

## **Pauline Oliveros: a shared resonance\***

By Ximena Alarcón and Ron Herrema

### **0. Intention**

Here we honour Pauline Oliveros with an account of the resonances that she left with us. We reflect on how she organised sound and life, based on our shared experiences meeting her as a composer, performer, mentor, teacher and friend. The reader will meet us both as 'I', which we leave indistinguishable in order to follow and interweave the flow of our experience.

Our resonance is also organised as if a Deep Listening score (in italics), with invitations to extend the experience through listening as meditation.

### **1. Breathe in**

It started with breathing. Each performance: with a long, audible breath from the accordion. Eyes closed. Performing—improvising—was thus connected with the essence of life, with listening, and with meditation. I asked once about the closing of the eyes. Automatic, she said. Dancers were concerned she couldn't see them. She chuckled and said, 'I tell them don't worry, I know what you're doing.' I didn't doubt it.

Pauline taught us to listen and to sound as a never ending process of living and dying. Her organisation of sound was linked with the organisation of life. She was gifted with the art of listening and gave us sonic gifts through her being, in art and in life, stepping fearlessly into the realms of science, technology and spirituality, all together.

Pauline, did I understand that it is better to listen first before I sound? 'Sure!', she said, smiling.

### **2. Organisation of Life**

In addition to being deeply rooted in the connections among spirituality, music, and sound, Pauline was also very pragmatic. Reflecting on her decision to leave her full-time academic position to go freelance, she said there are three things one needs to know in such a case: where you want to be, what you want to do, and how much money you need.

Pauline, there are so many things I want to do, I don't have time for it all! 'Choose the top three,' she advised.

*Listen to a sound as life*

Sound as life belongs to a never ending continuum that she invited us to follow. The organisation of sound is the perception of and attitude towards the organisation of life, and we compose it in the pace in which we embody it.

*Sound a sound as life  
Follow slowly*

She invited us to follow it (the sound and life) in a slow and continuous pace, developing awareness of everything that is sounding, and also of what is not sounding, right now. She invited us to slow down the pace at which we listen, which is the way in which we live, in order to embrace a full life where all beings take part.

*Listen to your pace*

*Be simple, open to complexity*

Presence and absence. The simplicity of her invitations led to complex forms that linked feelings, sensations, thoughts and intuition. A sonic organisation across time and space, expecting the unexpected. An exclusive way of listening to your own breathing, to your own steps. An inclusive way of listening to others' breathing, to others' steps. The balance achieved between these two forms of listening, she said, will produce homeostasis.

### **3. Hello Butterfly**

My encounter with Pauline's music came late, around 2002, as I was preparing to teach the History of Electronic Music. A colleague directed my attention to the compilation *OHM: The Early Gurus of Electronic Music*, where I discovered her well-known *Bye Bye Butterfly*. I was struck not only by its ethereal beauty, but also by her mention in the liner notes of 'studio improvisation', which resonated with my own practice.

Not long after, she came to Boston to perform, and I thought it wise to investigate and experience this electronic music pioneer. Impressed beyond expectation, I stored the experience away in my listening bank.

Four years later, now in England, I felt that we needed to bring a female composer into our concert series and proposed to my colleagues at De Montfort University that Pauline come for a one-week residency. The wheels turned quickly, and a few months later on a rainy night in Leicester, I was sharing the first of many meals and fruitful conversations I was fortunate to have with Pauline over the next nine years, finding her then as I have always found her: warm, thoughtful and wise, down-to-earth, no waster of words.

Pauline, I think I have this tendency to over-make projects, there are so many elements. Smiling, "I know, I know, over-produced. Yes, we have many projects like that!"

Pauline found pleasure in complex, challenging and rich productions, such as the ongoing *Nubian Word for Flowers: a Phantom Opera*, a collaboration with author and director IONE. The story 'examines the colonial mind through a mystical vision of British Field Marshal Horatio Herbert Kitchener, who mapped the Middle East at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century'<sup>1</sup> and became Britain's Secretary of State for War during WWI. He is on a Nubian island. In this contemporary opera, performers connect to the sound of flowers cultivated by Kitchener, which are part of his encounter with timeless phantoms from displaced Nubian people and culture. The realisation of sounds throughout the opera expands the range of instrumental performing, listening across time, and connection with non-humans.

### *React fast*

Pauline believed that everyone needs to be heard, and thus responded to everyone's call. Sonic energy which is sent from someone, from somewhere, needs to be acknowledged by someone else, somewhere else. A member of multiple social media sites, she was there, at any time, responding with ease, playfulness, challenges, certainty, and kindness, offering a direction for someone's greeting, question or commentary. She also responded to, and created, silences.

