

An interview with UCSD's avant-garde
composer Pauline Oliveros

All Sounds Are Music

“. . . It is the capacity to appreciate
and integrate into her music all the sounds of life
which sets Oliveros apart and gives
her work its universality . . .”

by Zenia Cleigh

This is the second of a series on members of the UCSD faculty, who, although relatively unknown in San Diego, possess national reputations as authoritative and talented proponents of the avant-garde. Composer Pauline Oliveros is considered one of the leaders in the field of modern experimental music, still somewhat controversial, but very much admired for her powerful musical "ceremonies," which have broken through to new levels of interaction possible between audience and musicians, explored the roots of sound itself and stretched the definition of what music is to the mysterious realm of altered perception.

The Introduction

Pauline Oliveros, distinguished modern composer on the UCSD faculty, had expressed a wish to conduct the interview outside, and so, dressed in blue jeans, an ivy-league shirt and a black rose-printed vest, she was sitting in the sun on a little grassy hill near the university's Mandeville Center.

Composer of at least 100 avant-garde works of music designed to change the way people listen, it was not surprising to observe Pauline appreciating the musical potential of a little red lawnmower which blasted unbecomingly into sound nearby. "It's making a

ceremony for us," she said, as the operator began to weave circles with the machine around an adjacent grassy knoll.

It is this capacity to appreciate and integrate into her music the sounds of life which both sets Oliveros apart from other composers, and gives her work its universality. She belongs to that genre of neo-shamans who strike such a persistent chord in the contemporary avant-garde, artists who are not content to stay within established limits of their craft—letting the work simply be what it is—but instead insist on using their creations as magnets for drawing people into processes of personal growth.

Oliveros is a mistress of the secular ceremony, in which visual, theatrical and musical elements all take equal weight, and long, slow, meditative feelings in sound predominate. Leave your desire to be passively entertained behind when you attend an Oliveros concert. (She is giving a performance of "Sonic Meditations," July 6 at 7:30 pm at The Michael Stamm Gallery in Hillcrest.) Her aim is not necessarily to delight, but to involve you. Forget about themes, expositions, recapitulations and other western musical concepts. A stereotype breaker, Oliveros' goal is to present new sound which could both alter your attention process and instruct you.

Pauline is a bit like a tribal magician, calling the various elements of life together for a ceremonial restructuring. She reminds one of an Indian wise woman, walking softly on the earth with a reverence for all things.

The first thing one notices about Oliveros is her beautiful low voice, full of music, and her sense of composure. She listens carefully, watches attentively, speaks thoughtfully, moves fluidly. Her awareness seems vastly open to all people and her mind will register the faintest whistle from a passing student, or calm itself to absorb noise from a passing jet. ("Don't try to block out jet noise. It just makes you tense.")

When the seven avant-garde contributors to the New York-based New Wilderness Foundation Printed Editions catalog were asked to submit a photo strip taken in a dime store machine for the publication, Oliveros, tellingly, was the only one who presented the same face in all four frames. "I try to present myself directly," she says. "I'm not trying to express a passing mood, but whatever I am—trying to let that come through. I don't see any reason to manipulate myself for the machine or anything else. The glasses I'm wearing I've had for 14 years. I just had my eyes checked and I'm getting new reading and distance glasses and I'm going to use the same frames. Also, if I see a piece

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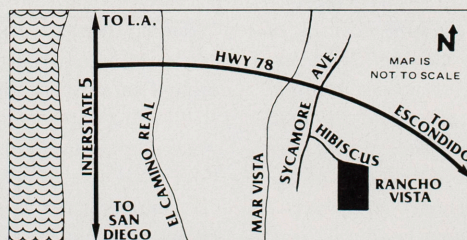
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Rancho Vista Estates

Balboa Stadium: Love Among the Ruins

"...Everyone who was anyone from Woodrow Wilson to Lance Alworth paraded through or played in the city's first big-time stadium..."

by Ralph Trembley

MEMORIES: The home teams that packed the place were not college or professional. The traditionally powerful elevens of San Diego High — the Cavemen — drew sell-out crowds of 30,000 to their big Saturday afternoon games against Long Beach Poly and, later, Hoover High. On Sundays, the San Diego Marine team, tough as barnacles, went up against the top service teams in the United States and battled evenly with some of the college biggies of the Pacific Coast. The high school stars — Russ Saunders, Cotton Warburton, Amby Schindler, Charlie Powell, Bill McColl, went on to become All Americans at USC and Stanford when those schools traded places going to the Rose Bowl every year. In the '30s, the awesome roar of motorcycle races filled the canyons and streets leading to Golden Hill, South Park and downtown. The stadium was the only game in town, the city coliseum where the *really* important events happened. You went to it on the streetcar, walking the long hill up 17th from Broadway after taking the No. 2 car. Or you walked through the honest old stones of the Gray Castle, San Diego High, after getting off No. 7 or 11 from North Park and East San Diego and climbing the hilltop from 12th and Park.

