

STANFORD UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: CAMPUS REPORT ONLY

11/13/79

FOR INFORMATION CONTACT MARCIA TANNER

497-3812

Pauline Oliveros and "The Grand Composition"

"Listen to everything all the time. Look at everything all the time. Be aware as much as possible, and educate others to that possibility."

This is the credo of Pauline Oliveros, distinguished composer in residence at Stanford's Department of Music this Fall and "one of those people" (to quote Henry James) "on whom nothing is lost."

Oliveros is professor of music at U.C. San Diego, where she has taught composition and experimental studies since 1967, and was until this year director of its renowned Center for Music Experiment. Internationally recognized as a pioneer in the development of experimental music, Oliveros has composed over 100 works, "designed" (as one commentator has put it) "to change the way people listen."

In 1977 Oliveros received first prize for her Bonn Feier from the city of Bonn in an open competition on the theme of Urban Music. In that piece, she transformed the entire city into a musical and theatrical composition, an event which lasted for several days.

Some of her recent works include Rose Moon, a ritual choral piece commissioned for the Wesleyan Singers by Connecticut Wesleyan College; The Yellow River[#]Map, a ceremonial meditation for large group, commissioned by the Experimental Media Foundation in New York; and The Witness for solo, duo or ensemble virtuoso instruments, composed for oboist Joseph Celli.

Born into a musical family in Texas, and a practising musician since the age of four, Oliveros began hearing sounds in her mind as a child, sounds she had heard nowhere else. It was the desire to make those imaginary sounds audible to others, she says, that led her to become a composer.

Oliveros studied composition at the University of Houston and at San Francisco

State University. After working for years with traditional musical instruments and forms, and moving on to experiment with musical improvisation, electronic music, and theater pieces, Oliveros began developing her "sonic meditations". These exercises in awareness and concentration are meant for non-musicians as well as musicians. Many of them are based on the release of long tones regulated by the breathing and the natural action of the vocal chords.

More recently, Oliveros has begun making compositions with her sonic meditations. These - the most recent of which, El Relicario de los Animales (Burial Ground of the Animals), was premiered at the California Institute of the Arts last April - have a powerful ceremonial, ritualistic quality which acts to alter the perceptions of audience and musicians alike.

Oliveros' work is characterized by an openness to the sounds of life. "Nothing audible is alien to me" might well be her motto, although she prefers the sounds of nature to those of technology. Many of her pieces incorporate sounds from the natural environment, or imitate them.

All sounds are potentially music, she believes. Oliveros speaks of the "grand composition": the total, ongoing sound environment we live in, whose existence and persistence depend on our continued awareness of it, our listening with attention.

Just as Oliveros seeks to banish distinctions and level hierarchies among sounds, she works toward the same goals with people. Her compositions are meant to blur the stereotyped roles of performer and audience, to bring them into new relationships to themselves, each other, and conceivably to something beyond themselves.

"I'm not interested in that type of music which aims to entertain the aristocracy," she has said. "I'm interested in music which sets processes in motion for spiritual connections between people, interactions....I want people to come as they are to my performances....I want it to be an atmosphere of communication where people are turned towards each other and not an object....Philosophically, I think music should tune the soul....traditionally, music has been used as a bridge between

human beings and the supernatural. It seems natural that if it is possible to tune the soul to spiritual vibrations, then music is the way to do it."

At Stanford, Oliveros is teaching a course in "Innovations in 20th Century Music" and a graduate seminar in composition. She ~~will be presenting~~ ^{recently presented} "An Evening of Sonic Meditations" with Alea II, the Stanford Ensemble for New Music directed by Robert Harvey, ^{Stanford's} at ~~8 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 20 in~~ Dinkelspiel Auditorium.

Oliveros is a direct, open and approachable person, radiating calm strength, an impression of centeredness, and great good humor. Some of these qualities may reflect her interest in ^{martial arts:} ~~karate~~; she holds a brown belt in karate, and is studying ^{for} ~~to achieve~~ the black belt. She speaks slowly and deliberately, with a tinge of Texas, in a quiet musical voice, and she laughs easily with a melodious chuckle.

In a recent interview she spoke of her activities at Stanford, her ideas about music, and herself. The interview was conducted indoors in her office, but the large window was open to the world and the sounds came in.

How do you approach the subject of "Innovations in 20th Century Music?"

