

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN COMPOSERS

John Luther Adams and Pauline Oliveros Discuss Process, Buck Rogers and the Popeye Club, Explorations in How Listening Happens, and Rediscovering Polyphony via the People's Microphone of Occupy

JOHN LUTHER ADAMS: What are you working on these days?

Pauline Oliveros: As usual I am working on myself, hoping to expand my awareness - my consciousness.

JLA: Or maybe I should ask: How are you working these days?

PO: I am working any way that I can! In December I made a piece with my harmonica recording directly into Audacity on my computer one track at a time for six tracks mixed down to mono. Making "Air" for the album "Music for Plants," being produced by the Kitchen. Nothing fancy except that the harmonica is extremely sensitive to breath, mouth resonance and tongue placement so there is direct processing of tone.

I made another piece, "Vancouver Calling," for three groups of players: Avatar Orchestra Metaverse (AOM) in Second Life, Adaptive Use Musical Instruments (AUMI) players and Instrumentalists at the Vancouver Forum in Real Life. The score is intended to coordinate the groups so they can perform together from their different locations and situations. AOM avatars play in world instruments of choice that also emit particles that show when they are actually playing. This is to help distinguish who is playing and also provide interesting visual effects.

The sounds are streamed into the space at the Vancouver Forum at Simon Fraser University. The AUMI players are using a software-interface developed by Deep Listening Institute, Ltd. to enable people with disabilities to make musical sounds with their available movements, tracked by camera.

The instrumentalists are players interested in improvisation. All sounds from Real Life are streamed into Second Life as well as video of the players. So the score is based in call, response and listening. Each player invents a signature call that is used to establish identity and develop relationship to another player. Then there are a variety of ways to use the call, variations of the call leading to a section of free improvisation, a return to including the call and finally to using the call as ending.

JLA: What's your process?

PO: My process always begins with listening. Any action proceeds from the space of listening, and then listening to the action, to the next action, until there is only the space of listening.

JLA: What tools are you using?

PO: First tools are my ears. Next tools are the neurons and networks and the mysterious interactions of memory and new pathways to new networks in the brain. However, I choose to extend into outer world tools such as the computer I am typing on at this

moment, depending on availability, accessibility and purposes. Sometimes I wish for tools that don't yet exist.

JLA: How much of your work originates in solitude?

PO: I don't really know! I do love solitude when I have it. However, ideas flow in the midst of chaos, too.

JLA: And how much of it grows out of your collaborations with other musicians?

PO: My collaborations with other musicians date back to the late 50s when Loren Rush, Terry Riley and I improvised together. In the early 60s, improvisations continued with Morton Subotnik and Ramon Sender Barayon. In the late 80s, the Deep Listening Band with Stuart Dempster and Panaiotis began, continued in the 90s till the present with Stuart and David Gamper. We have just lost David who died suddenly on September 27, 2011. This is a sad moment in a 20-year collaboration. There are many other collaborators in short- and long-term situations.

JLA: I'm very sorry to hear about David.

JLA: Confronted with the seemingly overwhelming problems of our times, I sometimes wonder how I can justify devoting my life to making music while the polar ice is melting. What thoughts do you have about the meaning of music in a world with seven billion of us human animals?

PO: Humans cannot do without music. There is more music now than ever before made by more of those seven billion people than ever before. Maybe there needs to be music to accompany the ice melting. Maybe there needs to be music to help change minds towards the elimination of wars and the support of peaceable lives.

As composers, we can associate our work with our beliefs and purposes to help raise consciousness for the plight of ice that is melting because of global warming. The plight of ice is our plight. The small gestures that we each make can connect into larger purposes through community and communities. We have the means of communication for local and global connections. More than ever before we need networks and the wisdom to understand that the greater forces of the universe are most likely microscopic.

JLA: Your creative life has spanned an extraordinary range of musical explorations. How has your work changed over the years?

I am writing a long article just now—*Music Technology Trails: Eight Decades – Reverberations*—for the *Jefferson Journal of science and Culture*. My work was influenced mightily by the Buck Rogers episodes that I heard on the radio and saw in the Saturday morning Popeye Club when I was six years old. Dr. Huer the genius scientist made me aware of future technology and fantastic devices. Colonel Wilma Deering, Buck's co-pilot, was there, too: an advanced idea concerning women for 1932 when the serial was launched. I realize now that I have been incorporating technology as possible throughout my career, with the early prompting coming from those childhood encounters with science fiction. So as technology changes, so does my work.

JLA: What would you like to explore next?

PO: I have just finished reading “Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain,” by Antonio Damasio, neuroscientist at USC. According to Bruce Charlton, “Damasio is a pioneer at the furthest reaches of understanding the human brain and human intelligence.” By 1970, I had begun my study of “consciousness” through composing “Sonic Meditations.” I attended the first scientific conference on consciousness in 1970 held at UCSD. Until that point, “consciousness” was not considered a possible subject for scientific study. Neuroscience was not a field.

Damasio’s work is delving into what I have explored and would like to explore more deeply with a neuroscientist. I believe that by learning more about how the brain processes sound, silence and sounding, or how listening happens, I can affirm what I call Deep Listening and how my composition is influenced by my practice.

JLA: I hope to hear the results of that collaboration. What other new musical experiences would you like to have?

PO: As I listen to the world as music, I would like to hear the sound of global peaceful existence.

JLA: I hear that! Are there current or recent developments in music that you find especially interesting?

Yes, I am very inspired by The People’s Microphone (PM) developed at Occupy Wall Street, and being elaborated at Occupy LA and other Occupy groups around the world. The PM is basically a call and reverberate tactic that is being used in very creative, strategic ways.

When an individual shouts “Mic Check!” the surrounding individuals repeat words that the leading individual says. This repetition then reverberates through the crowd so that everyone can hear what has been spoken. This was developed because no amplification was allowed in Zucotti Park. PM created a natural human-embodied way to amplify without equipment. I have written a piece, “Occupy Air,” for the PM. “Mic Check!” is called, “Sing!” is called, then a musical phrase is sung and the piece develops through the crowd.

JLA: That sounds terrific. I’ve been exploring something similar in “Inuksuit” and a new piece titled “Sila: The Breath of the World.” I’d love to hear more of your thoughts about making music outdoors without amplification.

PO: John, the PM is new to me. I really love the idea and think it could be elaborated even more. The simplicity of the idea is really effective. It does not need to be more complicated. By elaboration, I mean ways of using PM for other compositional purposes. PM comes out of a need to be heard. So be it!

There may be a way to measure how many people are needed to create a critical mass that can be heard over distance. It would be interesting to know this in terms of an open field with no reflecting surfaces except the earth. It is interesting in Venice to hear voices amplify in the narrow corridors.

JLA: Yet another reason to visit Venice. And, it makes me wonder: Do you think we're re-discovering polyphony here?

PO: Whatever you want to call it PM is a revolutionary answer to the suppression of those that would prevent voices from being heard. The new polyphony should be inclusive of many voices speaking and singing of freedom and the beauty of equality.

JLA: As John Cage might say: "Here Comes Everybody!"