How can you manage to be in all those social sites, Pauline? 'In the same way that you found me there!'

## **4. Feminism, Embodiment, Technology**

*Choose an instrument*

*Embrace the goodness of technology*

*Develop your art*

*Fearlessly learn your craft*

During her residency in Leicester, she assured us one night she would be OK walking unaccompanied to her hotel. After a few minutes, we thought of the 'dodgy' areas she might be walking through. I decided to run after her, and catching up somewhat breathlessly I explained our concern for her safety. Her reply: 'Well, you know, I do have a black belt in karate'.

Invited by CRiSAP (Creative Research into Sound Arts Practice) and Electra to the *Her Noise* event at the Tate Modern in 2012, Pauline performed on her accordion, captivating an auditorium full of people interested in feminism, sound and music.

I felt deeply her voice without words saying what her art is about. Through her accordion she extended her breathing. The instrument was in turn extended through the Expanded Instrument System (EIS), an elaborate delay-based sound processing system she developed in collaboration with a series of programmers over the course of 40-plus years. She described it as a 'time machine', enabling her to play simultaneously in the past, present and future (2010: 217).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-industry-first-take-20130603-story.html> Accessed on 29/12/16

After her Tate performance, having played and embodied with special intensity the accordion and EIS, she sounded harmonious, egoless. She talked not about herself, but about six other women artists who she believed are leading the future of music and sound art using technologies<sup>2</sup>.

*Drop your ego  
Find your harmony  
Collect your resonance*

## **5. Healing**

Pauline's love affair with listening and technology began with the tape recorder. She told the story of putting a microphone on her windowsill, listening back, and being so impressed that she decided 'to listen to everything all the time'. The idea proved to be as powerful as it is simple. Inevitably when I lead a group of students through a set of Deep Listening exercises, at least one will approach me afterwards to say how revolutionary, revelatory or life-changing the experience has been.

The revelation for me occurred in one of her week-long Deep Listening Retreats, which she offered for twenty consecutive summers. Attending my first in 2009, at the end of the week each of us was asked to briefly address the group. "Space to be, plus beautiful people, equals bliss," I said. The liberation from the competitive, purely aesthetic dimensions of music had been refreshing and extraordinary. Her approach was nothing if not inclusive and non-judgmental. To use her own words, 'Healing can occur . . . when one's inner experience is made manifest and accepted by others.' (Oliveros, 1974)

That healing came partly through playfulness, a playfulness that was part of what one student called her 'earthy sweetness'. It infused her workshops, when, for example, while doing a shaking exercise she would say, 'Shake something you never shook before!'

I also learned not to underestimate her stamina. Eating with a large group at a restaurant one night, a colleague said, 'Pauline looks tired, you should call a taxi.' Walking outside to find the taxi, pop music wafted onto the street from a nearby pub. Pauline lifted her arms and did a gliding dance. Even in her 80s and teaching full time at Rensselaer Polytechnic, she continued to tour internationally on a frequent basis.

## **6. A Futurist**

Pauline embraced technology with a futurist's awareness. America 'is noted for its technology' (2010: 228), she said in her talks and writings. Responding to polemic perspectives on the role of the military in the development of technologies, she opts for exploiting the good side of technology. Her love for and embrace of technology seemed to me a liberation of human heart intelligence. 'Think about why you would like to have a robot!'

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/talks-and-lectures/artist-talk-and-performance-pauline-oliveros> Accessed on 29/12/16

The iPhone became her principal mode of communication well before the rest of the world had caught on. And her Adaptive Use Musical Instruments (AUMI) motion tracking system was designed to help the severely disabled become active participants in music making.

## 7. Planetary and heart connections

'Why would anyone care to perform music between distant locations?', Pauline asked. She explored the implications of telematic technology for the making of music and friends as part of a nonviolent global practice of communications. She did much of her teaching telematically, including the current Deep Listening Certification program, where people from all over the world can study, connect, and develop their own creative path following Deep Listening practice.

Pauline thought from the future; technologies seemed to be in their early stages for the possibilities that she imagined. Though she was accustomed to using any amount of latency as 'a structural element' in her improvisation, she was excited about '[t]he ability to link partners around the globe with less and less latency' (2010:194) and moved from the experience of working with 8 seconds of latency in 1998 to 25 milliseconds in 2006.

