

CREATING, PERFORMING AND LISTENING

**Frank J. Oteri meets with Pauline Oliveros at Mills College, Oakland CA
Wednesday, November 8, 2000, 8:30 - 10:00 PM**

Transcribed by Lisa Kang

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1. Defining a Legacy

FRANK J. OTERI: First of all, thanks so much for taking time from your extraordinarily busy schedule of performing and teaching to meet with me. This is a great honor. As I said before we started recording, I feel you are one of the major figures in contemporary American music. I know that's somewhat of a loaded statement, because it raises a lot of questions like "What is important?" and "What is a legacy?" And so where I'd to begin with this is to ask you what you feel your most important contribution to music has been. And you can even tell me if you think that's not a valid question.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, I'm not terrifically interested in leaving so-called masterpieces, but I think that more important is the work that I have done to facilitate creativity in others as well as in myself. What I think about legacy is leaving behind ways of listening and ways of responding which leads to making music. So probably the work that I began in 1970 called Sonic Meditations is that direction.

FRANK J. OTERI: And do you feel that there is any one work that is somehow a summation of what you have done. A musical composition...- If people wanted an introduction to the music of Pauline Oliveros, what should they listen to first?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Oh boy, that's a hard one. That's a difficult question because I've been around for a while. I have 5 decades of making music. Right now, for example, there are something like 4 or 5 CDs of my old electronic music from 1966 and 1967 reissued, and these are pieces that were never released before.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right, there's a great disc on Pogus.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Right, Pogus is one, and there's another one coming out soon, and there's one on Sub Rosa, and one on our own Deep Listening label which is coming out. That's not old electronic music, that's newer. So there's a lot of action, there's one on Paradigm, so there are several. Then there's some MP3 stuff floating around too.

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh really? I didn't find any of those yet.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, go to mp3.com and you'll probably find it.

FRANK J. OTERI: O.K., I'll do that. For years I've had an old LP on Columbia Odyssey featuring an early electronic work of yours. And there's also a wonderful LP on Lovely Music for accordion and voice that they still haven't put out on CD.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, they haven't reissued that.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's a very nice record.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: I sent a message to them about that fairly recently, but I haven't heard back.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, maybe when we get this thing up on the Web they'll do something about it.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: (laughs) Well, maybe so.

FRANK J. OTERI: Then of course, there's been lots of stuff on CD now on all different of labels: New Albion, Mode, and Lovely Music.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: So what I would suggest to answer your question best I can is I have a Web site, and on my Web site there's a discography. A lot of these records are out of print now, of course, but there's stuff that keeps being renewed on new labels. Maybe looking into the discography to see what's there, and also to tour around my Web site a bit. And then that would be a good introduction.

FRANK J. OTERI: Hopefully this interview will also serve for people as a means in. You mentioned the Sonic Meditations. We actually have a copy of the score of it in the American Music Center's library. To the best of my knowledge, there isn't a recording.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Not really. They are not necessarily recordable because there's a whole experience that goes along with doing them. They are not necessarily intended to be concert pieces, even though I come from making concert music. But I turned the paradigm around by saying, "O.K., you make the music."

2. Rethinking the Canon

FRANK J. OTERI: Well that's what I really want to get into further as we talk about your not wanting to write masterpieces. Do you even feel it's valid to want to be a part of the western canon of classical music?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, what that canon is at this moment is kind of a question. I mean the western canon - you think of what's being taught in academic institutions which generally center around 18th century so-called common practice.

FRANK J. OTERI: And it's common to a few countries in central Europe.

(both laugh)

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well it certainly came from the first Viennese school which was definitely riddled in aristocracy, music for intellectual pleasure. If we're talking about that, I have as much influence from that but it's balanced with a lot of other influences of music from around the world.

FRANK J. OTERI: At this point of the game, I mean now that we're at the dawn of the 21st century, it's really foolish to even think of a western canon. I mean we really have a world music that we can examine now with the development of recordings.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, we've got a 100 years of recording and the recording is probably the single most important technological development for musicians in the 20th century. That in the first half of the 20th century, second being the computer, and then the integration of computer and recording, of the computer technology and recording. Those are 2 very, very evolutionary developments. It has certainly made possible the exposure of world music, world from different parts of the world. But it has also made it possible to have a mirror image in sound.

FRANK J. OTERI: And for there to be communication between cultures.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: And that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Traditional musicians in Zimbabwe can hear what traditional musicians in Bolivia sound like, and visa versa.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Because of the mobility it's possible for those musicians to mingle with one another.

