

PAULINE OLIVEROS INTERVIEWS ELLIOT SCHWARTZ

JANUARY 15, 1979

PO: This is Elliot Schwartz.

ES: Hello.

PO: January 15, 1979.

ES: Four days before my birthday.

PO: Oh, you're having a birthday. Happy birthday!

ES: Thank you (laugh).

PO: One of things I'd like to--I know you're interested in music for amateurs and I know you're interested in other things as well. What is holding your interest in your work right now, drawing your interest; what are you interested in?

ES: At this moment? Less and less, maybe I'll start out with the negative things. Less and less with the highpowered studio technology, synthesizers and tape decks, and so on, and I guess more and more with very simple resources, I guess, so-called primitive things. Just people's enthusiasm, their voices, their hands, their bodies. And in some way having that perhaps interact with traditional Western acoustic instruments. I'd say over that last few years I've gotten very interested in the notion of striking contrasts of performing bodies, that kind of I guess a concertatum style. And a lot of the more or less traditional kinds of concert pieces I've been writing over the last few years are concertos. There's been a piano concerto, clarinet concerto, bass concerto, and so on. I've been thinking of a sort of series of small concertos.

But also perhaps using amateur performers, you know just using enthusiastic people in my audience in a kind of concerto-like way, too. And that is, I guess an interest that toes back to a pretty early piece of 1970, the "Music for Audience and Soloist" which involves somebody who is a performer and <sup>the</sup>audience subdivided into four groups. But that was a kind of thing that I tried to continue

with some other more recent pieces, the "California Games" that you know and something else for piano soloist and a bunch of 10 people playing music boxes and metronomes and things, who again are called out of the audience. But to have that kind of confrontation between two sorts of groups of performers, perhaps more than two, is interesting to me I guess on a dramatic level as well as what you might think of as strictly musical--I'm not sure what strictly musical means anyway (laugh). But whatever it is, then there's also this other.

PO: Has this interest that's drawing you now brought about a change in your attitude toward your work?

ES: I suppose in a way only to the degree that I've spent the last 10 or 15 years-- it's odd that you ask that because I've never thought of this way until you asked it, but I've spent most of my teaching life at least always being frustrated because I was writing pieces for very good, well-trained traditional slick professional musicians who had the Julliard degree, and I was always teaching in institutions where there wasn't anybody who could play like that within a hundred miles, and consequently never really got many good performances of my own music at my own home bases. I was always traveling around the world to hear somebody play my music right. Increasingly over the last few years I have found that I can in fact realize what I do at a small institution like <sup>Woods</sup>Boden, you know, and get people there in fact working with me so that my two halves, I guess, of my professional life don't necessarily have to take place in two different parts of the world. I can integrate them in a way that I never really did before. So that kind of change has taken place.

PO: Have you had a consistent attitude, do you think, towards your work? I mean, I've asked you about change; now I'm asking you have you had a consistent

ES: When does my work begin, I guess, to be my work, I mean when did it begin. There's obviously student kind of works and student ambitions and student

?

fantasies and all that which go back 20 years, I guess. What I'm doing now is that's the most consistent level that I had imagined I would be doing that, I'm just trying to determine at what point this arc at consistency should begin. Certainly going back to the early '60's I've always been more interested in-- these are all such arbitrary differentials, I guess--"serious music" as opposed to popular music. But I suppose when I first began composing I always defined that, I guess, as concert hall. That's changed certainly; I don't think that all serious music gets played in Carnegie Hall as I guess I must have in the late '50's. I've always assumed that a composer's work was partly intuitive and partly systematized. That is, if you were trained to do certain things and that constituted part of what you did, that there was another part which nobody could ever train you for. That hasn't changed; I've always been very suspicious of all-encompassing, sweeping systems, whether they be twelve tone or computerized or whatever, and equally things which were entirely intuitive. I guess I've not changed my feelings about that; I tend to strike a very kind of middle, central approach to both of those. So that hasn't changed. I think basically I have different ideas about the nature of performance, which has become a kind of really obsession with again I think is also something would characterize my strongest interest, to go back to your earlier question. It's not only just the nature of concertato things but the whole business of performance. But my ideas about performance are certainly much different than what they must have been when I was a student, because I now think of performance in all sorts of ways, spaces and people and electronic speakers and all kinds of things which I'm sure did not occur to me then.

