Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice by Pauline Oliveros
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of Europe. Gooley looks at the critical reaction to show that the response of the Berlin public was viewed as a form of sickness that resulted from social conditions in the Prussian capital rather than from the specific characteristics of Liszt’s playing. He writes:

More than a mere political construction, Lisztmania spoke to circumstances peculiar to contemporary life in Berlin: highly punitive laws of censorship, restrictions on free expression in public spaces, the weakness of the bourgeois public sphere, and the self-enclosure of the aristocratic and bureaucratic circles. . . . Liszt’s outstanding reception in Berlin, then, can be attributed as much to the character of Berlin as to Liszt’s virtuosity. (p. 232)

He goes on to present evidence that the second major cause of Liszt’s success in Berlin was a conscious effort to engage in altruistic and philanthropic activities that endeared him to the public.

This book follows a trend in much recent scholarship of taking a seemingly straightforward issue—Liszt’s position as history’s greatest piano virtuoso—and problematizing it. The subtlety and complexity of Gooley’s arguments add new insights to our understanding of nineteenth-century concert culture and the familiar story of Liszt’s triumphs. Rather than an inevitable result of his transcendental abilities, the pianist’s reputation for virtuosity is shown to have been based on a set of unique social conditions that allowed him to thrive where others failed.

In summary, this book is a rich trove of social history that sheds new light on the context in which Liszt’s virtuosity was received. Those looking for discussions of musical elements will be disappointed, for these are mentioned only in passing and are usually analyzed superficially. The historical context that Gooley offers more than compensates for this omission, however, as the book is a valuable addition to Liszt scholarship.

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Before you read beyond this first paragraph, take four or five minutes to do this simple exercise: stop and listen. What do you hear? What is the most distant sound you can hear? The closest? The most vivid and the most subtle? Can you relax and just take in the whole soundscape? How do you feel after doing this? Has anything changed?

You will not be able to understand the power of Pauline Oliveros’s important new book, unless you take time to experience and practice different ways of listening, for this book contains a series of invitations to explore the world and ourselves through sound and silence. It is also an initiation in the practice Oliveros calls “Deep Listening.” One should enter this book with caution, because, if you are willing to explore experientially what it offers, it could well change your life.

If one’s hearing is healthy, listening seems as natural as breathing, since we are embedded in a sonorous world, with sound waves washing over and through us constantly. Yet “listening” is very different from merely hearing. If you need proof of this assertion, just stop reading again and listen. (You may wonder who turned up the volume!) Directing attention toward auditory perception can transform an ordinary din into an aesthetic experience, as John Cage’s 4’33” invites us to do. Awakening to the transformative power of perception takes practice, and as we practice, our listening and the quality of our experience seems to deepen, and with it the quality of our lives. For Pauline Oliveros, listening has been her life-long practice, and her new book offers a culmination of her experience and teaching in this realm.

That Oliveros has been a major figure in the field of experimental music as composer, performer, teacher, and writer hardly needs mention. She has to her credit an impressive catalogue of scores and recordings, as well as a wealth of articles, most of which have been drawn together and published in two collections: Software for People: Collected Writings 1963–1980 (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1984)
and The Roots of the Moment (New York: Drogue Press, 1998). A defining moment in her life came in 1953 when she placed her new tape recorder on the window sill of her San Francisco apartment and recorded the sounds of the street outside. When she played back the tape, she realized she was hearing sounds she had not heard while taping them, even though she thought she was listening. Surprised at the discovery of what she had missed, she gave herself a meditation: “Listen to everything all the time and remind yourself when you are not listening.” She has based this meditation as a core practice now for over fifty years. It is fascinating to trace in her work over the years her journey of practicing being present to sound and silence.