FRANK J. OTERI: One of my favorite stories is about an old Jimmie Rodgers song winding up in Kenya in the 1930s and influencing a whole style of music there. They started building their own guitars. There's even one group of people in Kenya that deified Jimmie Rodgers because he must have had super natural powers; he was able to communicate through this recording but he was so far away.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, right. It really is about ancestors and respect for ancestors.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, we can perhaps talk a little bit about several world music canons instead of just a western canon. In America in the 20th century we have a whole experimental music canon going back to Ives. I would argue that it goes back even further than that to the string quartet attributed to Benjamin Franklin and the hymns of William Billings. Most of the interesting concert music in America has been experimental in some form or fashion. And your music has been on these series that Michael Tilson Thomas did here at the San Francisco Symphony, the American Mavericks Festival. Your music was also part of a concert that the New York Philharmonic did of American experimentalists. Do you feel you fit in with that group of people? Another loaded question.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: I would say that I find myself feel collegial and had peer relationships with a fairly large group of people that where that was most apparent was probably began in 1979 with New Music New York which became New Music America for a good 10 years. There were New Music America Festivals moving from city to city. So the first one was in New York, the second in Minneapolis, then San Francisco. The idea was to move the festival to a different city every year. And in that festival were people who were composer-performers, or people who were so-called experimentalists or from the so-called avant-garde tradition were brought together every year. So there was a lot of camaraderie and exchange and places to go to play, and that festival served a really amazing function. They grew every year until it blew over the top and it ended. The last one was in Montreal.

FRANK J. OTERI: That was a great way to show the geographical diversity of new music in this country. The cliché is always for people think of New York and the San Francisco Bay Area as the two hubs of experimental music. But provocative things are happening all over the place. I think you offer an interesting perspective on this also since you grew up in Texas completely outside all of this. How did you come to music initially?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well initially it was because my mother and grandmother were piano teachers, and I heard music lessons every day, and I sort of gravitated to music myself. There was always music around one way or another, I heard a lot of music. Houston, where I grew up had a lot of different kinds of music. It wasn't a town for new music, or for jazz. I don't remember hearing Stan Kenton, for example, in Houston.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting because nowadays the Houston Opera is quite adventurous. They commissioned Meredith Monk's *Atlas*, and John Adams and a lot of interesting productions have come out of Houston. People always say New Yorkers have this snobbery about new music. Well, when I first realized that Houston was doing all these new operas, I was thinking, "Wow, we don't even do all that in New York."

PAULINE OLIVEROS: This is true. It's a little more decentralized. In New York we have the Metropolitan Opera that doesn't do new music.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, *Lulu* and *Moses and Aron* are considered the cutting edge of the avant-garde. They're both from the 1930s!

PAULINE OLIVEROS: But to throw things a little further along, in all of its history, the Metropolitan Opera has only done one opera by a woman, and that was Ethel Smyth's *The Forest*.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow, when did they do that?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: In 1903.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow, I didn't realize they had done that.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes, and it was a big success. But they've never done another opera by a woman since.

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to get back to that later.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, we'll go up and down.

(both laugh)

3. Texas and Accordions

FRANK J. OTERI: I find it so intriguing that you grew up in Texas and chose the accordion as your instrument because that already guarantees that you cannot be influenced by the western classical tradition because there is no western classical tradition for the accordion.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: (laughs) Well, the accordion was invented in 1840 and so it was already past the classical tradition. And there's a lot of snobbery about what instruments can be included in the so-called canon or not. But my mother brought the accordion home in the 40s because she was going to learn to play it and add to her repertoire of what she could teach. I got fascinated about the instrument and wanted to learn it, so I did.

FRANK J. OTERI: A few years back at a flea market I bought a Weltmeister accordion and I try playing it every now and then, but after all the physical energy required to do it, I quit. I can't last for more than 10 or 12 minutes. I'm out of shape.

(both laugh)

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well yes. It does require a lot of coordination because of the coordinating of the bellows, getting the air through the reeds and also playing buttons on the left and a keyboard on the right. And of course when you go in the vertical direction up is really down...

FRANK J. OTERI: Right, right. The world sort of turns sideways then backward-sideways. It's interesting to talk about the accordion's influence in music. The accordion is an instrument that the western classical tradition didn't incorporate, but all of these other musics used it - like the Polka music of the German immigrants in Texas, and it wound up in Tex-Mex music. There were all these great Norteño accordionists like Narciso Martínez, and nowadays Flaco Jimenez. Did you hear any of this music when you were growing up?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, the accordionists that I heard were Cajun accordionists because Louisiana isn't that far. I can remember hearing Cajun music beyond the big jukebox of the 40s listening to "Jolie Blonde" and playing it over and over again.

FRANK J. OTERI: I love Amade Ardoin...

PAULINE OLIVEROS: But I didn't hear Norteño music until after I left Texas because it wasn't that available to me in Houston at that time as I was growing up.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting because Norteño accordion music is more about lines and melodic phrases, whereas Cajun accordion music is more about breath and pulse, and that really is something that has shaped your musical sensibility.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, definitely. The Cajun accordionists really know how to make a sound. Those instruments are different too.

