this or have a very large impact upon what you have to deal with and that are not interested philosophically in that concept at all. So that there's this continual readjustment. And yet to be true to yourself you try to bring as

much of that with you as you believe in bringing with you. We find the common threads to interface with, and giving up as few of the threads that we are most interested in.

(end of interview)