

PAULINE OLIVEROS INTERVIEWS BOB ERICKSON

MAY 28, 1979

PO: Bob, what's holding your interest right now in your composing, liking about what you're doing?

BE: Whatever I happen to be doing.

PO: What do you happen to be doing now.

BE: I'm working on a song for Carol.

PO: Are there any particulars--why are you interested in this particular piece?

BE: I don't know.

PO: Is there any way I can get any information from you about it?

BE: I don't like to talk about pieces I'm working on.

PO: Oh. Well, then we'll skip that. Let me ask you what changes have occurred in your attitudes about music making. Have you held a consistent attitude throughout your career?

BE: My God, I'm over 60 years old. I don't know if every change that can be figured out has happened to me, but an awful lot of them have. So, there may be some things that I'll change into yet and I would imagine that to be true if I live long enough. But changing is what it's all about.

PO: When did you become aware of that particular attitude, that changing is what it's all about?

BE: Oh, I must have been 40 before I caught on to that. I think maybe before that I was trying not to change or worried about changing. Someplace around there.

PO: Was there a particular incident or part of your work that opened that...

BE: No I don't think so. It's just catching on to what you did. It's all retrospective. When you're doing it you don't know what you're doing. In between times you wonder about what you did. So little by little you begin to form notions about what happened, you know, these are sort of explanations. And

they always seem to be after the fact. I think if you live a long time you begin-- there's time enough for you to catch on, because I must be exceptionally stupid but it really took a long time, a lot of evidence, for me to understand that.

PO: I remember in all the years I've known you, one of the consistent things that you've said was that you were a late bloomer, a late developer. What did you mean by that?

BE: I wasn't famous when I was 16.

PO: You believe it was fame that made you say that? When you said it I always thought maybe you were referring to some revelation that you'd had.

BE: No, nothing more than daily. I'm all in favor of continuous revelations. There isn't some sort of time or event or sudden illumination that I can set up as a guidepost and say before that and after that. I don't think it ever seemed that to me, and it doesn't seem like that to me now. It seems--I guess I'm concerned with and happy about and comfortable with the continuousness of changing. Not like sudden stops and starts and angular shifts but more like fog.

PO: That's another thing I remember very often hearing you saying in the course of some of our discussions over these years is that there is a state of confusion.

BE: Right. That's the creative state.

PO: And that in the midst of that you felt, perhaps you felt comfortable there.

BE: It sure isn't comfortable. You know, all those things are very hard to put into words. And for me I'm not eager to put them into words because I don't want to solidify them that much. But there is a kind of confusion that's necessary for me or when I have this feeling of confusion I know that something's on its way. You can do it--I can do it by contrast better. If I knew what I was going to do so there was no confusion about what I was going to do, then I think I probably wouldn't have any interest in it. So the kind of confusion that I'm feeling has anticipation in it. It's like climbing up to go to bed and wondering

where you're going to go tonight in your dreams. And you don't know even if you will go. But you're ready and there's that anticipation. That's the confusion quality, unformed but somehow full confusion. Confusion is ready to go in other words. So that's the kind of confusion, that's the kind of foginess, it's a lot of things that don't have words.

PO: Do you think of words as solid objects?

BE: Words are different. When you do things with words you're manipulating counters most of the time. It's very hard not to. It's hard to reshape those counters. They tend to pick up their own sharpness of contour. When you make a concept you sharpen things up and give it a contour and that's wonderful as long as you're doing word things. But if you're not doing those kinds of things, if you're doing things where you don't want that/sharpness of concept but you're trying to do something else, whatever it is, then they can be an impediment, see, they cause you to ask questions like, "What am I doing?" and when you ask a question like, "what am I doing?" you turn on your intellectual apparatus, and that's only as good as your intellectual apparatus is. (laughter) And that's not good enough; at least mine isn't good enough. It's just different. It's perfectly wonderful of its kind but it's a different thing.

PO: Is there any kind of bridge between those two worlds?

BE: No, they're different ways of dealing with experience, I think. I'm not concerned to knit them together.

PO: One of the things that I've also noticed is that you're absolutely in love with sounds that you like. Have you always been in love with sounds?

BE: Yeah, as far back as I can remember.

PO: From all of your experience over all these years with sounds and sound making, is there any philosophical position ?

BE: No.

PO: Let me jump to the question that I'm really interested in, which is, are you aware of your own attention processes as distinguished from the content of what you're working on when you work?

BE: I don't know what you're talking about.

PO: Okay. Are you aware of how you attend to what you do? your attentiveness?

I notice in your writings that you talk about attention, the way it flickers from line to line if you're listening to a contrapuntal texture. But in composing I wonder if there are particular states, modes of consciousness that you're aware of that you're willing to talk about.