4. Role Models and Contemporaries

FRANK J. OTERI: Who were the compositional heroes in your early years? Here you are in Texas, you have a mother who taught piano, and you're playing the accordion now, and you enter the realm of academic music composition.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, I was always interested in music that I had never heard before. I was interested in all kinds of music, and the only reason why I might not have been interested in new music, or music that was being written right then and there is because I wasn't exposed to it. Otherwise I would have been interested. I'm really, what should I say, a little resentful that, for example, I didn't get to hear music by Ruth Crawford. I mean she was alive until the mid 50s; she died in 1953. I heard a little bit of Schoenberg, but that was the most recent music that I'd heard by 1949, or 1950.

FRANK J. OTERI: You were at UCLA at that point?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Right. And I had heard of Charles Ives, but I didn't get to hear his music. And also in the late 40s and early 50s, there weren't that many recordings available. So to be exposed to a lot of current or contemporary music was just not what could happen. And nobody was playing it in Houston so I couldn't get to hear it.

FRANK J. OTERI: But you went to study composition.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes. I was in the University of Houston, I was actually an accordion major. I had a really fine teacher Willard Palmer who I studied with for 6 or 7 years. He was trying to have the accordion be an academically acceptable instrument, and helped to build a repertoire for it, and he made transcriptions for it. So my acquaintance with Baroque music and some classical music came through transcriptions. When I went to University of Houston my major was accordion. He had established that as a major at the University of Houston. And I also took composition, but I had already made the decision by the time I was about 16 that I wanted to be a composer, I just didn't know how to be one.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now at the time, now that we get to the loaded gender question., I remember reading in one of the articles that you had written how you were the only woman in composition class, and what that was at the time. You weren't able to hear Ruth Crawford Seeger's music, and there were no models. What were the attitudes of the male students in the class and the teachers?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, actually, there were other women in that composition class at the University of Houston. I had composition for a year before I left - that was my third year - but I think the real cue came for me when my mother came home one day and she played some pieces for me that she had composed for a modern dance class at the YWCA. They were interesting, dissonant little pieces that looking back I realized that was a subliminal cue. There really were no models other than that.

FRANK J. OTERI: Even still there's an assumption, and it's disappearing more and more, but if you look at the rosters of the major publishers in this country - Meredith Monk just got signed to Boosey and Hawkes, but until then Barbara Kolb was the only living woman composer on their roster. At Schirmer the situation is very similar - Joan Tower is there but few others - Presser has more, including

all three women composers to win the Pulitzer thus far. But there's still this double standard where at this point in time there shouldn't be. There are as many interesting women composers out there as there are men composers today.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, there are lots; there are quite a few. There are more than I knew about coming up. When I came to San Francisco in 1952, I was in a composer's workshop at San Francisco State, and on that case there were 25 people there, and I was the only woman at that workshop. And I was writing dissonant music at that time.

FRANK J. OTERI: Were you writing serial stuff?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: No, I never wrote serial music.

(both laugh)

FRANK J. OTERI: Was there a reason?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: I wasn't particularly interested in that, I was interested in what I heard, and I think some of my music sounded serial, but it wasn't. I had it by ear, so to speak.

FRANK J. OTERI: There's this question of intuition versus rationalization. In the middle of the 20th century, academia became dominated by really hyper-rational music, and intuition was largely discredited. It was unfortunate, because if you listen to earlier dissonant pieces by Ives or Varèse...

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Or Ruth Crawford...

FRANK J. OTERI: Or Ruth Crawford. And it coheres to the ear in a way that an equally dissonant piece that might be structural along all sorts of rational visual systems does not because all of these composers were writing what they heard.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: That's right. I knew that was what I was doing; I was writing what I heard. That was what was important to me was to follow that, follow what I wanted to hear.

FRANK J. OTERI: But there's definitely a stylistic break between your early work and, dare I use the word, your mature compositional style. What would you say was your pivotal moment?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well I think it was quite pivotal when I began to work with tape music. That was at the end of the 50s. I began to play with sound on tape and I also began to improvise. So improvisation and tape music, and then electronic music, took me into another level of listening and formulating sound.

FRANK J. OTERI: And how to describe it? Longer, sustained, tone-based music...

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: Where it's much more concentrated and time is slowed down. And that was sort of a zeitgeist in the 60s with people like La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and yourself, and later Meredith Monk and Reich and Glass. It's interesting because traditionally you don't get lumped with that group of people, yet in some ways you inspired all of it.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: (laughs)

FRANK J. OTERI: Because you were doing stuff with tape loops before anybody.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, that was really part of the time. It was a pretty natural thing to have happen. Different people would have done it sooner or later.

5. Electronics and Indeterminate Music

PAULINE OLIVEROS: The first kind of tape loop that I can remember was 1960 when Ramón Sender and I started what was called Sonics, and this was gathering equipment together to make an electronic studio, and we had the attic at the San Francisco Conservatory, and this was the beginning of the San Francisco Tape Music Center, and what came here to Mills College and was renamed by Robert Ashley the Center for Contemporary Music later on. But we always did an improvisation in our tape music concerts, live improvisation. And Ramone had the idea to make a tape loop between 2 tape machines that would run while we were improvising. So one machine crossed to another so that there would be a long delay. Then he would play it back to us as we were improvising.

FRANK J. OTERI: And it would go round and round...