My belief is that the only real innovation in 20th century music is the breakdown of formal musical organizations and the return of music-making to non-specialists. There's a re-evaluation going on, brought about first of all by technological change, and the individual has to find out from within him-or herself what his/her values are in relation to the rapidity of change. Not whether to be conservative or avant-garde or any of those things, but what do these changes mean to us.

So much music is available to us now, on recordings and radio and television and so on, that it's becoming impossible to listen to it all. It was partly because of this that several years ago I shifted my composing activities toward meditation. I felt that in order for us not to drown in so much music, the perceiver had to be included.

In what ways do you include the perceiver in your own work?

/ more

In class we do a lot of exercises which are just listening, which lead students into areas they would never have encountered in a music class 20 years ago. We have listening exercises all over the Stanford campus: on top of Hoover tower, in the middle of Lake Lagunita; we spend a lot of time outdoors. We discuss attitudes too. Each member of the class has a different viewpoint about things like music and politics. These have to be addressed and worked with, so that we can make music together.

As a teacher and composer, I like to practice role reversal. I take notes in class when my students are discussing something. In many of my pieces there's no audience. The "audience" is actually doing the work. In other pieces, the audience is invited to take part in a particular meditation while the players are doing something else. For instance, there's a meditation called "Telepathic Improvisation". The task of each musician is to listen for a tone to appear in his mind. When the tone appears, he has to make a decision: am I sending or receiving? If he's receiving, he plays the tone; if he's sending, he waits until he hears somebody else play it. The audience is invited to try and influence the musicians with a similar task: to predict what sound is going to come from which musician, and listen for that tone. Or, to try to predict when a musician will play, or influence the musician to play.

How does it work in practice?

Well, it's fun! You can't prove anything, Sometimes, though, people will get so many hits that it's above chance. It would be hard to test. The point is not whether it actually works. I'm not out to prove it, I'm out to use it in a way which connects people.

In a lot of musical groups, like jazz groups, people do seem to share some extra-sensory rapport in the way they respond to each other musically.

I think I'm just tuning into that and trying to expose that process; to make a lot of people a little more aware of it.

You spoke of attitudes toward music and politics. How does political awareness in-

form your work, if it does?

I told my class a story about my own beginnings as a professional musician. When I was about 17 in Texas I played accordion in a polka band. The leader was Aaron Schultz, and we travelled around to different dance halls, and were modestly successful. People enjoyed the music, and if they enjoyed it, they danced. Our best numbers would have the most lively response.

One night we drove up in the country to play a job. There were a few people in the hall and they didn't move; then there were more people. We kept trying things and nothing worked. Pretty soon people were standing around the hall with their arms folded. Finally they started screaming and cursing and stomping, threatening, telling us we had to pack up and leave. Which we did: we got out of there fast, we didn't even get our money.

It was a Polish dance hall, we were playing German music, and this was 1948. That was a real marker for me, in understanding that what you do, even in music, has consequences.

Is that awareness at the back of your mind when you compose?

Yes, it is. At the end of the 60's - you know what the 60's were, a very turbulent time - I began to retreat into myself. I didn't feel that the activities I was engaging in were meaningful: playing concerts, making music in certain ways.

I felt that it was too nervous, too frenetic, not doing anything that seemed beneficial to me. Then I began playing long tones and listening to them. I became concerned about making music that people could participate in without having any skills and yet still have an experience of some depth.

I had already been very involved from the 50's on with improvisation; I'd taught musicianship to people who were not skilled instrumentalists, and helped them learn to improvise. Then at UCSD I taught a course called "The Nature of Music" for the general student. Its aim was to involve them in music making.

very
Music was emerging as a strong socio-political force in the 60's, so it was part

/ more

of the climate of the times. Remember Plato's Republic, which says that you can't change the character of a nation's music without changing the state. It's true that music has power, sound has power, and societies from time immemorial regulate music and sound.

I became concerned with all of those things. I didn't want to make music that was so exclusive of others. but music that was more inclusive.

Did you think creating that situation for people would do something beneficial for them?

I think that any time people have control over what they're doing, and a channel for expressing inner feelings and ideas, it can be beneficial.

What about the experience of making music together with other people?

That's ineffable. There have been many instances when people taking part in one of my sonic meditations who have never been involved in participation of that nature find themselves very moved by it - some of them are astonished to find themselves in that state.

Looking back at your development as a composer, does where you are now seem a logical outgrowth of where you've been?

The unifying element is always listening. In all the music I've ever written, that's been the primary motivation: what is it going to sound like? That's where my fascination is, where my fascination has been. Some of my early chamber music has been described as "Webernesque". That was not because I was using twelve-tone technique, in the sense of Webern or Schoenberg, but because I had the sounds in my ears. They were just the sounds I wanted to hear next.