At its opening in 1915, San Diego Stadium (later called Balboa Stadium) was described as one of the finest in the nation, the first true stadium on the Pacific Coast. This huge cement oval pile with its stately entrance of Grecian colonades was built in a small natural canyon behind San Diego

High. Its official capacity was 23,262 (allocating 17 inches per person) but it could be expanded for the big events up to 35,000 and, later in its life, accommodated up to 43,500.

But in 1915, there were more bicycles parked outside its peristyles than automobiles. The front page headlines in the *Union* proclaiming the dedication on May 31 were bannered above accounts of trouble between the United States and Kaiser's Germany.

That age of innocence was short lived. The War That Didn't Save Democracy was followed by Woodrow Wilson's historic visit before what was then most of the city's population on September 19, 1919, when he vainly pleaded the cause of membership in the League of Nations six days before being felled by a paralytic stroke. That crowd was estimated at 50,000 — because bleachers were set up on the stadium floor. Even at the height of the late 1920s boom, when Charles Lindbergh was wildly cheered there, on his triumphal return to San Diego after his historic flight to Paris, Balboa Stadium was chastized for operating in the red, and by mid-Depression 1934 the Board of Education and City Council were in combat over control of a facility located on land ostensibly granted to the school district in 1881 but for which no deed has ever been discovered.

The stadium survived World War II, but there was clamor over lack of police protection in 1945 and the need for new restrooms, food concession stands, press box and dressing room was a *cause célèbre* until money was appropriated in 1948.



Some time after this, the glorious 1915 commemoration of the Panama-Pacific Exposition that is to be demolished starting next month was the subject of the following exchange between Leo B. Calland, then Park and Recreation director, and his boss, City Manager Fred Rhodes:

Calland: "We really need some seats on those cement steps. Every time you sit down someone has his foot in your back. Damn that engineer who built it."

Rhodes: "I was the engineer."

Calland survived this, the battles over weeknight motorcycle, hot rod, stock car and



MORGAN SHANNON

“...I’m not interested in that type of music which aims to entertain the aristocracy. I’m interested in music which sets processes in motion for spiritual connections between people...”

of clothing I like, I’ll usually buy three of the same thing. You could say I’m rather conservative.”

Oliveros fasts every Monday for health; sometimes only has juice for lunch. She is vice-president and treasurer of the Institute for the Study of Awareness in Solana Beach, and has done research with the organization’s president, Dr. Lester Ingber, for seven years on the process of attention. She also has won a brown belt in Shotokan-style karate and just failed the test for the black. She does karate and yoga for 45 minutes every morning, and was instrumental in bringing the Gyalwa Karmapa, head of the Kagyüpa lineage of Tibetan Buddhist teachers, to UCSD in March 1977, an indication of her

interest in world cultures and expanded forms of awareness.

Born in Houston, Texas, on May 30, 1932, Oliveros knew she wanted to be a composer at the age of 16 when she “started hearing things.” She studied at the University of Houston, later graduated from San Francisco State in 1957, and became director of the Mills College Tape Center in Oakland. Oliveros moved to UCSD 12 years ago where she now heads the Center for Music Experiment, and has impressed her peers with the ability to continue to innovate and grow.

She is the internationally recognized recipient of numerous awards and commissions and at least three times a quarter leaves

UCSD where she is a full professor to perform or lecture in major American cities. She calls herself a “fool” professor since she only has an A.B. in music, and stopped work on a master’s degree when it interfered with her composition.

Oliveros was granted a Guggenheim Fellowship for composition in 1973-74 among other honors, and took first prize for “Stadtmusik” in the city of Bonn’s 1977 Beethoven Festival for her piece entitled “Bonn Fire.” The work was updated from a composition called “Link” she originally composed in 1971 for Palomar College, and fit neatly into the competition guidelines: use of outdoor spaces in the city, use of various

continued on page 222

one of them turned out to be me. I just happened to be there at the time of that particular performance, but I never knew where anything was going to take place."