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, it would come around again. It wasn't a closed loop; it was an open loop.

FRANK J. OTERI: So it sort of created a canonic form. Now the whole question of this technology is interesting because your music is very much about nature in a lot of ways. At the same time you talk a lot about technology. A lot of people think of it as the antithesis of nature. But in a weird kind of way by channeling technology, it's sort of allowed us to reacquaint ourselves with more natural modes of making music. It's sort of a Marshall McLuhan-esque view of technology and the future. We talk about recordings. Oral traditions which weren't notated in standard music notation systems didn't get preserved except in so far as they got handed down from generation to generation. Recordings allow a different kind of transmission, so they allow us to return to the roots. We no longer need to notate music in order to preserve it. Were you thinking these things even in the 60s when you were doing stuff with the Tape Center? This activity predates your involvement with Sonic Meditations and Deep Listening.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well sure. With tape there wasn't any need to write anything down because you had the tape. I didn't make scores, I just made tapes. As I got more interested and involved in improvisation; improvisations were recorded so there wasn't any need to notate anything there either. I mean the tape was the notation.

FRANK J. OTERI: So those pieces exist as recordings, but they couldn't be recreated again.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Not necessarily, no. But then I'm not so very interested in that necessarily. I'm more interested in the continuing variation.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well so much of your music since the 1970s has been about the physical process about making music, and there's something about splitting and splicing tapes, or working on a Buchla synthesizer, that really sort of divorces sound from it's physical means of production. You don't really get that physicality, that breath, as it were, whether it's through singing or through moving your hands back and forth on an accordion. You made a statement at one point that everybody needs to make non-verbal sounds. Yet we as a society don't really do things to foster that, and music is just one of them, but just to be able to go bleb-bleb-bleb feels good.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: This is true.

(both laugh)

FRANK J. OTERI: You don't necessarily need a conservatory degree or to be a coloratura soprano or a baritone to be able to enjoy doing that.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: This is true.

FRANK J. OTERI: This gets back to the notion of it's not really about composition for you in the sense of your working out these parts that someone else then plays, and has to play according to what you desire. You create things that allow people to find themselves.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: This is true. It's an interaction, it's interactive music, not in the sense that interactive is used in technology but that I can offer a proposition, and someone else can engage in it, and engage the material in their own creative way.

FRANK J. OTERI: So this raises a whole other gamut then. Say you have a piece, and you go hear a performance of that piece, and these people worked on it. Often it may sound completely different than what you imagined.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: It might.

(both laugh)

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, why not recognize that?

FRANK J. OTERI: How do you feel about that as a composer?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: I feel fine. I mean it would be very interesting to see what I have instructed, what results from the construction I made.

FRANK J. OTERI: To turn this question backwards. People say that indeterminate music sounds completely different each time someone plays it. Well, what I find more fascinating is that you can have performances that are from scores that are completely open form sounding quite similar to each other. And I find that really fascinating. John Cage always talked about divorcing intent from composition, but it's still there, there's still a compositional voice. I can tell when I'm hearing a Cage piece.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: I can pretty much tell that I'm hearing my music too.

6. Collaboration and Improvisation

FRANK J. OTERI: A lot of work you do, one of the things that's so rare in western classical music is the idea of working with other composers and creating works with other composers. You said something very interesting in an article you wrote about women composers and society back in the 1970s. Of course the world has changed a great deal in 30 years, but what you said at the time I think is still relevant to gender issues to this day. Everybody is so engaged in the ego of creating a work, whether it's a work of music, a novel, or a painting, but every human being is created by two people. I don't think most men would think in those terms. Already there's this collaboration. All of us are a product of collaboration. So to have this notion of a single author of a compositional work is really unnatural in a way.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah. Well it's the promotion of the individual that has come of the 19th century in heroism and so on. But music before, I mean if you go back far enough, composers were anonymous.

FRANK J. OTERI: And certainly in other cultures there are group creations of things, and in our own culture, most rock groups create the music together.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, they'll create what they're doing. Sure.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting, jazz has now become academically acceptable, and we've gotten into this notion of the jazz composer, and the notion of the soloist improviser. You know, Charlie Parker's solos are his compositions. And yet we'll take an ensemble and say this is Charlie Parker. Even though there are other people playing there we call it Charlie Parker's record even though it really isn't. There really was a group of 5 people that were playing. But that hasn't happened yet in rock only because all these guys give names to the groups that don't include their own names most of the time.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well you know I have the Deep Listening Band, and we co-create what ever it is that we play. Sometimes I'll have a title for a piece, and we use that, and it's my piece. Sometimes Stuart [Dempster] has a title and it's his piece, or suggestion, but then we all work it out.

FRANK J. OTERI: With the Deep Listening pieces, has anybody else ever played those pieces. Do they exist in any other form than their recordings?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well most of what the Deep Listening Band plays is stuff we've done together. We don't broadcast it for somebody else to do.

FRANK J. OTERI: But you certainly do the pieces more than once.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Often, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: They are not necessarily just improvisations.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: What do you mean by 'just improvisations'?

