

PAULINE OLIVEROS INTERVIEWS TOM NEE

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PO: I'm interested in what changes have occurred in your own attitudes about your music making, in other words why you do what you do, and is it different now than it was before?

TN: The last 2 years or something?

PO: Yes.

TN: I think, yeah, it's probably different. But as with all such things you realize you've been doing certain patterns that you don't change very much. In the case of performance I think the biggest thing I've discovered, I don't know, in the last 5 years or something, was how much in my kind of performance I was influenced by my friends or people I knew or my insights or lack of them into other people's problems, into the sort of human dynamics of human performance. And I've decided to try to counter that more, and one way or another I think it's influenced me to change the way I reverse things or the way I choose people in situations where I have a choice and have less to do on my knowledge of their background and capabilities, nonmusical things. That's the biggest thing I can think of right now.

PO: From what I understand your attitude has changed towards how you choose people.

TN: Yeah, how I choose people. Yeah, go ahead.

PO: What's different in the way you choose people now and the way you chose them before?

TN: Oh, say in the case of something you'd know about, say in the case of the New Hampshire Festival. Often I'd be fairly open, I could just go down the list of names or I'd choose people to play because I knew them or thought they, or in the case of even extreme cases where Vivian Hayes--do you remember her?--I would choose her boyfriends, current ones, to play in the orchestra, and they

seemed good, but it would be that I would be making them seem better than they were or that they had problems which there was really no point us getting mixed up with. Like Sonny Carl on the French horn. And there are all sorts of things and the only trouble, the problems with Sonny Carl's solos were that I picked him to play them, knowing full well what I was picking, and thought I'd fix it. And I just figured that finally you can't fix, there are a lot of things you can't fix. And I've had just a checkered history of that sort of thing. Well, that's an example of...

PO: So what would you do now in your selection?

TN: I wouldn't pick them.

PO: But how do you pick them now?

TN: Well, I'm still affected by all this stuff, I know, of how I get along with people or liking a sort of a good vibes in a performing group and all that stuff. As much as possible I try to pick people who will get along with each other but will still play. Now that doesn't always work, but I've tried to say no. I've also tried to do things more and more without writing. Never write a person if there's something that I don't want to say--I had a conversation this morning with a fellow in New Hampshire, and I try to do this in school and in other places, where I'd often be fairly-- I'd say cowardly--about saying I don't think you can do this, or you ought to do something else. And I'd, maybe I'd write them then. And the trouble with writing is it takes a long time for the other person to say anything where if you're to speak to them on even the telephone--you can't look at them but at least they can say it within a second or two--the other way it might take a week. And in the midst of this week all of these things snowball. So, okay, this is the kind of thing I've tried to change.

PO: When did you become aware of your attitude?

TN: Well, I'm sure I've always been--not always but for the last 10 years--been pretty conscious that that was a problem, some people have even told me that. And that

it would affect rehearsals; it wouldn't, you'd stop too soon asking for something to happen. I think it probably the year we went back to Minneapolis and came back, that general time I suppose was enough of an upheaval for everybody that it made me see it. I'm not sure specifically really.

PO: Aside from this particular specific kind of notion, why do you do what you do? Why are you conducting?

TN: I don't know. I think it started a long time ago probably, as often in conducting, probably for strange reasons. It started as far as I was concerned in an interest in conducting and that I happened to always have, not always but often, had band and orchestra directors and chorus directors that I thought made mistakes and I thought I saw what was the matter. And fairly early, when I was 13 or so, I always had ideas, paid attention to rehearsals and wondered how come something didn't work out and could I say what it was? Aside from any psychological stuff which I couldn't really say, I was interested in how people work with each other. When I was, oh 15, 16 in Oklahoma, I started a young football league. That was new then; what do you call them now, you know, these little kid leagues that we have everywhere. I sort of started one in Oklahoma. I got interested, oh, I'd always been interested more or less in football and how people learn to do things. That was for many years really my primary interest, I was much more interested in football. But I played a little--played a lot in high school but because of size couldn't do much. But I became interested in coaching a lot and would make football plays, give them to our high school football coach, talk about good or, you know. Did a lot of organizational type things. And the same thing was true in music. I got into pep band and so on and finally into starting a dance band and all that jazz. So I think it was more or less I was always interested in group activities and how some people seem to get results and other people didn't.