PO: How about your philosophical position? Do you have one, is it conscious or public, private?

ES: I suppose I should ask about what subject, that is

PO: On your work

ES: My own work as opposed to other people's or opposed to music at large?

PO: Yes.

ES: I don't know whether I take a philosophical position. If I do I'm not aware of having, that is I don't compose from a position. But I'll take a position first and then compose. I've enjoyed looking back on my work from a position of an analyst or theorist or musicologist or whatever, and seeing all kinds of marvelous relationships which I didn't know were there, which I has guess has colored my opinion about the whole business of relationships and whether they are intuitive or not. How much can you believe the writings of anybody about any other composer? That is, as far as intent is concerned, because I have seen a lot of things in my own work which were not intentional, but when you find them there they're just wonderful, I'm sure. Scholars look, dazzled by these things, hundreds of years from now.

But even then I'm really investigating materials, relationships from a very traditional Western kind of orientation. I don't think I've ever taken any kind of a position about the work other than a general acceptance of the fact that I'm engaged in a profession that is an anacronism, I suppose, in the twentieth century. That there always are a few foolhardy souls who require music for some purpose or other and who ask me to write some. I'm trying to do my job; it's immensely practical in that sense. I don't write any music unless somebody asks me to; I don't if that in itself constitutes a position. I don't find a great

PO: Sounds like a good stimulus.

ES: I don't write from an urge to express myself, that very romantic yearning to put something on paper, I could just as easily not put it on paper if nobody

wanted it. But there are always people who want it; that means that everything has always been wanted, I guess, when you bring it into the world, there's somebody that loves it or at least who requested it. And everything's always been played, in fact, with one or two exceptions. And I look back and I do recall the dozen pieces that I wrote for my own pleasure that nobody wanted, and then I wonder why. I guess you'd have done those pieces, but I suppose I would work very differently if, yeah, let me sort of stop at that point, that's a sentence that wasn't going to go anywhere (laugh).

PO: Okay, well, let me ask you another question. You mentioned frustration earlier in relation to performances of works, the way you got into the work that you're doing now, so that emotional state was there operating in your work. Are you aware of other emotional states or changes in emotional state in relation to your work?

ES: Again, I have to beg that I don't think I understand the question. I'll have to ask it again.

PO: Say just in the act of composing, are you aware of your emotional state?

ES: Okay, because that's not necessarily what I was saying before. The frustration before had nothing to <sup>do with the</sup> actual work, it was the fact that I'm job, to think that I get all my money for a month or whatever, had very little to with that work. My emotional state in composing is always very happy, really quite elated and excited, and a kind of a perpetual high, really, just very thrilled to be doing it and to see it coming along and to discover whatever the relationships are that seem to emerge as the thing is done. Basically, for me composing is not the articulation of some ground plan that's been worked out in advance, filling in of details of details that have been precomposed. It's actually kind of improvising on a page with paper and pencil, so that I'm as surprised as anybody else with whatever it is that happens on measure 73 on page 6, or something.

That's the kind of thing that excites me, and this is why I feel so happy as I go along and as I see it beginning to take shape. That's always a very pleasant feeling. Also the fact that it is going to be played by somebody, and then I usually seem to concoct some visual fantasies in my mind of the performers, even though I may not have met them, and what I think they will look like and what this kind of hypothetical hall will look like. It either in my mind looks like a very formal kind of middle-style Carnegie Hall or it looks like a high school gymnasium; it's either one or the other of those kinds. That's for me a kind of stimulus, I attempt to compose visually; this again has to do with the obsession with performance. I see the performance taking place and I'm trying to control it from my vantage point in the future or the past so that the performance that is going to come about at some point is actually happening a little before. It's a kind of pre-cognition thing.