FRANK J. OTERI: I'm not sure how to say this!

(both laugh)

PAULINE OLIVEROS: It's interesting, isn't it?

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah it is.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Because there's built-in to that particular way that you said that...

FRANK J. OTERI: Yes, you are right. You are absolutely right. How to say it? I guess replication is the issue.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: O.K., replication. What do we need that for? We've got recordings?

FRANK J. OTERI: It's true, but if music is this physical act, and this communal act - we haven't really gotten into that aspect of it - recordings wonderful though they are, divorce music from that. All of a sudden somebody could be listening to the Deep Listening Band and not deeply listening to it. They could be washing dishes to it.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: That's right.

FRANK J. OTERI: They could be shaving to it, or whatever, or have it on a walkman on a bus, and have all these other stimuli going on at the same time. And in a way it's sort of divorcing it from its physical root. How do you feel about that?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, we have live music, and we have recorded music. And as John Cage said, you need a lifetime to listen to live music and a lifetime to listen to recorded music.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting because Cage made a lot of statements against recorded music.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes he did.

FRANK J. OTERI: And it's only since he's died that there have been all these great recordings of his music. They are fabulous.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, there's a lot of good stuff. But also what has happened is that a record is no longer just a record. It's useful as material, and Cage has brought that about. He did it in 1942. He had a radio in one of the percussion pieces, so all of a sudden you hear a piece of music of some kind and it's incorporated into his piece. But today, DJs think nothing of mixing together anything they want to mix.

FRANK J. OTERI: Right.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: To make something live and performed, and physical, I mean there's a physicality to scratching and using turntables and so on. And it becomes alive again.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's a weird full circle.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: It's no longer an artifact, but as I say, it's material for a new creation, co-creation, appropriation, all of that. And I think it's pretty fantastic that that's happened, that it's become such a wave.

7. Working with Other Musicians: From Quintet of the Americas to Sonic Youth

FRANK J. OTERI: So getting back to this notion of replication and scores, and improvisation versus composition, or having something that other people can do or work with. You were one of the earliest people to experiment with alternative forms of notation - graphic notation, etc. When you've dealt back then to now, I mean now this is stretching back more than half a century. How do classically trained performers respond to those scores, how do they initially respond...

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well of course early on, the most radical departure was to do Sonic Meditations and just to transmit a score orally. I've found that the most receptive people were people who were not trained musically.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's ironic.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: They didn't bring that baggage to the experience. Early reactions, as far as musicians were concerned, they weren't interested, or they were ready to put it down because it didn't resemble what they were used to engaging with.

FRANK J. OTERI: And now?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Now it's much easier because the musicians have experienced so much and have been exposed a great deal. But you still run into attitude.

FRANK J. OTERI: And from all different perspectives.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Sometimes when you don't think it will happen it does.

FRANK J. OTERI: Getting into this whole idea of sharing music, and what that means, and what a composer can do who shares music. In addition to playing music yourself and co-creating music live with other performers, you've also written works for other people to do. And the range is so interesting. Everything from a wind quintet, like Quintet of the Americas, to a chorus, like American Voices, to the rock band Sonic Youth, one of my favorite bands of all time... These are a wide range of people who had to deal with a score of some sort from you. I'd be interested in hearing how the Quintet of the Americas reacted and then how Sonic Youth reacted because they have very different backgrounds.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, Quintet of the Americas, I worked with them on *Portrait* and with that piece, they each get a pitch set and metaphor.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's really a piece about them.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes it is. I've asked them to work from a feeling base. Here's some pitches - there's one called signature and maybe there are 3 pitches, make your signature with those 3 pitches, if you chose to go to that particular place in the map to play. There are also instructions there for listening in certain ways so that they can move away from those given pitches into more improvisation, but with guidelines for how to listen to other people or other sources of material. And they were scared because

they hadn't done anything like that before. They hadn't really had any experience with performer choice, or improvisation, or whatever you want to call it. But still, the guidelines are there. It's like here, here are some guidelines, make a piece out of it. Well, you think, "That's not a score because there aren't any notated pitches." Well it's not pitch-centered in the first place. We have pitch, we have rhythm, we have harmony and timbre, texture, density, volume. We have sound, we have silence and you put it together.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, this is an interesting challenge to the notion of replication, a piece tailor made for an ensemble. It wouldn't make sense for another wind quintet to play this piece because this is their piece.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well another wind quintet could have the score. Anytime anybody plays the piece they get a set of pitches which is unique to them. It's computer generated, it's program designed. So the pitch comes from information which is the name of the person, the date of birth, the place of birth, and the time of birth, and that information is then interpreted by the program and a set of pitches comes, and they are absolutely unique to that person. Each player in the quintet had a set of pitches that were unique to them, so that the 5 people were each contributing their own portrait to the overall portrait of the Quintet of the Americas. So it can be a solo piece or an ensemble piece, or duo, trio, or whatever, an orchestra.