PO: How about your emotional life in relation to your work. Have you experienced changes in your emotional states during your music making?

TN: What would be an example of an emotional state?

PO: Well, I guess, say the state of excitement or arousal or neutral even, or whether or not that's something that's consistent or something that changes.

TN: Oh sure. It's just almost--you can, I think, be certain that in music rehearsals any obvious problems you have are hidden. Or you might get the same thing jogging, you know. Certain clear physical activity affects all that stuff. Have a good rehearsal. I think--I don't know whether this is what you're talking about--but say, certainly conducting. Now I'm not so clear, I think it's true in playing and singing, too, I know it's in singing, that the activity and intensity of it change your emotional--I think I always have a more affirmative view toward life after a fairly successful rehearsal--enthusiasm and,... Is that the sort of thing?

PO: Yes.

TN: Practically if you any success with the music it's a sure thing that I have a more firmly athletic view toward life.

PO: You feel uplifted?

TN: Yeah. Now if you're not successful, of course, I think it's a different quality of depression you get. I think the muscle tone's different and something about music that still has a kind of a blood coursing effect. And you might know you were unsuccessful and a certain psychological depression but it's usually not so heavy or you don't feel ill or you don't have a fever or something like that.

PO: How about your philosophy about music making, is it a philosophy which has been consistent or does it change, has it changed?

TN: I don't know. I don't think I have a philosophy that surfaces much. I think I have a fairly simplistic view of it all and it's sort of an activity for me, I

believe, where I don't think of anything. For instance, I don't do as much new music maybe as I'd like to. For example in New Hampshire where it's a kind of somewhat commercial situation and I know the choice of music is in one sense a little commercial. Who's the audience, how many will we get, who will like it, who won't like it. And when I think of how I make my choices, like making a menu or cooking something, like who you think's coming to eat. And I think my choices--I'm always unhappy when I don't have a fair number of sort of new pieces to do. Then I say, how come I don't feel so happy? And it isn't really that I have a strong philosophy, I have an attitude but it isn't thought out very much, it isn't rationalized that we must do 20% new music or 100% or--therefore to do this the race must go on. It's just on my part fairly naive that that's what I'm interested in and that I feel unhappy when it doesn't occur. Then I can retreat and say, how come you like this smorgasboard sort of fare and bring it up to the surface. But more or less I don't philosophize about it. But I know, I'm pretty sure I've always done the same thing.

PO: I've noticed over the years that your programs are always interesting, the way they're put together, and I've wondered how you've developed that ability to put things together as I've noticed you have a lot of considerations that you have to draw on: the skill of the performers that may be there, and to balance the program in certain ways, and also to satisfy your desire to do some new things as well as old things.

TN: I know I'm quite overtly conscious of people I have available, and I think about them and even write lists of who can play, who can sing, who can tapdance, regional composers, or that sort of stuff. I bring up to the surface pretty much and make grocery lists. And I know I'm unhappy when I can't do it, sort of like a dog, I just don't feel good. So I'm sure I have a mental set about

that and I sort of like a variety of stuff. I've usually had a fairly naive interest in all sorts of music. I've never had to make much of a conscious effort to like stuff, so it's been kind of easy in one way to find different things. And it kind of works out, it's pretty good. I suppose the kind of program I've done has been more cafeteria-like things--I know that's the tendency so I'll counter it by doing all this or all that or something.

We've had French programs or French meals, and you know that can get to be Mickey Mouse. But I do, I enjoy reading about all sorts of music and listening to it and I jot down things. I suppose that's--I keep check of whose in a group and I buy hit songs so I think I have an almost inordinately strong feeling for have I kept everybody busy in a constructive way. Have I given so and so a solo or half a one in the last year or this year if they can play it?

PO: Let me ask you what skills are important or central to your work?