"Bonn Fire" also involved such activities as selling fake mustaches to women only and giving them away for free if the women would don the disguises on the spot. Senior citizens were placed in store windows painting pictures ("The Germans, you know, that drives them crazy to see something at all different"), and one group of musicians rehearsed a piece and gave a silent concert, which looked as though they were playing, although no music emerged.

"The point," Oliveros said, "was to alter perception. Usually you go about your business in the city, but there are always very strange and interesting things happening all around you. We try to pick up on them on the obvious level, sometimes on the subliminal level, and I was trying to play on that."

All of this demonstrates Oliveros' main theme: "Listen to everything all the time. Look at everything all the time. Be aware of as much as possible, and educate others to that possibility."

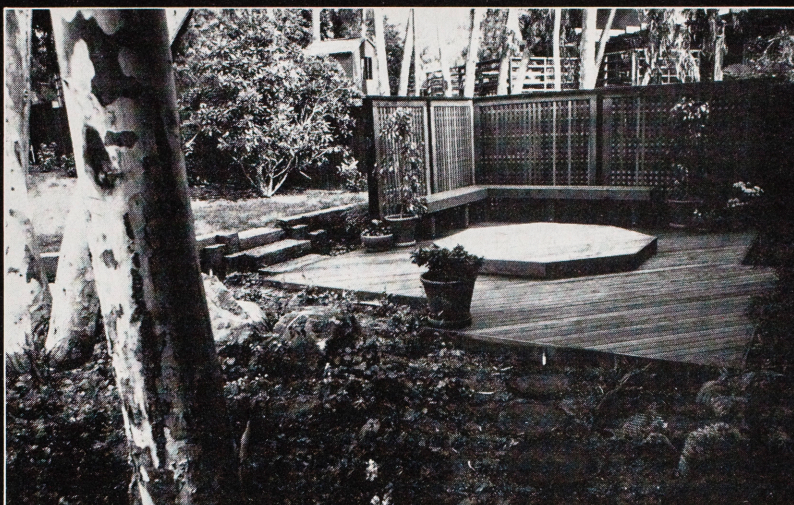
Oliveros' latest work, "El Relicario de los Animales," performed in May at UCSD, contained other examples of her penchant for blurring roles, disorienting audiences, breaking stereotypes, using natural sounds, and still managing to come up with passionately alive, sometimes very harmonious music with a deep element of human interaction which eludes the over-cerebralization of many avant-garde musical contemporaries.

In this work the musicians, seated in a mandala formation, entered one by one and began playing interpretations of a tiger's noises the minute they sat down. A violin shrieked into a jagged cry, a flute took up the call and a trumpet responded in turn as did the other instruments—clarinet, saxophone, cello, trombone, percussion, bass—while soprano Carol Plantamura turned slowly on a heap of red dirt in the center of the musicians and sang the word earth in four different languages. The French word "terre" was for the tiger evocation; the German "erde" for the owl; the Cherokee word "ehlohi" for the wolf; and the Spanish "tierra" for the parrot. At one point in the jungle of calls the percussionists calmly began to rustle large palm fronds which lay beside their seats when the performance began. The effect was compelling and outrageous.

Confronted with the apparent absurdity of using a palm frond as a musical instrument, Oliveros just laughs. After all, a palm tree shakes its fronds outside her Leucadia house all day. Everything *is* music after all. And she has been known to say: "You've always got to have a few people around rocking the boat."

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The Interview

San Diego Magazine: Among your better known works locally are the 36 "Sonic Meditations." What do you mean by meditations?

Oliveros: I began work with long, slow feelings in sounds and about 1970 I started calling it "Sonic Meditations." At the time I was not connected with formal meditation. I just meant "to stay with something." Eventually I became aware there were other forms of meditation as the gurus began to arrive in the West. My work has no conscious relationship to these other than that they were occurring, but I try to stay in meditation as much as possible. For me that means to stay in touch with what I'm hearing, both in my imagination and with the data that's coming in. To just be aware of as much as possible. I don't say I succeed, but that's my intention.