Other than that I don't think I tend to feel emotionally whatever the music, and I don't think that's you meant.

PO: How do you produce the creative process or creative event in yourself? How do you get yourself to do this?

ES: I think it's always there, I just need the time. Having the need to write the piece that I know is due, that is, having a deadline in front of me and knowing that there is a performance in the offing is just enough <sup>of a</sup> stimulus to get me to make the time, to set aside enough time from whatever else there is that I'm doing. Other than that the kinds of stimuli that move me are dramatic situations or theatrical ones, the natural timbres themselves, that is, if I know that a piece is going to be performed in a particular kind of space, either a particular sort of room or an outdoor situation or whatever it is, or if I know that a piece has been requested for 5 bassoons or some kind of particular timbre, I'm excited enough and my imagination gets working enough to just start

thinking about things. But actual pitches and durations themselves are really important, the things that I tend to use because I guess I'm still enough of a traditionalist to use them, but they're not really the exciting part of my work. They're just a means of articulating these other things. I tend to work much more with instruments than with voices. This may be a philosophical position to go back to earlier. But I just think it tends to reflect my own self-image I guess of my strengths and weaknesses as a composer. Also a general kind of bias; I've always tended to feel, and I guess it was partly because I grew up as a pianist and <sup>even</sup> played a little chamber music and standard solo keyboard, and had very little experience with anything that might be considered vocal, whether opera arts or pop music or any of that. I've always grown up with a very strong feeling of music without words

and I suppose part of that is intended just to color my own work just the few times I've tried setting words I've always found that the results weren't anything I was hoping for. So that much of my music, I'd say more than 99% of it, is --abstract is a terrible word, because I don't think it is abstract-- but it's nonverbal, or at least noncontextual. The drama is something else.

PO: What are the major skills that you're concerned with in your work, to do your work?

ES: To do my work? What I think I need or what I suppose what I assume my students need, what I always tell them they need?

PO: What you need.

ES: Oh, peace and quiet, some way of recording my ideas, keeping track of them, which either means putting them on tape, making a tape piece, or just having access to pencil and paper and some notational scheme, either one of my own devising or a more or less traditional, but just something to keep track of what I'm doing. So that I have a record of whatever it is that's taking place

as it takes place. I tend to compose music which will sound basically the same in many performances of it, and so with a lot of the details of the time frame, and so these details, I try to keep track of them. I would assume that a prerequisite for me or for anybody else is a very good memory. Of all the music I've ever heard that interested me because I assume all of us in some way or another really is plagiarism, from the great universe of music that we know. And just some sort of musical total recall helps, just to be able to pull, snatch ideas, things which have been sitting and percolating perhaps for decades, and come out in some kind of shape. But there is no resemblance to whatever it was I heard, but it still good to have had them up there. I think for the kind of work that I do, a good ear--I don't know, again, what that means--for my own practical self that means the ability to hear internally various kinds of relationships between pitches, between durations. Again, I work with standard sort of, with the simple-minded divisions of the octave into 12 and basic kinds, I guess, of rhythmic and durational subdivisions which also include <sup>things</sup> being super-imposed so that the net result tends to very complex but still the actual components are very simple. I find that it's essential in my work that I can hear those all internally and that I understand what kinds of notation on paper gets other people to reproduce what I hear. That I find is crucial; I assume that the business of notation is essential not only for my work but for everybody's work, that there has to be somewhere that a composer makes clear to some other second party what it is necessary to produce the sound on. And that can really encompass anything from the traditional noteheads to symbolist instructions in some language or other that there has to be something that specifies what you want and what you don't want and what you really want to have. And I guess I'm including all of that under the general notion of good ear, that is some way of relating symbols to sounds internally from either direction, a sense of the way

the way time passes, how to use duration for dramatic purposes for ritual ones, for symbolic ones, or whatever, a very keen sense of time. I don't think I've ever met a composer who wasn't amazingly aware of time, even in           like organizing your own schedules; just knowing how much time it takes to get from here to the corner drugstore and back; just intuitively handling time in ways that other people that are very competent in other respects, visual artists or sculptors, don't seem to have.