TN: In this case sort of conducting groups? Well, I don't know. If I were to do it again I think people ought to actually conduct groups probably much later than I did. I think you--the main skills, I think, have always been to play or sing or whatever it is, dance, in a group quite a bit and know what it's like to have been in a good one. I don't think I did that enough. I came up for some years through school music and marching bands and was just a mediocre player. I was a horn player and mediocre clarinet player. I played clarinet in city bands quite a few years, and I don't think I ever had a good sense of what it is to be a really fine player. I don't think I--I was just average and played a lot of instruments. I played most instruments like you'd play in a high school band level and I could play most overtures and stuff. So I think you'd get all the plusses of that. But you wouldn't what it's like to be in a really terrific group where everybody was very particular about every

single note. That was a long time coming, I think. So if I had to do it again I might do it in another way. I started out actually leading groups kind of early, ^{you know,} teaching high school and having pep bands and this and that and the other thing, and played in the dance band. But I was just a fair trumpet player I think then. I could play jazz pretty well but I couldn't read anything. I didn't know what the chords were called (laughter). I could hear them pretty well. So it took me a long time to figure out what those things were. And partly ^{you} could say it was because I didn't go into music until I was a junior in college. That sort of time thing I think you get--I always felt that I was about 5 or 6 years behind since I actually started out in art. I think I've always felt this time lag and I've always been sort of a self-taught person and not terribly good at--I always had my own time schedule for learning things, just like many people. And it often didn't coincide with a teacher, and I usually assimilated on my own time and go back. Even with a guy like Krenek I think it was years for me to get something out of him. I was a slow learner. So in the case of the conducting I'd say I started conducting before I knew anything to put it simply. And that you get kind of adept at the outward stuff, waving your arms, running people, organizing schedules, and not enough on deeper levels of what's music's . And because I came up through bands and jazz groups I really didn't know any orchestra music until I was way out of college. I'd played in orchestras but the only orchestra ^I knew is what they played. I'd gone to symphony concerts, but it's one thing to have heard Mozart this, Mozart that, but it's another thing to have played it a lot so you actually knew it. Like a lot of--let's say a piano player might have the same thing, or whatever. You didn't really know when you'd get a piece, it was a new piece to you, it's got plusses but it's got problems, and the problems with me were that I was sort of a band

director doing orchestra work, I guess. What was the question (laugh)?

PO: The question was, what skills are important or central to your work and how did you acquire them?

TN: Well, one skill that I think you'd--say as a horn player--you don't get, say as a wind player. If you think of just an interpreter of large pieces, most wind players have never played a large piece or never--there are no big horn sonatas that are like playing a Beethoven piano sonata. They are usually maybe 10, 12 minutes long. So what you do with a piece that's 25 minutes long? Well, I know that as a player I'd played all the horn concertos, so a Mozart horn concerto is just nothing compared to a Mozart piano concerto. It's just dinky, you see. And so I'd never as an active musician had to memorize or decide on how in the hell would I do a piece that was 25 minutes long. It was only when I'd started to conduct one, there's that big thing in front of you. And I think certain kinds of players--it could be percussion players, it could be horns, or think about the poor trombone player, tuba player--what are they going to do say if they suddenly become responsible for coaching a Beethoven string quartet? I mean, Jesus, that's a hell of a task. And it could be your training doesn't quite prepare you for that. That's just the risk you take, I guess. I'd change that. If there was a way, if you thought somebody was going to go into interpreting stuff, there ought to be a way where you'd maybe teach people --I've thought about it a little--to actually encounter real live big pieces, people like myself.

PO: How did you then acquire your skill for time scale, talking about...

TN: I don't really know, probably a lot of little bleeding corpses still left. I don't know, I always knew it was a problem, I think. Probably worked on it. It could be your musical intuition and training does take over in some--I don't know the answer to that. I know it's a problem and I know I've thought

about it a lot. Now what I did. I think when I first started that it was accidental if it worked out, let's put it that way. I didn't know there was any problem and just kept going till the piece ended (laughter).

PO: There must have been a time when you came to think more about the innards of that.