In 1958, a significant event occurred which changed my perception and I've been doing a meditation ever since. I put a microphone in my window and recorded the environment and played it back. What I discovered was that I wasn't really listening to what the recorder was. So I said to myself, "Listen to everything all the time." And I've been trying to do that ever since.

SDM: How did the meditations come to you?

Oliveros: The Sonic Meditations came from

an inner need. If you think about the '60s for a while, the Vietnam War was on, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, the students were in the activist mood. A student here had burned himself to death in Revelle Plaza in protest. I felt a need to do work to help me cope with this atmosphere—a refuge. Also, I found it began to give me insight into human relationships, communicating. Not performing to be on display or be admired, which is a narrow form of communication, but to make sounds so you connect with someone else and share the energy.

SDM: Critic Thomas Putnam of the Buffalo Courier-Express has said that you are a "great leveler in an age of musical specialization" and a "musical spiritualist." Another writer, Craig Palmer, in an article for Coast FM and Fine Arts called you "a people's composer, not a king's." What do all these epithets mean?

Oliveros: I'm not interested in that type of music which aims to entertain the aristocracy. I'm interested in music which sets processes in motion for spiritual connections between people, interactions.

Just look at a conventional concert hall today with the people in tuxedos, long gowns, the whole atmosphere carried forth from the times of Mozart and Haydn. There is that attitude of an elite performance taking place. I'm not comfortable in that atmo-

sphere. You can tell that by looking at me, it's not my world. They don't play anything new, for one thing. Some people enjoy it, I'm sure. I don't want my view to sound like there's another kind of elitism going on. I want people to come as they are to my performances. I want it to be comfortable. I want it to be an atmosphere of communication where people are turned towards each other and not an object. But I want to say this: I don't see my music as a replacement for other music. I see my music as part of the picture.

SDM: What do you mean, "spiritual connections between people?"

Oliveros: Awareness of others, and respect.

SDM: What is music, and what should it do?

Oliveros: You can get a technical definition: Music is organized sound in relation to organized attention. Philosophically, I think music should tune the soul, not merely entertain. And I might add that in the tuning process it might fail as an object of admiration which is a risk I'm willing to take.

SDM: What do you mean by "tune the soul?"

Oliveros: The Sufis claim that the soul is music, that the only way the gods could get the soul into the body was to play music and lure it in that way. I don't want to say things that sound stupid, but traditionally music has been used as a bridge between human beings and the supernatural, the gods or whatever. It

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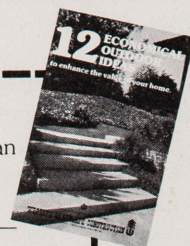
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Oliveros

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musical performing groups, street painting, theatrical action, and electronic equipment.

“Actually, I was making a giant collage using prefabricated materials like barbershop quartets,” Oliveros said, “or an ordinary musical, dance or dramatic group of any kind. But what I was doing was shifting them out of context so they were performing in places that were unusual and unexpected. I was interested in a casual audience, a chance audience, an audience that just happened to be there, so there was always a process of discovery, so people just happened to be there and saw something and noticed it was unusual.

“In ‘Link’ at Palomar I had a barbershop quartet show up in the men’s room, sing and then leave. In ‘Bonn Fire,’ dance groups began their performances seated at one of the outdoor cafes in the city, all sitting at different tables as ordinary customers. They ordered a coffee or whatever and performed their movements very consciously and slowly, raising their cups to their lips and taking two minutes to do it, then making a conscious transition to slow dance, getting up from the table so that slowly the cafe was transformed into a dance drama. This was designed to happen to ordinary people, and

seems natural that if it is possible to tune the soul to spiritual vibrations, then music is the way to do it.

SDM: Spiritual vibrations?

Oliveros: I think everything is living and vibrating, and we can't perceive it all. Our five senses are too limited and it wouldn't necessarily be desirable. But one can develop a flexibility with different awarenesses, useful for both daily functioning and spiritual receptivity. I don't like the idea of hierarchy, implying that there is something better. It's just that there's more.

Historically, one of the sources for this idea comes from Boethius, a Roman theorist who lived in the Justinian Empire between 490-524 A.D. In Ruth Halle Rowen's book, *Music Through Sources and Documents*, Boethius discusses three kinds of music: the music of the spheres (the sound heavenly bodies make in their orbits), human music (uniting the soul with the rational parts of the person), and music which comes from instruments. The first two types of music involve vibrations which can't be sensed with the human ear. They are above or below the range of hearing.