Pioneering through Second Life performances with the Avatar Orchestra Metaverse, her avatar played in 2010 with Stelarc and Tina Pearson in 'Rotating Brains / Beating Heart': a 'performance of synchronised avatar bodies, sounds, images, virtual instruments and texts in real time.'<sup>3</sup> There we encounter a huge heart in 3D that connects to many brains. In the midst of sound, life continues as an individual pulsation.

*Drop your fear  
Listen and sound  
Connect your heart to your brain*

## 8. Inclusive spirituality

In her Heartbeat exercise, you follow the rhythm of your heartbeat by tapping, and listen to others' asynchronous or synchronous tapping of their heartbeats. Life also is expressed as a squeeze of the hand, a 'jolt of electricity', in the *Zina's Circle* score (2005:25), where in a circle each person needs to quickly pass the pulse, and eventually voice 'Ha', creating a collective pulsation. 'Listening is about survival!'

*Improvise from the heart  
With anyone*

Improvisation. Changes that defy pre-determination. Changes that defy an established order. Challenges that defy fixed forms of thought. In the improvisation festival *vs. Interpretation* in Prague, 2014, many artists were invited to present many

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<sup>3</sup> Presented for New Adventures in Sound Art's Sound Play Festival, Toronto, November 2010.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AzwYogTMw24> Accessed on 29/12/16

forms of improvisation. Pauline was a keynote speaker, a performer, a workshop facilitator, and a member of the audience. Jetlagged and enduring an especially hot venue, she listened patiently to everyone's perspectives and presentations.

In a presentation on the relationships between improvisation and theology, a scholar invited the audience to the stage to recite John's Coltrane's prayer from *A Love Supreme*. I wondered who would join the speaker to recite a prayer in this artistic and academic environment? To my surprise Pauline went resolutely on stage and joined the small crowd. My ongoing fascination with her inclusiveness increased yet again. With this action, she was challenging my limitations in listening to others' ideas, sounds and beliefs. The sounds that are not included in my own organisation. The sounds that are excluded from my catalogue of liking and disliking.

*Push hard your limits of listening and sounding  
Something new will happen*

In 'The Collective Intelligence of Improvisation', Pauline wrote, 'I am something akin to a high wire artist. The audience is with you, because they perceive the risks and dangers.' (2010a: 296) I asked her, does that imply you could make a 'mistake'? She replied, 'The only mistake that counts with me is losing my listening attention when I am performing.'

## **9. Persistence**

In 2009 I shared with her my poem 'Tortuga', which begins: 'I am a turtle/I have a shell/made of bitterness and love'. She responded with her own poem, beginning: 'I am a turtle too/My shell is marked with wisdom/born of knowledge gathered the hard way/slowly bit by bit.'<sup>4</sup>

In an interview with EX.293 this year, when asked about recognition, she noted that in the early 80's she had moved to upstate New York ('the wilderness'), where recognition was unlikely. 'I never went after this kind of recognition—I simply did my work.' The persistence eventually brought her the recognition nonetheless, including the William Schuman Award in 2010 and the John Cage Award in 2012. Her advice: 'Do your work and stick with it, no matter what.'

*Recognised or not  
Follow your heart  
Embrace wilderness*

## **10. Breath Out**

Pauline Oliveros has not died. In 'The Earthworm Also Sings', a poem written in 1992 and dedicated to the recently deceased John Cage, she wrote:

The process of dying  
also sound

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ronherrema/4240273299/in/photolist-7sGvwk> Accessed on 31/12/16

sound of becoming another kind of being  
living dying  
pulsing dying  
listening to death  
returning to home in the earth  
where the earthworm also sings  
Shedding physical body  
like the earless snake shedding skin  
allowing spirit body to soar  
at home in the universe  
Gathering learning through hearing what is  
inside/outside space  
Learning zero vibration is not absolute  
Learning there is always living dying sound leading me deeper  
Learning I was born here to hear all my cells through my cells (1998: 38)

On 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2016, dearest Pauline, we were not prepared for the unexpected. But we are pretty sure you always were. And in an amazing and rich silence you breathed out and smiled.

### 11. Listen for the calm<sup>5</sup>

In 1988, Pauline descended with fellow musicians Stuart Dempster and Panaiotis into a cavernous cistern, to explore, as improvisors, the cistern's sonic space, which included a 45" reverb time. That experience gave birth—characteristically, through a pun—to the concept of Deep Listening, and to 28 years of developing what Deep Listening would come to mean.

Like her accordion resonating endlessly in that space, we feel her—her performing, her thinking, her teaching, and her love—calmly resonating in our lives and in the lives of the many who listen with her.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Afterwards, listen for the calm' is the last line of her score Breathe In/Breathe Out. (2013, 186)

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