TN: Right. I think after I studied with Wolpe pretty certainly I thought about that. Krenek. I was really interested in composition but I didn't know much and Krenek wasn't the kind of a guy that made you feverish to do anything. I admire him, I could never repay all the stuff I learned but he was not one who would say, let's go here. Where Wolpe was the exact opposite. So I think I was slow picking up a lot of things with Krenek; on the case with Wolpe I'm pretty sure I got into the insides of a piece in a kind of an energetic way that I think that was a key thing.

PO: Let me ask you, what is a creative musical event to you in your work? And how do you produce such an event?

TN: Could I go to the toilet first? . . .

What was that question?

PO: What has been, or what is now, a creative musical event for you in your work and how do you produce such an event?

TN: I've been very leery of ever using the word creative for performance. Other people have their - other ways. And I've practically never thought of it that way. It seemed, I suppose, too vain. However, I think it does occur. I just always steered away from it, ^{kind of} like an alcoholic. So when I'd get an, when I've gotten successful, what I'd say was a successful performance where a mixture of what you'd planned occurred plus things that, like a Quaker consensus, occurred otherwise, I think it would be when the things were rehearsed well and that everybody felt confident of each other and that they practically never occur

off the cuff--well improvisation might be different. But say if it's written music, I think it would have to be rehearsed well and then... Well, I think it does a lot depend on a conductor in the case of conducted groups, that performers are a lot like animals, they pick up something out of the air just like dogs don't like you or they do, you know, or whatvere. It's hard to, I'm pretty sure you can't decide, well, I'm going to make this next dog like me (laughter). And the same with the performer. But I do believe you get prepare for it in a psychological way so that it's a way, a mixture of looseness and focus, and you don't think about anything but what you're going to do. That's pretty clear, I think, that if you ever think of something else, some little minorcatastrophe--if you're bothered by some little, minor catastrophe before a program. This happens with large groups, I don't know about string quartets or trios. A large group and the more people, or with opera or with things, large events, there's a very good chance that you can be waylaid and your attention. And so you have to figure out beforehand that everything's ready, like I get to the places way before a concert and check the Mickey Mousey little things. Is so and so sitting there, are the drumsticks there? Now that sounds so simple but I just found that if any of those things happen and that, let's say, a minute before you start, it can sometimes affect the way you do a piece, that's all. You find when you back up, you say now how come I slowed down or didn't do this or didn't crescendo or took this funny tempo, you'd say I think it's because my attention was misplaced, and that's all. Well, that's one of the things, yeah.

PO: So then--I know of your objection to the word creative in performance but you're putting it now on the level of attention, of a certain kind of attention it seems. Something can happen. But I'm wondering what the "something" is that is different from something else.

TN: Okay, then the something - well, that would be creative in that the performers would add some dimension to the music that maybe perhaps you hadn't heard quite or a slightly new inflection. I'd say that's creative. I think it only happens--in the ones I've heard just as a listener--I think it only happens when people are very sure of their skills and sure of the people around them and pick up inflections off of each other and everybody's ready to follow through. Now, you can follow through over the cliff, just like sheep, and say in the case of music you'd end up with an accelerando that nobody'd ever want (laughter). I think that implied in being creative is that that wouldn't happen. But that you would--it does seem to me that there, you can hear in a group a change in tone and accent and vibrato and they way they look around, the way people sit, just general attentiveness. But we would have had to have rehearsed it pretty well so you could kind of forget the rehearsal, I think. Now, in certain kinds of music that are, say, in the common denominator, some common trend where you can almost sightread it, then that sort of thing, I think, would be different. Where there are no problems or very minimal interpretive problems. Let's say you know, that's on a, a march,/you'd say on the organic scale of musical forms, I'd say a march would be on a low organic level like an amoeba would. You'd say there's not much there in the form of the piece, but it could still turn out to be quite exciting. And that therefore that might be an example of a piece that wouldn't have to be prepared but that everybody could take it as it is right then and through super attention and listening to each other they would make some of it right then.

PO: You seem to be well aware of the attention processes that go on. Are you aware of, do you distinguish that attention processes from the content of the work, say while you're engaged in a musical activity?

TN: Try that one again.