PO: A question that I'm very interested in this problem, are you aware of your own attention faculties as distinguished from the content of your work as you work?

ES: Attention. If you mean how I'm aware of myself working.

PO: Yes, in a way, and how you

ES: I don't think I'm aware of it while I'm doing it. When I'm engaged in the work I'm living in this kind of fantasy world, with this hypothetical performance taking place in the high school gymnasium a year from now or whatever it is, and I'm just hearing that work and seeing those fantasy people, and I don't think I'm really even aware of where I am. When I become aware of it, it is usually because something has interrupted me, that is, some distraction or sound or noise or whatever. I work best if I'm actually at the point of what will take place in detail, then I work best in a situation of complete silence. I very rarely use a piano or a musical instrument; it's just me and the paper and the pencil, but I just have to be very quiet. When I'm in the overall planning stage I can do that in an airport lobby or anyplace, even in a hotel. I tend to use a lot of the same materials again and again for various pieces, tiny snatches of material, simple type    dimensions or tunes or, not because I've run out of ideas but simply because I enjoy playing a <sup>kind of</sup> private game with

myself, almost keeping a kind of running dialogue going that extends from piece to piece and a way of communicating, I suppose, with the me or whoever it was that wrote the last piece six months ago. So that there's a part of me that I like to believe is never changing. Sometimes I'm still writing the same chord progression and still have the same chord in me. On that kind of level I'm very much aware of what I'm doing because I'm aware of the fact that I was doing it the last time.

PO: This process that you just described, does that channel into any other part of your life, your other things.

ES: You mean lucky charms or something, or... skipping every other step. Because that's what it really is, it's kind of the equivalent of that. No, I think the only area that I engage in that is composing. If you meant something deeper than that, I suppose I'm a creature of habit in some ways. I can't think of anything similar to that situation that I consciously have taken or some kind unit I have to measure and have placed it from one place to the next. So that's very different each time, that's what I mean I suppose.

PO: Transformation?

ES: Yeah. Almost

PO: Is there anything else that, thinking over what you've said, I'll ask a last question. Are you doing what you say you're doing?

ES: Oh yeah, sure (laughter). I suppose so. I enjoy what I'm doing and it's good fun. I think more and more as time goes on I think again, I can't say I'm sure it is, but I would like to think and I think I've been able to convince myself

that I'm tending more and more to reconcile all of these various and different aspects of what I'm doing, that is writing about things like having to play the piano and composing different kinds of there always <sup>been</sup> a crazy kind of eclecticism. Take all the things I've done, even all the courses I've had to teach which include things like 18th-century counterpoint. I think that's all been pulled together, not because I don't want a thing that's eclectically made up of all these things but I'm find all I do are three kinds of insights with respect to the points of view which are tending to unite all those things.

When I first became aware that I had certain kinds of mannerisms it was when I had to give a lecture about my own music and the changes in my style and I suppose particularly because--this was a talk at Boden at about 1972, or 1973, which I guess really does date the beginning of my thinking at this point--I suppose it was of some interest to people at Boden how my style had gotten where it had gotten because they think me--and by "they" I mean the Brunswick community--to be some kind of very far out experimentalist which I always find kind of amusing because I'm no different, but they think of me in terms of what they're used to, which is the traditional concert repertory and twentieth century music as far as Hindemith and Stravinsky. And they also think of me in terms of the music that I composed when they first knew me, and I've been there for 14 years, what they would consider drastic transformation in my style since, certainly since I began seriously composing, which is longer than 14 years, that really goes back almost 20 years. I decided as well as answering their request for a lecture on this subject to go through all my music going back to late 1950's some of my student days, and to try to trace the evolution of a style, to show how in fact somebody who began writing music in C major has wound up at another

