

A Conversation Between Musicians

Composers [Anne LeBaron](#) and Pauline Oliveros discuss music and activism, the formation of "Occupy Oceans," future tools for composing, and unified theories of collaboration.

ANNE LEBARON: This dialogue we're about to have, Pauline, in celebration of your eightieth birthday, is an honor for me, as a long-time admirer of your creative, personal, and essentially shamanic force, and as a composer colleague. Plus, we share the same birthday!

PAULINE OLIVEROS: It is wonderful to have greetings from my astrological twin sister for my 80th birthday. Congratulations on the recent success of your *Crescent City* hyperopera! The [review](#) in the *LA Times* by Marc Swed was terrific and greatly increased my desire to experience this work. I am most certainly hoping for a reprise on the East coast!

ALB: Thank you, Pauline, for your enthusiasm and may your wish (and mine) for another performance on the other coast come true.

ALB: You're known for your activism through music and for expressing the inexpressible through your concepts and performances. In the July 17, 2012, issue of the *New York Times*, an [article](#) was published about an controlled experiment proving that whales are able to 'close' their ears, protectively, in response to loud or disturbing sounds. It seems to me that this discovery might be a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, it has inspired conservationists and scientists to try and replicate the results of the experiment in natural surroundings, by teaching these creatures how to proactively protect their hearing from dangerous levels of sound (such as sonar experiments from the U.S. Navy) that have been proven to cause significant damage to whales, dolphins, and other ocean-dwelling mammals. (Loud booms from Navy underwater experiments already lead to hearing loss in over 250,000 sea mammals on a yearly basis. This is projected to rise to one million due to planned expansions of such activities.)

On the other hand, the military, business and government organizations that stand to benefit from experiments that are harmful to sea creatures may use this discovery as an excuse to continue, or indeed, even amplify their activities that result in excessive decibel levels in the ocean.

PO: Hello dear Anne! Thank you for pointing to [Whales get some help in tuning out man-made noises](#) by William Broad in the July 17 *New York Times*.

Yes the article begs the question: how can all creatures learn to reduce their hearing sensitivity on cue? As you suggest, this shifts responsibility from the perpetrators of destructive noise to the innocent inhabitants of the ocean. Whales and dolphins are the more notable of sea creatures who do rely on hearing and their own sonar to navigate the ocean, find food for their young and escape predators. They also contribute beautiful songs to the ocean culture.

The business interests driven by desire for profit and the military seeking to locate enemy submarines, etc., are the beneficiaries of test results from the ocean that are done despite the destruction to habitat and creatures. After all, we are the country that developed and dropped the atomic bomb, and now have started cyber war with Stuxnet despite wise opposition and unknown consequences, some yet to come. Concerning whales and dolphins, we don't yet know what the far-reaching consequences may be if the ocean ecosystem is destroyed.

ALB: What might musicians do to raise awareness of this abomination?

PO: Starting with you and me, we can educate our students and friends about the effects of ocean sonar blasts on whales and dolphins. We can ask for their help to spread the word, call their congressmen, use social media, start petitions, do performative actions, use every means to get this issue before the public and congress. Engage the imagination of children about the plight of whales and dolphins. Encourage teachers to do school units on the subject.

ALB: These are all imaginative and inspiring ideas that have the potential to interface—in educational settings, to topics in science—making it more likely that they would be addressed by teachers and capture the imagination of children.

As musicians, we are blessed with exquisite sensitivity in our sense of hearing, and therefore might be drawn more readily to activism on behalf of the difficult situation for whales and dolphins who are so adversely affected by these sonar blasts.

It's a challenging situation, hidden from public view (and hearing) for the most part. Social media, performative events, petitions, education and actions that are, by their nature, cross-platform and can enhance one another. Activism resulting from the [plight of whales and dolphins captured for entertainment purposes](#) led to a ban in Israel, Australia, and Canada has banned the exportation of beluga whales, proving that public outcry leads to results.

How could the Deep Listening Institute (so aptly named in this context) be involved in alerting the public of these dangers that are increasing in the ocean, largely invisible to public awareness?

PO: DLI will start *Occupy Oceans* - a movement to demand protection for all ocean creatures, especially whales and dolphins, from man-made ocean roar - motor noise, sonar blasts and much more. The mindless use of technology has created the problem; the

antidote is the mindful use of technology to educate, raise awareness to curtail and annul the damage.

There is not likely a magical cure for the damage already perpetrated. People will be forced by uncontrollable circumstances of negligence to come together for solutions. It is really about inclusive spirituality, meaning that extreme heightened awareness of the interconnectedness and respect for all things, from boson to black hole, from microbe to macrobe, is needed.

ALB: With this new level of understanding—that whales and perhaps other ocean-dwelling mammals are capable of 'stopping up their ears' when necessary—the onus for protection from harm is placed on the animals, instead of on the perpetrators who are not as likely to find ways to decrease their harmful activities that lead to suffering among these creatures. In a similar but contextually different vein, women have long been expected to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancies, with methods that have sometimes led to harmful side effects. How do you think these two scenarios relate to power issues?

PO: We need to empower people to use their voices to speak up at the slightest transgression. We are too-long intimidated by those who hold the purse strings (power and power over). Empowerment means bringing bodies together for the common good. Because there is the 99% of people controlled by the 1% of the wealthiest people on earth, this is the time to break the spell of money starting with ourselves. It is time to disempower the desire for money - more money than any individual needs for living and the pursuit of happiness. It is time to move through the addictive desire for money.

ALB: How can music help to overcome such entrenched attitudes?

PO: The 1% holds power because the 99% allows it. We need our own USA Spring. How about millions of people singing songs of empowerment?