PO: Okay, you talked before about preparation, a real attentiveness to detail, like are the drumsticks in place or are the chairs right or this and that, so that you really pay attention before a concert to all of those things so that they can be out of the way. But while you're conducting are you aware of your attention as distinguished from the music itself?

TN: The answer bothers me a little because sometimes when I've thought that I was, oh, most involved in the music, and then heard a tape of it, I've sometimes been disappointed, and I'm not sure of all the things that go into that disappointment. But I think I've got a suspicion that probably in the case of large groups, I don't know about other things, that somebody has to be, probably everybody, a certain percentage of their mind fairly uninvolved, objective, that is, can I play this, is this really F# or am I just thinking it's F#. In the case of a conductor I think there'd have to be some channel left untouched somehow. I find that when I do better some part of my mind is ahead in a piece, I've got coming up, we've passed this, I suppose it would be like running an airplane, and that you can just check in on this and you can hear these words going through your head practically. We're coming to a place where so and so will split - I think I've had people where I knew that if I gave them a too energetic beat, they'd split the note, - I'd take that as a very primitive example. So you just say, I'm not going to do it (laugh). Now as soon as you say that there's a portion of you that's involved in the piece in a fairly objective way, just sheer, I'm not going to burn the toast. I think a good share of music making, or some portion of it, has a cooking aspect to it where you don't become so overtly or so emotionally involved that something happens that you don't want to. Now it can be, I'm sure that in, I think it does probably vary in certain kinds of pieces and that ⁱⁿ some kind of a piece a leader could act as for that day as just sheer catalyst and

everybody else would keep their channels--objective ones--going. And they'd say so and so's just wiggling off. And it might work out, probably would work out very well if, say in the case of new music, I'm almost certain I have to keep some objective portion, like one third or something, of my mind just absolutely thinking forwards and backwards, where we are in the piece, what's likely to happen. I probably have this more than a lot of people in that I've for many years actually been prone groups a lot where you're pretty sure you have to keep checking that they are going to actually play this part. So whether you do that with a group if you had a full time job, say with a big symphony or chorus or whatever, I'm not sure. I find I have a pretty cold-blooded section of my mind that goes when I do a good job.

PO: So it's involved with strategy.

TN: Yeah, I think so. And I think I've found through listening to other things I've done that I want to be sure that, say, for instance, accents and crescendos and decrescendos, and shortness and longness, tend to be not as short as you think they are. You get very involved and you think, that's really short. My impression, say, of short notes is they're practically never as short as they should be or could be. But most people, say in the case of short notes, don't really like to play real short. As soon as I come up against short notes I just flick the little that says, here's a short time. And then, is this occurring. Because I've found when you listen back to a tape, for instance, it hasn't, or is this really piano, and then you find that 90% of the time it really isn't, as far as you can tell from a reproduction of it. So whether you're just now at gunshot, I'm not sure...

PO: So you have this part of yourself that's busy with strategy. But there are also other things that you're doing simultaneously. Are you aware of those and how?

TN: No, I'm not. I think I'm at the point where I don't think much about, say, waving. I have found that I do practise things that are quite difficult, if we do a difficult waving piece with funny things happening, then I practise then in just a very cold-blooded fashion. And then just like--I think I was influenced a lot by the Zen and the Art of Archery sort of thing in a lot of ways, where a mixture of practice and forgetting it. So I practise it. Now when it comes to the waving part, I've found that for myself--I don't know about others--I do better when I let that go. And that I have enough physical-- I think I naturally have enough physical grace or appropriateness usually-- I believe that what I do is more or less appropriate and it's better when I don't think about it. But if I know the piece, forget it. And that part I don't think about--other things, I'm not sure what the other ones would be.

PO: It's also that you do have to get the attention of the group. What about when you're working with groups. How do you work...

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TN: I've often noticed when--you can easily notice--when a group starts talking. For example, the reason they're talking is something you're doing. That's all there is to it, it's not their fault. It took me long time to fix it; I don't even feel I've fixed it now, but I don't think it's--it hasn't been easy. It was sort of a mixture of cold blooded because I^{had} felt fairly unsuccessful a lot of times. I tried to figure out what it is. Now I've always been interested, I think, in things about how people work, what goes under the name of psychology, and reading about successful - athletic coaches, I think, are very adept at this it seems to me from just reading newspapers and athletic magazines and like you mentioned the black guy over in the Psych department, . They've actually figured out what one ought to do about it and what works out. So I've been interested in that and tried to use it in a profitable way. Now when it happened

I'd say it might be, I suppose, some 10 years ago when I knew that I couldn't do a lot of things and it was all my fault.