kind of point. Doing that, I discovered all of these relationships, all these strangely recurring mannerisms, little bits and pieces of things that have fascinated me going well back, the concern I guess with triads moving in non-functional ways, with which I had always had a great fascination, which explained I guess why my favorite composer even in high school were people who used chords that way. Once I saw that a lot of these things were apparent in various pieces, it then just became almost a point of honor, a kind of game-playing thing, to see whether or not I could continue it. And of course once you become conscious of something you do it very differently. You do it in ways that are both more blatant and less blatant at the same time. I guess that was when it started, probably about 5 years ago, 1973.

PO: Actually when, in answering this last question you got back to content, because you're talking about the different contents of your work and using it in different ways. But the other question is, how you attend to these and how you pay attention to these events in your work? If you know how you do that, then when did you become aware of that?

ES: That's hard to answer because I'm not sure that I ever do attend to my work in the way that I think you mean the question, that is, as I said, I don't usually think about the activity itself in a conscious way while I'm doing it. I attend to these sounds in my imagination and try to scribble out in some ways here as instructions to get people to make the sounds, but I'm not aware of that. I think my attention becomes strongest, and I hope again I understand your meaning, when I'm listening to a performance of music, somebody else's or my own, but when I'm a listener or a performer in a kind of acoustic setting where it is actually taking place, not symbolically taking place or, but you know actually happening. A performance of any kind, a performance on the radio,

Then I am attending in a way that I think say qualifies, as far as that word is concerned. When I'm composing I'm juggling and manipulating and fantasizing and actually moving a hand on a page, which is of course the thing that anybody looking at me doing it would see me doing. And I'm alone. And as I say, it's usually very quiet.

PO: And then you characterize performing or listening as different attention processes?

ES: For me I would have to say, yes.

PO: And can you say the difference?

ES: I suppose part of that difference is that there's something acoustically happening to my ears or the air waves, whatever, and that I become aware of space, the space in which all of this is taking place, whether it's inside of my automobile or concert hall or outdoors or wherever, but I become very much aware of the fact that there <sup>are</sup> sounds filling up the space, and that usually for me it involves some kind of a communal sense of sharing with others. I don't like to listen to music alone. The only time that I usually do is in a car, probably, or when I'm involved in doing something for teaching purposes or writing purposes, but as far as any kind of, well if I get a good record and I want to put it on, I ask somebody to listen to it with me. It's, I tend to think of eating alone, or I suppose of drinking alone, <sup>or something</sup> as the equivalent I suppose of listening to music alone. It's very, I think could be, very dangerous and should be a social activity, that is some sense of communal activity, and I think part of the attention involves that kind of ambiguity between the fact that only I am inside my own scheme and only I am responding to it in a certain way, but also that I'm sharing it with other people who each are experiencing whatever it is differently, but each of us are together, or all of us are together. Somehow composing music is very solitary; it's a totally different thing. My concentration is not upon it, and I don't think of myself doing it, as I said, involving something else. I'm

in fact trying to imagine a communal situation.

PO: You said the questions were unusual that I'm asking. Do you want to respond to that? (laughter)

ES: I suppose I've never considered the psychology of, that's probably the best word that comes to mind right now, it may not be the most accurate, the psychology of composition. I guess I've become very much aware of the sociology of composition, of music, and maybe the theater of composition. Of course, like most musicians, the architecture, structure, the grammar of the material itself. But I've never really bothered to think about who I am when I'm doing it, or how I feel about doing it, or whether in fact the fact that I'm somebody who enjoys doing this means that I'm a certain kind of person or a special kind of person. So it has been <sup>very</sup> natural to me and <sup>it's</sup> something that I do very easily, and I've not done it to express my sense of specialness. I don't do it for that reason. So I've never thought about any of those questions; it's been nice to hear them.

(end of interview)