Oliveros’s exploration around the year 1970 of group improvisational practice called Sonic Meditation proved a major development in her career. Influenced by her study of Asian contemplative practices, including Buddhist meditation, she created strategies for improvisation that allowed musicians and those without musical training alike to explore modes of listening and responding in sound. The first collection of Sonic Meditations was published in 1971 as a series of verbal descriptions of how to listen and create sound fabrics in groups. In these pieces everyone is a participant and there are no separate spectators. Active participation helps develop individual awareness and sensitivity, as well as a sense of group bonding and healing, where music is considered “a welcome by-product.” Sonic Meditations laid the foundation for the practice of Deep Listening.

Oliveros coined the term “Deep Listening” in 1989 after making a recording in a remarkable acoustical space: an abandoned cistern at Washington State University with a forty-five second reverberation time. Her friend and long-term collaborator Stuart Dempster recounts the story in the foreword to the book. He points out that the term captures Oliveros’s approach to music making over many years. Although others use the term “deep listening” to describe different practices, it has become the registered service mark of the Deep Listening Institute (formerly the Pauline Oliveros Foundation) in Kingston, New York.

In 1991 Oliveros led her first Deep Listening Retreat, which marked a phase of her career in which she began doing systematic training in the practice of Deep Listening. These retreats have occurred at least once a year since then in North America and in Switzerland. They last a week and propose twenty-four hour listening, including listening while asleep and dreaming. A three-year certification process began in 1995, qualifying holders to teach Deep Listening Workshops, which are now held throughout the world. She also teaches Deep Listening seminars at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Mills College (at the latter her “virtual presence,” using live, interactive video and Internet technology).

Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice is a detailed and well-organized manual of Oliveros’s Deep Listening practice as offered in retreats and longer seminars or workshops. The preface provides a background while the introduction poses basic questions about the practice meant to be explored experientially. The rest of the main part of the book describes a typical four-hour class in detail, presenting each component with a description, rationale, and practical tips and observations. The training exercises in each class include: energy and body-work, breath exercises, listening, vocalizing, and dream-work.

One might be surprised to find that body-centered exercises comprise the foundation for listening practice. Oliveros discovered long ago that body and mind are not separate and that an open, receptive mind requires a relaxed, alert body. She has practiced both yoga and t’ai chi, and holds a black belt in karate. Her classes in Deep Listening begin with essentially a standing meditation, where one establishes a good posture through a body-scan and visualizations. This is followed by a series of exercises to stimulate internal organs and increase flow of blood and lymph that involve arm swinging and slapping parts of the upper body, a “Taoist face wash,” and simple yoga postures. Then there are seven “chi” or energy exercises adapted from chi kung and t’ai chi involving conscious breathing and body movements. Awareness of breathing is further emphasized through a three- to five-minute breath improvisation that invites participants to create a playful, collective piece using only breath sounds. Later on in the class a period of extreme
slow walking is introduced, where one moves as slowly as possible, with a note that “no matter how slow you are walking, you can always go much slower” (p. 29). The body-centered exercises help to restore energy and promote balance and tranquility, and provide a good ground to begin listening—or any other purposeful activity. Focus on the body helps clear the mind, allowing for fresh insights and connections.

After the breath improvisation students are invited to enter that great mystery that is listening from the depths of their being. The second hour of the four-hour class begins with a listening meditation, the crux of the whole practice. Listening as meditative practice involves directing and training attention in several ways. A simple way of describing the two basic aspects of perception is, on the one hand, our ability to focus attention on a specific object, and on the other, to maintain an awareness of the field or context in which the object exists. In some meditative traditions the distinction is made between mindfulness (focus) and awareness (global attention to the whole field). Oliveros refers to these two aspects of attention, among other ways, as “exclusive” and “inclusive.” For several years she has used the diagram of a circle with a point in the middle to represent field and focus. Deep Listening seeks to balance a sense of precision, in experiencing the vividness and penetrating quality of sound, and a sense of expansion, in going beyond boundaries that exclude perceptible sound.