FRANK J. OTERI: In our library at the American Music Center, we also have an orchestra score from 1981 called *Tashi Gomang* which looked really interesting to me.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, I have a tape of it right here.

FRANK J. OTERI: Ooh. I'd love to hear it... I imagine that your approach with Sonic Youth was quite different from these.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Sonic Youth got a piece called *Six for New Time* and I wrote it especially for them for 4 guitars and 2 percussion. It also is a performer choice piece but it's designed for some of the attributes of the group. There are noise components, in the pulse rhythm, and so on, and they have choices they can make. There's kind of a map - there's a hexagon that had different choices around the hexagon, and also ways of listening. I think maybe there's a scale they can choose to use as well. I was not able to be at the recording session. They wanted me to be there to work with them, but we could never get our schedules together. They had to work with the score themselves, and William Winant was one of the percussionists; he has an office across the hall.

FRANK J. OTERI: I noticed that.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: He's played a lot of my pieces. In fact he was on this recording *Tashi Gomang* from 1981.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you really can't speak to what it was like to work with Sonic Youth.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: No because I didn't get to work with them.

FRANK J. OTERI: But I guess you can say what you feel about the recording.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes, well I like it. I think it's really fine. I mean I wish I had had a chance to work with them. I might have been able to bring out more aspects of the piece.

FRANK J. OTERI: I found that the whole recording project they did so thought provoking. In the classical music field we talk about this ghetto of new music, and all the established rules, "You can't program a piece by a living composer or by an American composer because no one will come to the concert, etc." Sonic Youth does this album with your music, with Christian Wolff's music, John Cage..

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yoko Ono...

FRANK J. OTERI: All this music. And they have a huge fan base and people are buying it and people are hearing very experimental music, sounds they're not used to hearing, and loving it.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: That's right.

FRANK J. OTERI: I've been to Sonic Youth concerts and their own music is informed by their knowledge of the experimental music tradition, and there are young people, thousands of young people hearing these unusual harmonies, unusual guitar tunings, unusual intervals and loving it.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: And I'm finding that I'm being very, very well received by young people, and I really appreciate it, I like it. I play with lots of different people. DJ Spooky and I played together...it's very interesting.

8. Teaching

FRANK J. OTERI: You've been teaching for years and years, so you've always been able to stay young in that sense, and stay connected to a lot of music - when jazz came along there was a divide among people. A lot of people said "This isn't serious music." Now we've gone past that. And there's still a divide with rock, with people over a certain age saying, "This just isn't serious music," and that includes jazz people saying that rock isn't serious music. And now the rock people are saying that about hip-hop, and sample-based music. It's like every generation has this. For a short period of time I taught English in high school, and it was a great way of staying young, and staying connected, not falling into the trap of getting jaded.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: That's important.

FRANK J. OTERI: In a way it's a two-way street, this whole teaching thing.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: My mother is 86 now, and she's still teaching. A lot of her friends were young people, and she likes that. I think that I get it from her.

FRANK J. OTERI: So as someone who teaches composition, someone who founded the contemporary music department here, what do you do with your students. How do you keep them open minded? What do you do to keep them open to possibilities?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: I trick them. (both laugh) It's very interesting, you get a 20-year-old person who's going on 65. (laughs) Basically what I do is listen to what they say, and if they're not saying it, well then I find ways to get them to say it, to say something.

FRANK J. OTERI: And what kind of styles are your students are writing in, is it all over the map?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: It's very diverse, I would say. I'm not even sure if I know how to answer that. Each student is definitely treated as an individual, a new person. I don't try to teach composition, I don't know how to do that. But what I do know how to do is listen to what people bring to me and ask questions about it. And that's basically what I do. I try to draw them out as to what it is they want the piece to do, how do they want it to function. If I can find materials that support what they're doing I can do that. It's basically listening and questioning.

FRANK J. OTERI: I was lucky enough, as fate would have it, to get to attend a concert here this evening, and it was wonderful being able to hear it.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Matthew Goodheart. Yeah, it was pretty fantastic.

FRANK J. OTERI: So he's one of your students?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: No, Matthew graduated from Mills a couple of years ago. He wrote his thesis on Cecil Taylor. That was 1995, I believe, when he was working on that, because I came as a guest in 1995 and then I started teaching here in the fall semester in 1996. Matthew graduated right about then. Cecil Taylor had just been here and done a 40-piece orchestra work and Matthew's thesis was writing about that whole process.

FRANK J. OTERI: I should get a copy of his thesis.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah. Well it's online.

FRANK J. OTERI: I actually knew him before tonight because he'd sent a recording to *NewMusicBox* that we featured a year ago.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, I think he's quite an interesting guy. You'll find an real interesting variety of students here. The one thing that keeps me interested is them.

FRANK J. OTERI: I feel a great energy from this place.

9. Listening vs. Hearing

FRANK J. OTERI: We talked about the process of composing and the process of performing. What about the process of listening, an area that's really important to your work, which is a third equally crucial part of the equation? How would you describe Deep Listening in a nutshell as a process for the listener?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: It's listening to everything all the time, and reminding yourself when you're not. But going below the surface too, it's an active process. It's not passive. I mean hearing is passive in that soundwaves hinge upon the eardrum.