SDM: So your music wants to sharpen people's awareness to a level of spiritual receptivity?

Oliveros: It wants to. I don't want to make any claims.

SDM: The Hindu scriptures talk about God

as being perceivable as the universal sound "Om," an all pervasive energy field, and they chant "Om" and other mantras to raise their level of consciousness to where they can have an experience of God. You seem to be much more interested in the vibratory experience, shall we say, than in any dogmatization of what God is.

Oliveros: I want to create something that can be experienced and then you walk away without becoming a devotee.

SDM: What is God to you?

Oliveros: All of them. The primary spirit, the source from which all things come. I don't want anything to sound as though I'm some kind of high priest who has a truth that other people don't have. That's against my philosophy.

SDM: You use ritualistic forms in your compositions, which make me feel I have just been through some kind of special ceremony. Could you discuss your use of ritual?

Oliveros: There are a lot of definitions of ritual. In my case it has to do with state of mind and state of attention. Ritual means there is symbolic action. Ritual is to involve people, but also to carry symbolic messages, not just as sound itself. For example, a mandala is the symbol of integration. It has that meaning universally. So when I seat performers that way—the simplest form being in a circle, but there are variations—they are making that statement for integration.

SDM: Integration of what?

Oliveros: The mandala represents the symbolic side of human thought, a side that has been neglected and suppressed, and I'm trying to bring it back into balance with our linear thought processes, not to overcome, but to balance, because we want our full human potential.

SDM: So this use of ceremony is a reaction to the modern world which lacks communal events in which people can participate together meaningfully?

Oliveros: Going to work or going out to eat can be a ceremony, but part of the problem of our society is the non-consciousness of actions, the possession of conflicting interests.

(At this instant, a black crow flies up to a perch on the top of Mandeville Center.)

Oliveros: There goes my crow. There are two who live on top of Muir College. It's one of my totems. The crow is a lively, intelligent creature—the only one who has managed to live with man and not be destroyed. It likes shiny objects and I'm always finding pennies, dimes and nickels, even in the streets of New York City. The crow is kind of a herald. I see it at interesting times.

SDM: The cultural historian William Irwin Thompson has written about the bankruptcy of modern art as a reflection of what he calls the Age of Chaos. Thompson predicts that this will decay into what he calls the "new



music of the Age of Gods," which is "not a horizontal progression of harmonies, but a vertical space of timbre" where sound becomes "a mandala, a hieroglyph." He also says: "Most artists do not like this talk of gods for they have grown up on a fashionable cynicism which makes their own egos the most important part of the universe." Your music emphasizes meditative states, connecting themes, unity of experience. Would you say your work represents this "Age of Gods?"

Oliveros: I'm trying to enter into a collaboration with people. In the meditations, the instruments are simple, but the process is not. It's as difficult as playing a virtuoso piece, but yet it has a simplicity, an immediacy, so you can begin. But also what it does is to make music accessible to people who thought it wasn't. The Age of Chaos Thompson talks about is concerned with selling a product, which may be the music or the personality. The other is more concerned with the process. My attitude towards consumerism is that we're living in a house of cards. The results are beginning to come in. The energy crisis, gas shortage, nuclear plant incident, people injured in industrial accidents, all in the name of consumerism and greed. We live with a certain kind of convenience but we pay very dearly for it in terms of life and health and peacefulness. My music is poor people's music. All it re-

quires in many cases is just the people—nothing more—the desire on the part of the people to share something together.

SDM: Your work is representative of what they call the "interdisciplinary" approach to art which is so popular here and in New York, the merging of forms in one work. Isn't it uncomfortable to step outside of your field of expertise, to risk failure?

Oliveros: I give myself that permission. I have to have it. I include visual elements in my work, but I haven't been trained as an artist. I include physical movements, and I haven't been trained as a dancer. But I take that chance. When you do something outside your discipline it is criticized as being naive, but then it turns out to be not so naive after all. Boundaries are crossed and re-crossed. The point is simply to overcome the fear of being an amateur—to give up expertise in order to get experience.

SDM: Two hundred years after Mozart's death, he is still a favorite at most symphonies. Will it be another 200 years until people are listening *en masse* to your work?

