Pauline Oliveros
IMPROVISATION, DEEP LISTENING AND FLUMMOXING THE HIERARCHY

Interviews conducted by
Caroline Crawford
in 2000

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Pauline Oliveros in her faculty office at Mills College, 2002
Photo by Caroline Crawford
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PREFACE

The American Composers series of oral histories, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1998 to document the lives and careers of a number of contemporary composers with significant California connections, the composers chosen to represent a cross-section of musical philosophies, cultural backgrounds and education.

The twentieth century in this country produced an extraordinary disparity of musical styles and languages, and with those controversy and even alienation between composers and audiences, as composers sought to find a path between contemporary and traditional musical languages: serialism, minimalism, neoclassicism, and back to some extent to neo-romanticism in the last decades. The battle of styles was perhaps inevitable, as well as the reverse pendulum swing that has followed, but as the New York Times stated in a recent article, “the polemics on both sides were dismaying.”

The composers were selected with the help of University of California faculty and musicians from the greater community and asked to discuss their musical philosophies, the development of their musical language, their processes of composing, ideas about the nineteenth-century European heritage, and experiences studying with such signal teachers as Nadia Boulanger, Roger Sessions, Arnold Schoenberg, Darius Milhaud, Luigi Dallapiccola and others; university associations (Andrew Imbrie) or orchestral ones (David Sheinfeld); and forays into fields as different as jazz (Dave Brubeck), electronic music (Pauline Oliveros), and blues (Jimmy McCracklin). Also interviewed as part of this series was David Harrington of Kronos Quartet, which has a remarkable record of commissioning new work over the last three decades. Various library collections served as research resources for the project, among them those of the UC Berkeley and UCLA Music Libraries, The Bancroft Library, and the Yale School of Music Library.

Oral history techniques have rarely been applied in the field of music, the study of music having focused until now largely on structural and historical developments in the field. It is hoped that these oral histories, besides being vivid cultural portraits, will promote understanding of the composer's work, the musical climate in the times we live in, the range of choices the composer has, the obstacles he or she faces, and the avenues for writing and exposure.

Funding for the American Composers series of oral histories came in the form of a large grant from San Francisco art patroness Phyllis Wattis, to whom the Regional Oral History Office is greatly indebted. Mrs. Wattis has supported several of the office's projects, including the histories of Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera and Milton Salkind and the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to California history. The office is headed by Richard Cándida Smith and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Caroline C. Crawford
Music Historian
December 2005
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley
Through Pauline Oliveros and Deep Listening I finally know what harmony is.  It's about the pleasure of making music.

John Cage, 1989

Composer Pauline Oliveros’s history as a new music pioneer dates to the early 1960s when she and Morton Subotnick and others organized the San Francisco Tape Music Center. She was born in 1932 and raised in a musical family in Houston, Texas, and learned the rudiments of music from her mother and grandmother, who were piano teachers. In her early years she studied French horn with J.M. Brandsetter, violin, and the accordion, her principal instrument.

From 1949 to 1952 Oliveros worked with composer Paul Koepke at the University of Houston, and in 1954 with Robert Erickson at San Francisco State College, where she earned a B.A. In 1960 she won the Pacifica Foundation National Prize for her piano sextet. In 1967 she presented a 12-hour marathon of electronic music at the Tape Music Center, and later that year she joined the music faculty of UC San Diego, where she remained until 1981. Since that time she has taught at several colleges and universities, including Oberlin and Mills College, and performed worldwide as a soloist on her just tuned accordion and with the Deep Listening Band. Her Deep Listening seminars are popular all over the world.

Works of Oliveros discussed in the oral history are Duo for Accordion and Bandoneon (with possible mynah bird obbligato), Bye Bye Butterfly (for oscillators, amplifiers, and tapes) Theater Piece for Trombone Player, To Valerie Solanis and Marilyn Monroe, in Recognition of Their Desperation, and Crow Two, a ceremonial opera based on native American traditions.

Caroline Crawford Biography

Caroline Crawford has degrees in linguistics from Stanford University and the University of Geneva and a keyboard degree from the Royal College of Musicians, London. She worked as a copy editor for Saturday Review in 1973, served as staff writer for San Francisco Opera, 1973-1979, and has been the interviewer-editor in music for the Regional Oral History Office since 1986. She writes about music for the Opera Journal and Bay City News and plays piano with Bread and Roses.
I EARLY YEARS: 1932-1961
Deep Listening: A Childhood in Houston, Texas
Parents and Grandparents
The Accordion and School Bands
[Interview 1; October 26, 2000]
[Begin Tape 1]

Crawford: This interview is taking place in Pauline Oliveros’ office at Mills College, where she is teaching this term. I want to start by asking you about what you call deep listening, something central to your work. You said, "From childhood, I have practiced listening."