BE: Probably the most interesting experience when I'm composing--you know, you can't predict when it's going to happen. But it's just like disappearing from the world although you're walking around (laughter) enjoying what you're supposed to do, but you're really not there, and this gives you a very funny feeling sometimes. If you're not there, where are you? I think I know what's happened is, all of my, or most of my operating characteristics have just removed themselves from daily life, teaching and all of that stuff, and are working on the piece although I don't know what they're doing. But I have the experience, I know that here I am walking around but I'm really someplace seven fathoms down someplace. And that's always a pleasant experience because I don't know what's going on but I know that it's going on and something will happen. The sort of failure of attending--that's an example of the failure of attending to real life. But sometimes when I'm working, usually working on paper and working in my studio or it could be a tape piece, too. But when I'm in my studio I can sort of seal myself off. Then I quite often have the experience of time disappearing. You know, normally I know what time it is within a few minutes. And I'll look at my watch and suddenly discover that literally hours have gone by, that no experience in the passing of time. I suppose people have things to say

about that, that it's concentration or something. I'm not aware of any concentration. I'm just aware that I looked up and suddenly it was four hours later. But those are sort of normal experiences. Otherwise when I compose--well, everything I've said tells you this--I'm listening to my intuitions. I've spent a lifetime really getting on good terms with them. So all of this walking under water and so forth is understanding, sensing when my intuitions are up to something or other. So I do consciously in the sense of a keeper pay a lot of attention to my composing self, I don't take it for granted, coddle it, I humor it. I don't control it. If you can be a keeper of something you don't control, that's what my rational, conscious thinking self is doing.

PO: You value this state highly...

BE: Well, I like to compose. I'm not concerned with the state; I'm concerned with the doing.

PO: But you talked about being a keeper, and it's a different form from dailiness. Is there any carryover to any other activity in this state?

BE: What carries over to what?

PO: This particular mode of consciousness that you mentioned, I mean in listening to your intuitions. Does that carry over into other activities besides composing?

BE: Hm. That's a very internal business. There is really only one person involved. I can't find a carryover. I can't even find any other activities that I do that--except, you know, I certainly run my life on intuition and hunch, so there might be some carryover there, or it might be carryover goes to music, who knows? I think the kind of intuiting you do with other people is a little different--It might be related and the fact that I'm interested in catching my own intuitions might make me willing, even eager, to catch other people's intuitions. So there might be some carryover but I think when I'm relating to students or other social

situations, it doesn't feel the same. It might come from the same stem but it feels a little different. And I think I'm operating much more with my keeper self. Not that I'm not using my intuitions, but it's a more rough and tumble business. Also it's a public business, you know, it's very busy.

PO: Can you say how you came to rely on that?

BE: No, not really. But when I was probably in my 20's I really thought I could push myself around. You know, it just seems so reasonable that you could say I'm going to sit down and write, damn you. Probably someplace in my late 20's or early 30's I began dimly to get the notion that the faucet went on and off, but when off and on of its own course. Certainly not by my rational fiat. I think someplace in my 30's I went through a lot of agony over that because I do like to be rational and I finally came to the conclusion that, by God, you know it was just that conflict between these two sides. I wasn't going to write again until I felt like it. I didn't write anything for almost 4 years. But I worried, maybe I'll never write anything again. But then I began to get these messages, so let's write it. And that probably completely confirmed me. The notion that you don't have this kind of control but you have to accept what comes.

PO: But you said you have some notion when your intuitions are working.

BE: Yeah. It's not anything you can put your--it's not like a recipe book. There isn't the--now I've gotten so I watch the signs pretty carefully. And I've had really, now they seem really quite funny. But very often summer comes along, vacation's there, by God the middle of June I'm going to sit down and start writing. Never! Middle of June I sit down and there's nothing to be done. That's that. It just, it's not perverse, it just runs its own way; that's all there is to it. And sometimes I've actually felt it would be nice to take a little break; how

about it? You know, it would be nice to take a couple of months off something like that, like to do something else, and something will come up. I've got to do that first, do that first. So there are two sides to writing to what comes. You don't write when there's nothing there, but if it's there you write. You know, it's very queerly two-sided. Sometimes things like teaching cause a lot of difficulty because it often happens that just at the time when the heavy load is on at the university the message will come. I have to deal with that as best I can and try not to cheat myself but somehow get through my duties at the university. Those are rough times and sometimes I've got to get up earlier, dodge a class, save special weekends, or something like that, do that kind of thing. I haven't had the experience of having a message come up and not do anything about it. But I do have some things that sort of come up part way. I can make a file folder for, and make another file folder in my head, and ⁱⁿ two or three years they might emerge again. So in the case of some projects, bigger projects, things where I might have to study, learn something before I can really tackle, I can sort of send them back, just not forever, just for some delay. And there are a couple of things like that that are sitting around

PO: If you could have it any way you wanted, is there any change as far as the working process is concerned that you want to make?

BE: No, I wouldn't change anything. I really wouldn't even change--I've often thought about that. When I have a year off I always write more, you know. On those occasions when I'm going back to work I think, wouldn't it be nice not to have to do anything but compose? I don't think it would be nice. My life with colleagues and students and so forth, really that's an important part of, I don't know, stirring the broth or something. So far as the way I work, I can't change anything, I don't want to change anything, because all I want to do is never the same twice anyway. I simply want to follow it to see where it leads. So I'm

not likely to change. Something that might cause trouble, it did with that violin piece commission, I got the NEA grant. I don't know what would happen if I got commissions because then there's some kind of external-internal kind of thing that has to be fitted together. On the other hand, I notice that the way Stravinsky was, got commissions in his later years, was to decide what he wanted to do and then find somebody to be the commissioner. And that might be the nicest way. I think then there wouldn't be any difficulty. But I have to write to order. But the order has to come from the interior, that's the hitch.

(end of interview)