Anti-systematic....

That's true. Someone from Yugoslavia was here the other day, visiting composers in this country, and he wanted to know what system I was using to teach my graduate seminar. I told him "anarchy".

If a composer is someone who organizes sound, you seem always to have worked on

the edge of that. Your music is inclusive of sounds as well as people, and now you see your role in terms of giving people a set of instructions and letting them do what they do, leaving a lot to chance, rather than writing a musical composition that's very organized on paper.

It's simply that I shifted my focus from specifying note-to-note relationships to specifying outside forms, I suppose you could say. Actually, it's composing algorithms. In this case, the algorithms are procedures which result in relationships in sound. I know very well what's going to happen, I know what the overall sound of the piece will be, even if I don't know what the note-to-note details will be, by any means. I do leave a lot of room for chance and that's the pleasure, that's what's delightful.

You've said that several years ago you became interested in listening to sounds rather than in manipulating them. At one point, you charged yourself to be aware of everything all the time. If you stopped, there would be gaps in the "grand composition". How possible is that kind of total attentiveness? Aren't we built to be selective, to edit the sensory stimuli we receive?

That idea has been challenged. I think we are globally aware, and that exercises or meditations can help us gain control in moving from focused to global awareness. In what ways was your recent work, El Relicario de los Animales, ^(Burial Ground of the Animals) an outgrowth of your work with sonic meditations?

It certainly is an outgrowth. It was written after I wrote my paper on sonic meditations, "Software for People". One of the interesting things about El Relicario for me was that it was a return to working with virtuoso musicians, coming back to expertise after having spent a number of years working with quite a wide range of people. I composed it for the soprano, Carol Plantamura, and twenty instrumentalists. I was using all that I had learned in making those meditation pieces without saying to the musicians "This is a meditation". However, if they follow the instructions, it's almost impossible to play the piece unless those kinds of meditation states come about.

For instance, the musicians are guided by eight words: lead, echo, follow, blend, extend, embellish, free, and silence. They're not confronted with all those different words at once, but in various combinations at different stages of the piece. The instructions call for a very high order of flexibility and concentration from the players in order for them to move back and forth between the internal and external environment, to "lead" or "echo" as the case may be.

Can you describe El Relicario?

Its floorplan is a mandala, with the singer in the center standing on a platform and surrounded by a circle of red earth. Four groups of five musicians are at the four directions around her. Each group is a square of four players with a percussionist in the middle.

The outside players must be at least 20 feet from the center of the mandala. That's important because the players are in twin groupings: pairs of flutes, saxophones, clarinets, trumpets, trombones, violins, cellos, basses, and four percussionists. That gives you the potential of matching sounds. Across a long distance the sound travels in very interesting ways.

The singer is already in place before the piece begins. Then there's a procession of instrumentalists. The four brass players begin it by playing four conch shell trumpets from a distance. They gradually enter the space, and then the other players enter the mandala one by one, sit down and begin their evocation of the tiger in the jungle. When everyone is present, the conches and percussionists take their places and then everything is in full motion.

Each of the four sections of the piece is guided by the image of an animal, and the singer evokes each one with the word "earth" in four languages: the French word "terre" for the tiger; the German "erde" for the owl; the Cherokee word "elohi" for the ^{wolf} ~~worl~~; and the Spanish word "tierra" for the parrot.

Each animal has its own emotional state: the tiger is hunger; the owl is reverence and death; the wolf is mating and longing; the parrot is joy - that part sounds like a rain forest.

For the exit, the conch shells begin again; the players process out very slowly, and the audience is invited to join in singing long tones with the conch shells, so that the piece ends with a choral development.

The audience surrounds the mandala during the ^{performance.} ~~piece.~~ Physical staging is very important in my compositions, always. My theater pieces of the 60's began to eat away at the audience/performer relationship, questioning the conventional format. The acoustic space is also important - wherever a piece is to be performed, I go in and listen for a long time to see what it sounds like, what can be done. I always end up doing something that's different from the way you're supposed to. But it's important for the understanding: the expectation people have when they sit down in a chair facing the stage is very different from when they're standing up, surrounding something, or sitting on the floor, or milling around, or moving from one location to another.

What can you say about the ritualistic, ceremonial aspects of El Relicario and many of your other pieces, such as Crow II and Rose Moon?