FRANK J. OTERI: And we're taught to sort of channel out stuff. Like, I'm hearing vibes right now in another room here and I'm actually enjoying them but I shouldn't be listening to them.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Why not?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, because society says I should stay focused on the one thing.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: You can do both. You can focus and be receptive to your surroundings. If you're tuned out, then you're not in contact with your surroundings.

FRANK J. OTERI: And I think you can't really listen to music if all you're doing is hearing sound.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah. You have to process what you hear. Hearing and listening are not the same thing.

FRANK J. OTERI: There's this wonderful statement in an essay you wrote about the zoo and about how we're such a visually based society. Zoos are open for optimal viewing times, but not for optimal listening times.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: This is true.

FRANK J. OTERI: And I thought that in a nutshell crystallizes our plight. Here in the West we've even made music visual by having notated scores, a lot of musical analysis is all for the eyes, whereas the ears are just as powerful a tool.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, the ear is the primary sense organ. It's the first organ to develop in the womb. The ear is fully completed by 4 1/2 months. So the fetus can hear in the womb. And it's the last sense to shut down after death.

FRANK J. OTERI: Really?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes. So you can still hear. There's still hearing going on, listening going on.

FRANK J. OTERI: And in our society today there's so much hearing loss, more than at any other time.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: This is very tragic.

FRANK J. OTERI: What can we as a society do to listen better? And more healthily as well.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, don't tune out. Every sound is a piece of intelligence no matter what.

10. Microtonality

FRANK J. OTERI: Now in the area of tuning, we really didn't get to touch on that but I really want to because that's an area that fascinates me no end, the more you listen, the more you realize that there are so many musical sounds beyond the equally-tempered scale. And you've done work for years using purely tuned intervals, just intonation.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: My accordion is tuned in just intonation and I like it, it's important to me, but I'm interested in all kinds of tunings, not just that. Not just equal temperament. We don't have to be stuck with one system. There's an interesting group that I'm performing with called the Space Between, with accordion in just intonation, shakuhachi, and piano in equal temperament. So that's three different tunings right there. So our performance together is really a negotiation on how to perform together and not have our differences in our tuning system collide in a way that we don't like.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's poly-microtonality. Johnny Reinhard who runs the American Festival of Microtonal Music is a real advocate of poly-microtonal thinking. There's a composer who's almost totally forgotten about now Mordecai Sandberg who wrote for all these instruments in all these different tunings, and almost nothing has been recorded, there are scores here and there. But other societies have done this for centuries. In West Africa, you'll hear ensembles where the koras are in one tuning, the balafons in another tuning, etc. and it works beautifully.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: The thing is that the tuning system is really only a reference. It's something referred to but most music deviates from it.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well I guess this gets once again to this whole notion that the so-called developed societies needed to have things that were identically replicable in order to mass produce them. In Indonesia, every gamelan is tuned differently. If you listen to a piece played by one gamelan and then hear the same piece played by a different gamelan, the piece will always sound slightly different. There must have been a time in Europe when every orchestra sounded completely different.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: I'm sure.

FRANK J. OTERI: But they put a stop to that.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, when you think about the standard, A = 440 - that decision that was made in England somewhere in the 19th century - that was a tremendously political act. It's also a product of the industrial revolution. It was something that would make it possible to have standardization among musical instruments.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's like Greenwich Mean Time for music.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: But it's truly construction.

11. *Crone Music*

FRANK J. OTERI: The last area that I want to about which sort of an extension of the hearing and listening thing, I have a favorite piece of your music. I absolutely adore *Crone Music*. I think it's a phenomenal, phenomenal work. You created it to go with a production of *King Lear*, and it would be described as "incidental music," but I think that term "incidental music" is somewhat pejorative. If we're listening, nothing is incidental.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: That's right. Actually in working with Lee [Breuer] on *Lear*, the idea was to have music that played all the way through so that there was always music throughout the whole thing, and that certainly is not incidental. It was a lot of fun.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's a wonderful, wonderful piece.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Did you see it?

FRANK J. OTERI: No, I only have a CD so I have this divorced experience. I've never heard it at a concert or in the theater, just in my home.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well, *Crone Music* can stand alone, so can *Lear*. (both laugh) But in this case, they wanted music as a constant, as a part of the set.

FRANK J. OTERI: It would be very interesting to see how it works with *King Lear*, and to hear how it works with *King Lear*.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: You know that they dropped all the royalty so they didn't call it *King Lear*, just *Lear*, and the roles were gender reversed so Ruth Maleczech played Lear.

FRANK J. OTERI: Oh wow. And Cordelia then was male.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: What was the gender of the Fool?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Transsexual.

FRANK J. OTERI: You know there's this cooky theory that Cordelia and the Fool were played by the same actor originally. They're never on the stage at the same time. And the Fool is the only character who doesn't abandon Lear, just as Cordelia remains true to him in her words...

