

Beth Anderson  
26-2nd Ave. apt. 2B  
NY, NY 10003  
212+777-6787  
2/10/80

PAULINE OLIVEROS WAS HERE

Pauline Oliveros. Ever hear of her? If not, it's about time. She was in town a few weeks ago to do music for Elaine Summers' intermedia performance at the Guggenheim. Everything that Pauline does has a sort of mythic quality, a largess, a wide arc--and the echoing, resonating vocal piece in the tiered space of the Guggenheim was no exception. She's been interested in meditation since about 1971 when she made a piece called TEACH YOURSELF TO FLY. Before the meditation pieces, she did a lot of improvisation--in groups and alone, with instruments and finally with voices. Before the improvisation, she wrote out the notes, just like everybody else--but she said that that didn't work for her. She didn't get what she wanted and she discovered if she told people something to



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do (instruction pieces) she got better results--more of what she liked. So, the composition at the Guggenheim combined all these threads of artistic evolution. It was vocal, ensemble, an instruction piece requiring certain limited improvisation and listening (she's also ob<sup>s</sup>essed with attention and how to get it), peaceful and meditative, about 25 minutes long, and used what sounded like (mostly, or all?) women's voices. That's the other thread in Ms. Oliveros' life--openness to and interest in women, feminism, the sound of women's music and voices, working with women, and, therefore, self-discovery.

The most exciting thing about Pauline's work, for me, is the fact that she is so inwardly motivated. I have looked at her work for years and always been able to "see" how her evolution as a composer moved side-by-side with her external life and the conditions in the society at the time. But I was completely wrong. She has something to say (from her heart) and she is saying it--not in response to anything. Besides that, what comes out of her inward looking is interesting and often very beautiful. And that's very unlike a lot of other supposedly inner-directed but unbelievably gross, limp, and altogether wretched music we hear about town, now and again. I imagine that



it depends on the mirror used for looking (distorted?, dirty?, or clear?),  
not to mention the soul under inspection.

Speaking of the soul--and reincarnation aside, how in the world did Pauline develop? How did she get the way she is? She told me that she first wanted to be a composer when she was sixteen, but that she didn't have a way of making the music she heard 'accessible'--to herself, much less, any other performer. She used to study the accordion and the french horn, but her teachers didn't help her with composition. She didn't have any facility with notation and didn't try to manipulate the teacher to get him to help her with it. And so, the first piece she actually wrote down appeared when she was nineteen. It was for piano.

Some time after this Pauline began again to think about notation. Eventually she got rid of it. If you've ever looked at a choral piece of hers called SOUND PATTERNS, you know that she had already begun to give up controlling pitch by 1961. She made approximations. When the composer only provides an outline, the performer becomes of necessity more involved in making the music. Whether or not you think that's a good way of composing, it was an important idea at the time. Her approximations led to more theatrical kinds of music. DOUBLE



BASSES AT TWENTY PACES (1968) is my favorite--a duel for good string bass players--death by riff... During part of this decade she was involved with the San Francisco Tape Music Center and Mills College.

Tape music was vital to her. One day she put a tape recorder in the window and recorded whatever happened. When she played it back she discovered that she had not heard everything that was on the tape. She had been unconscious of what was 'sounding'. Apparently that was a big realization. The tape recorder could remember everything and store it! It freed her to work in the oral tradition. It turned her onto sound, as opposed to 'musicmusic' and helped her escape the pain and responsibility of compositional specification. (Does that sound like hemorrhoids? Sure, and it feels that way when you're trying to be specific.) I'm positive it was a great relief.

Anyway, about 1967 she went to teach at University of California down at San Diego where she met Al <sup>Huang</sup>~~Wong~~ ( a dancer with and for whom she improvised), started an improvisational ensemble that grew into the women's ensemble, became interested in educational psychology and attention, began playing long tones on her accordian which she eventually discovered to be sonic



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meditations, and where she continues to teach. San Diego provided Pauline with a home base through which she filtered her life experience and came out with a very long list of compositions. Most of these pieces have not been seen or heard in New York, and probably won't ever be, because they don't travel well. They're too big and too expensive to mount. A piece she made last April, EL RELICARIO DE LOS ANIMALES (for singer and two flutes, two clarinets, two trumpets, two trombones, two violins, two cellos, two string bass, two alto saxophones that double on bass clarinets and four percussion) is just one of those pieces that are possible in a school situation where there are a lot of free players. In New York it would cost at least \$4,000 to pay the performers for four rehearsals and a performance--and then there's the publicity and the hall rental to consider.

The other day when I saw her, I asked her what she wants to accomplish overall in her work and she said that she wanted to change her mind. ~~Now~~ <sup>INTO</sup>  
~~what does that mean,~~ <sup>what,</sup> you may ask. And the answer is even stranger. She said, "Into nothing." Now, this would be the point at which to sum her up in terms of Zen, the psychological implications of nothingness, and the educational



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<sup>consequence</sup>  
~~implications~~ of not-knowing, but I don't see Pauline as a disappearing act.

I see her as a great warrioressa! My excuse for doing so is based on a story I heard at least seven years ago that goes like this:

Pauline and the women's ensemble were at the airport en route to a performance. The plane fares were being donated and so some waiting was required. Finally, a basketball team whose fares were also being donated showed up and was about to board when Pauline went up to the desk and was told that her group would have to wait, even though they had been there first. She kicked in the desk (she's into martial arts, you know) and was boarded immediately with her entire group.

Now, this may be <sup>totally</sup>~~entirely~~ false. (Baker's Encyclopedia has 16 errors in it's biography of her, too.) But then, who cares? It's a great story and I've already said that Ms. Oliveros' activities have a sort of mythic quality. And, they do! They do!