Oliveros: Right. As a child I was fascinated listening to the soundscape which I grew up in. In Houston's lowlands, wetlands, and in my childhood, beginning in 1932, it was still a very, very thick canopy of sound coming from insects and birds and animals and what have you.

Crawford: Wild sounds.

Oliveros: Wild sounds, natural sounds. That was always fascinating to me. Plus I grew up in a house where my mother and grandmother were teaching piano, so I heard piano lessons.

Crawford: Your grandmother lived in your home?

Oliveros: Yes. And, of course, we had a Victrola--the wind-up kind. That was always fascinating, too. I loved to listen to the records winding down.

Crawford: Better that way, wasn’t it?

Oliveros: Well, it's different. It's a different technology and a different time, but the kids--they're using CD players now, finding ways to slow them down, too. [laughter]

Crawford: You've said babies are the best deep listeners.

Oliveros: Yes. Well, it's quite clear that we come into the world prepared to receive what our surroundings are, in listening. I mean, the greatest attention and concentration, it seems to me, and exploration seems to be what babies do in order to learn and explore the world, and so it takes tremendous listening power to learn to speak.

Just think of the concentration it takes to make a vowel sound, you know? Babies learn this on their own. They don't read it somewhere. So it's the listening that informs them.
Crawford: What do you think the impact of listening to music, good music is for a very small infant? Have you done some work with that?

Oliveros: Well, not really. I don't think so. When you say "done some work with," it implies some kind of scholarship or study. I haven't done anything like that. I've simply observed babies and children when I have that proximity.

I had great fun one afternoon with an eighteen-month-old, doing improvisations, vocal improvisation. We improvised for quite a while in the afternoon, all kind of sounds, and babies are very responsive to sound. They love it. They're very interested, as long as it's not threatening to them. What's threatening is something that's loud and very unfamiliar, and that can be very shocking for a baby. But sounds that are reasonable and in the environment and maybe coming from someone who is not threatening is a good thing.

So we played this way, and then that evening I had a concert. It was with a dancer. In one part of the dance, there was a vocal improvisation, which I did with the dancer, and sure enough, we were doing this and from the audience comes this little voice, and it was Rachel. It was the same little voice. She heard it, and she started to vocalize. She even started for the stage. Her parents had to restrain her. [laughter]

Crawford: Sad to prevent children from participating.

Oliveros: Well, it's the culture of exclusion, and so this was certainly very inclusive and it was wonderful. Often babies have been at my concerts and have vocalized, so there's something going on there, and I think it has to do with listening, that listening is an effect. I mean, it's effective, listening, something that tangibly radiates to others. People think of listening as a passive act. I don't think of it that way. I think of it as very active.

Crawford: I read in Baker's dictionary that you said that you've been able to aurally suppress rude noises from the environment when you were little.

Oliveros: I said that?

Crawford: I'll quote it here: "I was able aurally to suppress the rude noise of motorcars in the environment."

Oliveros: That's not my statement. Was that written by Nicolas Slonimsky?

Crawford: Yes, it was.

Oliveros: Well, don't believe a word of it.

Crawford: Okay.
Oliveros: He made things up! He just made things up. Whatever he felt was interesting, you know, he would write it. But it's not my words.

Crawford: Where are your listening skills now after this long life of listening? Do you learn, for instance, to listen in more detail?

Oliveros: Well, the conscious practice goes back about forty-five, forty-six years, when I was given a tape recorder for my birthday by my mother. That was 1953. Tape recorders like this were nonexistent.

Crawford: They were the big reel machines then, weren't they?

Oliveros: Well, they were large and heavy, and just available on the home market. They had just become available. And so I had my first tape recorder. Before that, we had had a wire recorder in the forties and I had done some recording on wire, but with the tape recorder, the first thing I did was put the microphone in the window and just record whatever was going on.

Crawford: From outside.

Oliveros: Yes. And I was listening while I was recording, but when I played back the recording, I realized that I hadn't heard everything that the microphone heard.