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Maybe.

FRANK J. OTERI: Back then all the roles were played by men anyway...

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Right. Very interesting. Anyway, the Fool was played by Greg - I can't remember his last name. Glouster was played by a black woman.

12. The Foundation and Some Upcoming Events

FRANK J. OTERI: Last question for you, any upcoming projects coming up.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: All kinds. Tomorrow night I get the Goldie Award.

FRANK J. OTERI: I plan to drop by.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Oh good.

FRANK J. OTERI: But maybe we should explain what it is.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: The Goldie is an award that is going to be presented to me by the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. It's their award. It's for lifetime achievement and contribution to cultural life in the Bay Area.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's a wonderful acknowledgment.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: In December, there are two benefit concerts for the Pauline Oliveros Foundation at the Studio Valencia in San Francisco which features the Circle Trio which is another group that I play with, India Cook on violin, Karolyn van Putten on vocals and percussion, and we have a CD coming from Sparkling Beatnik.

FRANK J. OTERI: Is that the new label?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: What a great name!

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Anyway so that's Studio Valencia, and Sisters of the Sound Continuum is going to perform with us, and Philip. And the next night, December 3rd, Terry Riley and his 2 sons are performing with Space Between, this is at St. John's Church in Berkeley, a benefit for the foundation. So those are coming right up. And then the end of January, I go to the University of Wisconsin in Madison, the Arts Institute, I'll be the Artist-In-Residence for the semester there, and have a new project which is called *Io and Her and the Trouble with Him*. The concept is by Ione, the concept and the story, and we'll be collaborating on this production with Joanna Haigood who's an aerial dancer, and putting it together and doing it on April 13 in the Union Theater. So that's a big project that's coming. It'll probably be about an hour. And it will be the beginning of it - it will be developed further.

FRANK J. OTERI: And will it tour?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: We hope to do at other places, maybe we'll do it here in San Francisco in 2002.

FRANK J. OTERI: You should say something about the Foundation.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes, the Pauline Oliveros Foundation - this is based in Kingston, New York. You should come up visit there.

FRANK J. OTERI: I'd love to. When are you back there?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Well I'll be back in mid-December, but then I'll leave for Madison. But I'll be back there in May. We have a very full schedule, I'll give you the calendar, but you also can see the calendar on the Web. We have a building, and a gallery called Deep Listening Space, and a lot of different activities. I founded the Foundation in 1985 and it's for the support of NY artists and for the creation of new work. So the building is a creative cultural center, we can have projects, we can have artists-in-residence and work on various things - there's a production studio, and a gallery, and other things that are for developing, there will be a small theater for film and video, small ensembles and so on. But the idea is to support artists' projects, but the way we work is by sponsorship of projects. This doesn't mean we give grants, because we can't. We're too busy looking for money. But what we can do is provide a non-profit structure. So, for example, if you had a project, and you wanted to make a proposal, you could propose a project and as long as it's resonant with our mission, and you've written a budget and it has a line in it for administration for the Foundation, then you could raise money for your project using the structure. I have a chapter in Kingston, here in the Bay Area and also in Houston, Texas. But it has an international reach.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you go back to Houston from time to time.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, I'll be going back for Thanksgiving, for example.

13. The Web

FRANK J. OTERI: The final area I'd like to talk with you about is the Web, and how composers and musicians and artists of all type can use this wonderful tool.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: It's a fantastic tool, and I've been online since 1986.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: We had our Deep Listening catalog, mail-order catalog on the Internet before the World Wide Web.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's great. Do you do most of your sales through the Web?

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yes. I also just used the Web site for the development of the Lunar Opera which was done at Lincoln Center on August 17. There were nearly 300 performers involved in that, and it was developed over time using the Web site to put out the score, the synopsis, the performing list and production, and I used an e-list to connect everyone. We even had a registration form for volunteers.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you found everybody on the Web.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah, and the project was coordinated all through the Web and e-lists. We had two days for a walk through, and then a performance, and everybody knew what to do, and it worked really well. I think it's a new model for how to develop a project.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's definitely a way to get new music out there.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: Yeah. And we are planning and wanting to have Web cast from the Deep Listening Space in Kingston because it's a small space, but you can have nice performances, intimate performances. We just had a wonderful one last week, the Mallik family from India, Dhrupad singing, this gorgeous singing - you never get to hear it - it's a disappearing form because there are no more Maharaji's to support it. But this family is remarkable, they had a performance in New York and a performance in Kingston, so it would have been wonderful to have Web cast it.

FRANK J. OTERI: We're going to start Web casting.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: And we will too. I've already been involved in many improvisations on the Web with people in remote locations. In fact the first distance thing I did was back in 1990.

FRANK J. OTERI: This brings us back to the whole McLuhan thing - this really is the global village.

PAULINE OLIVEROS: We have the tools - we can do really good things or we can do really stupid things.

FRANK J. OTERI: Let's hope we continue to do most of the good things.