Well, a ritual implies symbolic action, so a musical ritual carries symbolic messages, not just the sound itself. The mandala is a universal symbol of integration - integration of the symbolic with the linear processes of thought. I've been working with the mandala for a long time: it became the basis of organization for many different pieces. The Crow piece was a circle piece, but various things happened within the circle, many different relationships. Rose Moon was an even more complicated mandala. All the action ^{that} takes place among the 33 people, all the parts of the mandala, are related by sound. It's an interpretation of the mandala in sound and motion.

The same is true of El Relicario. I started with a particular mandala, which I drew; I stared at that for a long time. Now that contradicts what I said before, that it's sound that has always fascinated me. But this is a visualization which has been translated into sound.

I've had some contact with Mary Danieli, an anthropologist of the mandala. She did field work in Madagascar and lived with the Malagasy, which is a mandala society. Malagasy villages are built in that shape, everything is related to the mandala. Their geomancers consult the mandala in all questions of their work and family relationships and everything else. I showed Danieli my mandala pieces and she saw Rose Moon. She recognized correspondences, she said, between it and Malagasy ceremony. I know nothing about Malagasy ceremony! But the real point is that it is a really universal form. It appears throughout the world, in every culture, in some way. Danieli claims that we're in trouble because we're not paying attention to the mandala in our own society.

Do you think that your being a woman had any influence on the musical idiom you've developed?

Only in that culturally, women are supposed to be more aware of human relationships. That may play into the fact that I tend to be more concerned about how people relate to each other in a musical situation. I don't think there's a "men's music" and a "women's music" unless you're thinking in terms of associations that have been built up over the centuries. Structurally it doesn't matter. Music doesn't have any sex. I'm looking for ways of working which are beneficial to human relationships, and not exclusive. So I can't be exclusive by finding a "woman's form" that excludes men.

What about the problems of becoming a composer, as a woman?

It never occurred to me that there was any reason why I shouldn't. Unconsciously, it must have occurred to me that most of the composers were men, and most of them were not alive. An important cue came from my mother, who used to earn a living by playing piano for dance classes of all kinds. A couple of years before I began thinking about becoming a composer, she was composing little things to play for a modern dance class. Some were quite bizarre, weird. To me it just seemed perfectly natural. When I began to hear sounds in my mind, as I've described, I just thought "that's what they do, and they call it composing" - and being stubborn,

once I had made that decision I just followed it.

Do you have some musical ideas you want to explore next?

Right now I'm in what you call the idling mode, just being open and listening, and I don't know. I have those cycles of knowing and not knowing, and I'm in a not knowing one right now, just waiting to see what will happen. That's always an interesting, exciting kind of time. I've learned that my best work goes on when I'm not interfering with it.

While I'm here I'm also learning the computer music system at the CCRMA (Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics). I don't know what that holds for me. I'd like to work with that in an interactive way, so that people could perform and get feedback during a performance. There are things you can do with such a tool that you couldn't do any other way, and those would be the things I'd want to explore. But always in relation to performers and feedback, to increase awareness and reaction time. I could think of interactive tasks that would be progressively more difficult, say, so that they would expand a performer's awareness throughout the course of a piece.

What does your study of karate have to do with your musical life, if anything?

It has a lot to do with it, because I can't seem to do anything that doesn't, one way or another. I'm a whole person, not split off. I wanted to learn a body language, because I realized that a lot of information is transmitted through the body that is not carried in the verbal language. Certainly karate is one of those languages; it has to do with attention and concentration. Things I've learned in karate I've been able to translate into my work. El Relicario de los Animales is in many cases a translation of states of attention that you need in karate practice.

I wrote a piece called The Witness for two very extraordinary performers, oboist Joe Celli and violinist Malcolm Goldstein; it's based on higher level sparring in karate.

What is your definition of music?

It's that which is intended to be music: either by processing sound as music, through our own attention or awareness, so that we listen to the ongoing environment as music; or, that which people designate as music. That's my definition of music: sounds which are organized attentionally.

In his book How Musical is Man? the musicologist John Blacking defines music as "humanly organized sound."

Yes, but I feel that he's leaving out the other species. How about whale song, bird song, wolf song, gibbon song? Gibbons - there's a wonderful account of a ritual done by gibbons in Joseph Chilton Pierce's book Exploring the Crack in the Cosmic Egg. In the morning at sunrise they start this song - it begins around E-natural and they go up by half-steps as the sun rises. As they reach the octave they all quiver and trill and go into an ecstatic state, and the sun's up.

Now if that isn't music, I don't know what is.