ALB: Rising up in the USA to rebalance, why not...let the call begin!

ALB: What were your reasons behind the decision to trademark 'Deep Listening'?

PO: Deep Listening® came about after Deep Listening Band made our signature recording in the Dan Harpole Cistern at Fort Worden, Port Townsend, WA. *Deep Listening*, the recording, was released in 1989 by New Albion and is [still available](#). My long-time friend and associate Stuart Dempster—co-founder of the band—advised me to register Deep Listening since I began to use it as a logo for my work. DLI is termed a "service mark" because we are a nonprofit organization.

Sure enough, many others have tried to trademark Deep Listening, including the Army! Our attorney advised us that the TradeMark office registered a request for Deep Listening to the Army for [classes for soldiers in situational awareness](#). The trademark was granted because the Trademark office did not think that the activity would interfere with our activity.

I never thought to register *Sonic Meditations* for a service mark. Now there are a variety

of uses to be found for *Sonic Meditations* through Google just as *Deep Listening* is used without reference to my work.

Actually I am very happy that both *Sonic Meditation* and *Deep Listening* have become memes. I would rather that these be freely used as influences for mindful listening.

ALB: You've written works for orchestra, such as *Four Meditations*, and even for the online Avatar Orchestra Metaverse. Have you ever written a composition for a 'standard' symphony orchestra, i.e., one that would belong to the League of American Orchestras?

PO: I wrote *Tashi Gomang* for the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra in 1981. It was performed in between Mozart and Beethoven under the direction of Dennis Russell Davies. *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation* (1970) is also an orchestra piece. I lost interest some time ago in standard configurations of instruments and really prefer mixed inclusive ensembles that include a diversity of instruments of the world. Players tend to loosen up when they are not a part of a standard grouping.

ALB: That's as good a reason for individually configured groupings as I've ever come across, and attest that it's true in my experiences as well. Ensembles that are more fluid in size, instrumentation and configuration than the standard orchestra definitely seem more open to experimentation and unusual approaches.

An operatic staging of "To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation" will be given this week in Los Angeles, by Opera Povera, at [REDCAT](#)...and I'll be there, wouldn't miss it! Do you plan to attend the performance?

PO: I would dearly love to be there, however I have previous obligations here on the East Coast. I am fascinated with the talented Sean Griffin's operatic treatment using my music and the title metaphor to develop this piece. I am hopeful that I can be present at another performance.

ALB: In [your interview with John Luther Adams](#) you mentioned that at times, you wish for tools for composing that we don't yet have. Could you elaborate?

PO: Today, it is already possible to alter any parameter of music digitally, including the sound of instruments and the acoustics of any venue. The most problematical issue is interface or the way to access the enormous power of computers. Any instrument that is not a human voice has to have an interface to make sound waves - i.e. a keyboard, bow, mouthpiece, valves or reeds, etc. The current use of keyboard and mouse for a computer is not intended for making music. The interface is for text and code rather than performing. Though there are many breakthroughs in controllers such as Kinect and other game controllers, there is a long way to go to achieve transparency and embodiment for performers.

How about a venue that automatically and intuitively adjusted to your musical needs and could join a performance with appropriate adjustments to the acoustics from performing areas to audience areas? Such programming is possible but needs to be considered as

something to enhance the quality of life and music making. Of course, the sponsor of such technology will be looking at how to make a profit.

ALB: You also mention that the 'greater forces of the universe are most likely microscopic.' Where does the discovery of the Higgs boson fit into this philosophy and how might it affect the way we think about collaboration as musicians?

PO: We will likely be looking beyond the boson soon as theoretical physicists begin to articulate a unified theory. We might look forward to unified theories of collaboration. Certainly noticing how we affect one another at deeper and deeper levels should be at the base of successful and transcendent collaborative efforts.

ALB: That's a potent phrase, 'unified theories of collaboration!' I imagine, Pauline, that you have affected more people's lives in significant, fundamental and unforgettable ways than any other living composer. Your life's work emanates from an attitude embracing exploration and advances in technology, tempered by a researcher's doggedness.

In other words, what you've accomplished and how you've managed to have such a sweeping influence originates in your creative impulses, and naturally flows outward in a combination of musical compositions, collective music-making and philosophical developments that will surely continue to evolve when you are no longer on this earth. Did you ever have such a 'goal,' or vision, or a wish? Or did so many novel accomplishments, which transcend political and aesthetic borders, emerge naturally?

PO: In the earlier part of my career, I was mostly concerned with how to compose and make the sounds that I wanted to hear. My goal or vision for myself was to create and perform music no matter what.

1970 was a turning point for me when I began to formulate *Sonic Meditations*. This was a radical departure from the avant-garde scene at UCSD that included me. I was reacting to the Vietnam War. The violence of the times forced me to turn inward to a kind of meditation involving listening to long tones that I performed vocally or on my accordion. This included noticing how I was affected mentally and physically. I was giving attention to my attention. Simultaneously a form of composition emerged—*Sonic Meditations*—that became inclusive of anyone who wanted to participate. These pieces were the foundation for what I now term Deep Listening.

I had no idea about a vision for the future of this work. I was just following my heart and responding to the times and circumstances of living.

ALB: We surely all want to celebrate your 85th, 90th, 95th, 100th, and MORE birthdays in the coming years. As for your legacy, what is most important to you, with all that you've composed, written, influenced, and built?"

PO: Thank you for the projection of more birthdays! I certainly am enjoying my 80th. I guess the most important thing that I would like to leave as a legacy is the possibility of an open door for anyone to explore his or her own musicality and creativity.

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