Oliveros: It takes time to build understanding of music. I dare say if you were an Australian aborigine who had practiced music since you were a child and you were confronted with a Mozart symphony, you would find it chaotic and vice versa. Music operates at deep levels. If you have learned to listen to Mozart it means you have had experience

which makes it understandable to you. A lot of it is not organized attention on a conscious level, but it is familiar to you and predictable. So, suddenly you hear a new piece in an idiom that's removed from that style and you don't have the connections in your psyche for it, and you have to open yourself to a new state. How do you do it? You just have to let it be and let yourself be so you can eventually use your analytical powers to figure out what's going on.

I really think the most important part of my work is to influence listening. In my own life, every time I compose a piece, it has to change me. My new piece, "*El Relicario de los Animales*," is based on calling. Somehow I'm beginning to hear the calls of animals in a new way. It's sharpened my awareness.

SDM: Chance plays an important part in your work doesn't it?

Oliveros: That's the most natural part of life. That's where we all come from. There are 300-500 million sperm released to meet each egg, and only 300-400 eggs are released in a woman's fertile period out of the 400,000 the ovaries contain, and I resulted from that. I have a question: Those sperm who were swimming towards the egg that was me—were they in competition or were they collaborating?

SDM: Who do you admire?

Oliveros: Them. (She gestures towards the

passing students.) I was just watching the people go by as you were saying that.

The Performance

It is the evening of March 6, 1975. Pauline Oliveros is giving a performance of her new work, "Crow Two," composed for the opening of Mandeville Center at UCSD. The audience files into the hall filled with simulated moonlight.

In the center of the performing area sits a 70-year-old white-haired poetess, and at four points of the compass forming a human mandala, four other women face her, two with white hair, two with black. These are the Crow Mothers. Revolving around the Crow Poetess are the Mirror Meditators, two people who face each other and mirror each other's movements, but must allow whatever movement occurs to be involuntary. This idea of totally spontaneous action is central to the musical form.

The most powerful force are the seven drummers who must each perform basic single stroke rolls with alternating hands. This is not a difficult technique, but what makes it interesting is that the drummer must first imagine the roll, the rate, the quality of sound and its intensity and then—as Oliveros describes it, wait until his body performs it. "The drummer initiates the action mentally, not physically," she says, "and the point is to keep the mental and the physical matching

each other. Each drummer is independent, so it makes a beautiful texture of beats which wax and wane according to biological rhythms."

On the outside of the circle are four players of the *didjeridoo*, an Australian eucalyptus branch buzz lip drone instrument. Finally, up in the ceiling of Mandeville Center on the catwalks are seven flute players entrusted with "telepathic improvisation." "The performers have to mentally hear a pitch and when they hear it, they have to make a decision," Oliveros explains. "The decision is: 'Am I sending or am I receiving?' If the answer is receiving, they play the tone, and if the answer is sending, they wait to see if they hear the note coming from another performer, meaning that somebody got the message and is playing it back.

"The audience is invited to participate in this by trying to influence the flute players. They can imagine a pitch to see if the flute players will play it—or start it or stop it. This is a private activity, so nobody knows whether people in the audience are really communicating with the flute players or not, but it's possible." Oliveros goes on: "Now, meditators are very often subjected to some kind of a test to see if they can really concentrate. In this piece, there are three clowns whose task is to attack the meditator-musicians in the mandala. There's only one rule. The clowns can't threaten anybody

physically, but they can approach people in any way to break their attention like by dropping boards, screaming, and one of them speaks in tongues. There's an element of risk, so that the whole piece can fall apart. This gives the work a tension which is resolved eventually. The clowns are attracted away by the crow calls and leave the meditator-musicians in peace, or pieces, as the case may be."

Drums. The music begins. Pounding primitive rhythms circle and build, the pitches of the flutes grow higher and higher, and beneath the incessant circling is a powerful drone. There is the sense of mystery, like being lost on the prairie on a black night and stumbling into an Indian enclave where a ceremony is in progress, capable of something utterly unspeakable, and whether it is good or bad, you do not know.

A terrifying scream fills the hall, chilling, destroying all complacency. Sticks seem to break, stones clap ominously, objects drop, everywhere there is clapping, stomping, incessant rhythms, laughs, cries. It is like being born or dying and impossible to say which. A shaman voice enters to explain it all, but the words he utters are indecipherable and in a strange language, so only the mystery remains. Then gradually, mercifully, it all falls away, like the ending of a dream. A profound stillness. And then, thunderous applause. #