PO: . . . you've calmed down. Have you been able to apply some of the same processes, attention processes, that you're aware of, to other mediums or other forms of activity?

TN: Yeah, I think so. In my case I almost verbalize something. Like I just said, now I'm now going to pay attention and quit fucking around. And you just decide instead of letting your mind flit around as it might very easily, say when I took transcendental meditation stuff. It was interesting both to do the meditation and then to see how your mind would flit, go and come back. And in meditation stuff they would give talks on how it's okay for to let it flit around and then bring it back in. But I think that brought out to me how flitty we could be. You could be saying a mantra and pretty soon your mind would just wig out and you'd be thinking of something absolutely different. And you'd bring it back in again. It seemed clear that we could do many more things about paying attention than we often did. I just now make a decision more or less. I more or less say it to myself, I'll just now think about this.

PO: Is it possible that you could think of your history in terms of how you paid attention?

TN: I could because I don't think I ever paid attention for most of my youth. I think I did for a lot of things that I was truly interested in, you find that with a lot of people. But I didn't know how to do it. I just knew if I wasn't interested I just didn't pay any attention to it. You have to decide that sometimes you have to pay attention to things you're not interested in; for instance, how you teach this, Well, go ahead

PO: If you want to back up, are there points in your career where these things may have come up, made changes in your way of doing what you do?

TN: Well, it certainly was in the conducting racket, so-called, where I know that I remember years when I was fairly ineffectual, I think, as a conductor because say of models you'd have, for instance, people that wouldn't apply to you maybe. Like Bob Holliday, who you know was a big model of mine for some years, but he is a totally different person and a cool, little cynical at rehearsals and things like that, and I would--so I was around him a lot--and his conducting style was fairly restrained, and you can't put that on. It has to be in--I think, any kind of a person in any activity would have trouble with the people you model. And you'd get good things and bad things and you'd have to know when to leave them. And I know that for a long time I was too influenced by his style, for instance, which is very intent and sort of understated, and yet I don't really go for it, I don't think. That has a little to do with attention in that I think, probably, that my attention as a performer was kind of keep 'em cool, for maybe 10 years when I was with the Minneapolis Symphony. A lot of things were not good because you wouldn't dare to take a chance sort of. I kind of stayed too aloof from it all. That really isn't answering your question.

PO: Well, I think that threaded through all the things we've talked about--there are things that you've mentioned, points you've mentioned in your history--that each time you're actually mentioning things that seem to be signposts in your career and also seem to be changes in the way you--well, simply the way you're attending to things. So I guess what I keep trying to find out is those ? what your awareness of/things are and how they've guided you.

TN: Probably the key to it would be, or one of the keys--one has to back up and say, what is it I just did? Did I write it, is this piece any good; or is this performance what I thought it would be? You have to just be prepared to say, if it didn't work out--a kind of new thing to me in a way was about 10 years ago when we took the Appalachian Mountain Trail thing, where at the end of it

they would have reviews of mountain accidents. They'd go through somebody who fell off a cliff, you know, on Mount so and so, and they'd say, they went back here and they picked up this stuff but instead of getting the number so and so they got a number, too, and instead of calling the weather station, they didn't--and they'd go through and find out how come they fell off the mountain. And in all sorts of life nobody does that, they just say, "oh, that concert wasn't so hot". (laughter) and "we'll do it better next time". Or the same with a piece. And that really impressed me. I don't think I ever had a-- in music you don't read many surveys of how come something didn't really work. What did I say that time that made me dot that note? So one way since even reading the mountain climbing thing I've changed my view as to how I could fix a performance. I'd say that was probably my first experience of people reprocessing an activity in a way and see if they could do it better.

PO: Thank you.

(end of interview)