The purpose of this practice is “to heighten and expand consciousness of sound in as many dimensions of awareness and attentional dynamics as humanly possible” (p. xxiii). To this end the exercises point to and goad our attention in many directions. Deep Listening is a form of meditation in the way it systematically works to train attention in both mindfulness and awareness. A simple mantra is used when attention strays: “With each breath I return to the whole space/time continuum” (p. 12). When the gong sounds to end a session, students have a chance to reflect on their experience and describe it in their journals. Journaling is an important way to monitor progress and heighten experiential learning.

All of these exercises and activities precede the performance of improvised sound pieces and participation in a rhythm circle. Twenty-four Deep Listening Pieces are included in this book from a variety of sources from 1975 to 2001 providing opportunities to listen to and respond in different ways. The pieces vary from simple conceptual invitations to listen or remember sounds to more elaborate pieces to be realized over time and in groups. The shortest is New Sonic Meditation (1977): “Over a specified time have a randomized cue (or cue synched with a slowly recurring bio-rhythm) and meditators respond with sound on cue” (p. 43). Ear Piece (1998) is comprised of thirteen questions about the difference between hearing and listening, as in “Are you listening to what you are now hearing?” (p. 34). Deep Listening Through the Millennium (1998) is a goad to listen over a three-year period and to involve as many countries as possible (p. 33). Much in this sampling of pieces is very playful, even whimsical, but if one is willing to play seriously, you enter the vivid world of perception and direct experience with sound and silence, and that is anything but trivial.

As Dempster points out in the foreword, three prominent threads run through the book and Oliveros’s work in general. The first is the emphasis on health and healing, obvious in the body-centered exercises, but also central to the listening and sounding ones as well. Listening, or receiving sound, brings calm and balance, while sounding, or sending sound, can bring us into a communion with others. How easy it is to forget the restorative power of music. Deep Listening reminds us and restores us. Another thread is humor, which prevents the practice from being too serious or tight. In a practice that involves relaxation and dissolving boundaries, taking ourselves lightly is essential. This work, since it involves play, is too important for us to take ourselves too seriously. At the same time, listening involves effort and focus, so the two aspects of relaxation and effort must be brought into balance.

The third thread is Oliveros’s dedication to collaboration, and she is quick to point out that much of her practice owes to countless collaborations over the years. Particularly important to the development of the Deep Listening work are Heloise Gold and Ione, who have shared the teaching of the retreats since the beginning in

In this book, Ian Bradley, author of The Complete Annotated Gilbert & Sullivan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), reports on, and attempts to account for, the persistence of Gilbert and Sullivan. Why should such quintessentially Victorian theater still appeal to citizens of our bewildered and noisy postmodernist world? For "[d]espite being periodically written off as anachronisms by their detractors," he notes, "... [they] have not just survived but positively thrived into the twenty-first century" (p. vii). Bradley's analysis of this matter is largely sociological; he argues that the Savoy operas make a particular appeal to men, lawyers, Methodists, and intellectuals. Meanwhile, the author contradicts himself, for elsewhere he notes their popularity among women, Jews, children, and working class folk.

Plainly, a deeper understanding is needed. If art endures past the boundaries of the specific time and place in which it was created, there must be something in it which transcends sociology in the ordinary, limited sense of the word. An on-going aesthetic need in humanity, just so, must be met. Unfortunately, here Bradley gets mushy. When he tries to define this culture-transcending quality he is uplifting, but vague. "We come back," he writes, "to that quality of divine emollient and that indefinable but unmistakably spiritual essence which are at the heart of Gilbert and Sullivan's work" (p. 204). More troublingly, he seems to argue that people care for the work of Gilbert and Sullivan out of various forms of mental insufficiency. He says their work "provides an escape from the disorder and complexity of reality" (p. 107). And on the same page he cites, with apparent approval, the association of care for Gilbert and Sullivan with autism, and the "pursuit of the inconsequential."

The truth is different. As the great American philosopher Eli Siegel explained, art arises from the sanest possibility of mind—our ability to make a one of opposites, to find honest coherence where, ordinarily, we do not feel it. The operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, far from embodying neurosis, are instead radiant, if wildly imag-