So that was my challenge. I thought, *Listen to everything all the time and remind yourself when you're not listening.* That's been my practice for these forty-five years, and I still remind myself. I still get the reminders, in other words. It's an ongoing practice. It evolves over time and experience.

Where we start to tune out is where I start to tune in and remind myself, *Wait a minute. If you're tuning out, why are you tuning out? Why aren't you including whatever it is in your environment as it's there?* So that means I want to be aware of where I am and what I'm doing as much as possible.

I've often seen musicians sit down and tune in a concert hall where there is maybe a very noisy fan operating, and sending a different signal.

Crawford: Often in these rooms, you find after an interview that there's something that interferes with the sound.

Oliveros: Something you didn't know about.

Crawford: You were born May 30, 1932, in Houston, Texas, to Edith and John Oliveros. Talk about your family and growing up in Houston, would you? Your immediate family, and what it was like living there.

Oliveros: Well, it was mixed because my mother and father had problems during the Depression, and I remember that we lived at one point with my father's
parents, my grandparents on my father's side, and at another time with my mother's parents, and at another time in a house of our own, and finally we were living out in what was the country, rural, beyond the city limits of Houston. This was probably about 1941, just before World War II began.

At that point, my father went to the Coast Guard, joined the Coast Guard for World War II, and my grandfather, my mother's father, died of a heart attack. He was only fifty-one. So then we were living there with my mother and my grandmother [Pauline Gribbin] and my brother and I, out in the country.

It was a very interesting time. I remember I used to like to listen to the chickens sing. In the afternoon it would be very hot. We had 200 White Leghorns. My mother was chicken farming to earn extra money during World War II, in addition to teaching private piano lessons, and also playing for dancing classes. That's how she earned her living. My grandmother taught also.

Crawford: She was apparently a major influence on your life. You composed "Pathways of the Grandmothers" when she died in 1976 in her nineties, I read.

Well, was your father musical as well?

Oliveros: He wasn't a practicing musician of any kind, but he loved to sing and to dance.

Crawford: You chose a different keyboard than your mother.

Oliveros: She brought home the accordion when I was about nine, and her intention was that she was going to learn the accordion because it was very, very popular in that time. There were large accordion schools in Houston in the forties, and she was going to add that to her repertoire.

Crawford: So she could teach it?

Oliveros: So she could teach as well. And also my brother got very fascinated with it, so I really wanted to learn to play it, and so I did.

Crawford: You learned several instruments then.

Oliveros: Yes. Well, after that, when I went to middle school, junior high school, I ran into the prejudice against the accordion.

Crawford: What was it?

Oliveros: The accordion was not an instrument that was included in the band or the orchestra. You felt the rejection of the instrument.

Crawford: Not proper?
Oliveros: Not a proper keyboard instrument, right. So I learned to play the tuba in junior high school, and in senior high school I took up the horn, but I used to make transcriptions of whatever we played and played them on the accordion.

Crawford: How long did the chicken-farming go on?

Oliveros: That was just probably for two or three years. I'm really fuzzy on how long it was, but we did leave the country and move into the city limits somewhere before the end of World War II, so it must have only been two or three years. I think by 1944 we were living within the city limits.

Crawford: What does that represent to you, city versus country in your childhood?

Oliveros: Well, I think it was really a terrible loss because both my brother and I loved being in the country.

Crawford: Preferred it.

Oliveros: Preferred it, and I've always preferred it. Still do.

Crawford: Still want to live in the country.

Oliveros: Still want to, yes.

Crawford: Would you talk about your teachers in school? Anybody make an impression before the time you left home?

Oliveros: Well, of course, my band directors made an impression on me. The first band director was actually a woman in my junior high school. She was the one that gave me a tuba and a book and sent me off into a room to learn it, and so I learned to play the tuba. So that was an impression. I still remember her. And I also remember J.M. Brandsetter in senior high school.

Crawford: French horn?

Oliveros: The horn, yes. For this particular personality!

Crawford: Bands were important in those days, weren't they?

Oliveros: Oh, yes. Very, very, very--it's not the same. Both were concert bands as well as marching bands. During the football season we marched, but the rest of the time we played concert repertoire. And then I went to the University of Houston and also played in a band there, and also the orchestra, and marched--so I had about seven years of marching in a band.

Crawford: You enrolled at the University of Houston as an accordion major in 1949. Were you studying composition at the university?
Oliveros: Yes. By the time I was sixteen, I had decided I wanted to compose.

Crawford: Who told you you could do that?

Oliveros: Nobody. [laughter]

Crawford: It must have been very unusual to find a woman in a composition course.

Oliveros: I think it was my mother’s cue that on a subliminal level gave me that permission, if I had to have it.
II COMING TO CALIFORNIA: THE 1960s AND THE SAN FRANCISCO TAPE MUSIC CENTER

Founding the Tape Music Center: Morton Subotnick, Loren Rush and Ramon Sender
Equipping the Tape Music Center
Thoughts about Improvisation and the Critics
The Buchla Synthesizer
Significant Collaborations and Community Support
Moving the Tape Music Center and Operating at Mills College

Crawford: Some background to bring you out to California: You left Houston in your third year, with accordion and $300, and found Robert Erickson at KPFA in Berkeley, and Wilfred Ogdon, who later invited you to UC San Diego. Then to S.F. State and on to the S.F. Conservatory of Music to study there with Erickson from 1954 to 1960. You wrote your first tape music in the late 50s and the idea for the S.F. Tape Music Center got going shortly after that.

Oliveros: Yes. In 1960 we did several concerts at the Conservatory of tape music and improvisation, instrumental improvisation. Robin Laufer was the head of the Conservatory, and Bob Erickson talked with him a lot about the Tape Center, and so that's where the thing started. And then by 1962, I think, it had moved to Jones Street.

Crawford: Why did you leave the Conservatory?

Oliveros: I forget what the reason was, but there was some difficulty about continuing at the Conservatory, so I in 1962 went to Europe for a while, and Ramon Sender and Mort Subotnick moved the place to Jones Street. I think it was because somebody offered them this old Victorian place.

Then there was a fire, so that ended that time, and then they found the 321 Divisadero place, which was an old labor hall. There were two halls upstairs, which had a studio, and there was a room between which had glass windows and such that could be used as a radio studio. It was used by KPFA as a remote studio for a while.

But the larger hall seated 150 people, and so we had that to put on concerts.

Crawford: I remember it was very popular.

Oliveros: It was. We developed a subscription audience, which helped pay the rent for the place. It was Loren Rush and Ramon Sender who filed the 501(c)(3) for the Tape Music Center. So they claim being the founders, although I was involved from the very beginning.

Crawford: I think of you as a founder.
Oliveros: Well, I think of me as a founder, too, except they are credited as being the founders because they filed the 501(c)(3).

Crawford: I see. Did you start with Monday evening concerts right away?

Oliveros: Yes, two a month. We would repeat the concert. That went well. Mort was teaching here at Mills at the time, and [Luciano] Berio was also around, and so I think we played some of Berio's tape music.

There were connections with Europe through Mort and his position here at Mills, so some of our concerts had tape music like Henri Pousseur and other Europeans. We also played tape music of people from elsewhere, like Jim Tenney. I remember we played his *Blue Suede Shoes*, which was a remix of Elvis Presley.

Crawford: Stockhausen?

Oliveros: Stockhausen, yes. We played all sorts of things there. But as I said, we always did an improvisation in our concerts of some kind, an instrumental improvisation. That was important, to keep that aspect going.

Crawford: I read Alfred Frankenstein's reviews of those concerts.

Oliveros: They were wonderful. Both he and Alexander Fried. Frankenstein particularly. He had a lot of insight. For example, when we did *In C*, Terry Riley's *In C*, in 1964, that was the premiere of that piece, and Frankenstein hailed it as a twentieth-century masterpiece, and he was right, you know?

Crawford: A piece that is performed often. It was just done at the San Francisco Symphony Maverick Series, wasn't it?

Oliveros: Yes. I did it this summer also at the Lincoln Center Festival. It was an all-electronic instrument performance. But I've been in a lot of anniversary performances of *In C*. And it keeps evolving in various ways. A wonderful piece. But that was a very important event, I think.

Crawford: We were fortunate to have reviewers to listen.

Oliveros: Well, that was the thing. The Tape Music Center opened up, and there was the cooperation of the press with Alfred Frankenstein and Alexander Fried. They came to the concerts and took them seriously. Journalists do write the history.

Crawford: You collaborated with other artists, I think.

Oliveros: Yes, occasionally. Also Ann Halprin had her Dancers Workshop in the other big room that we had. Her participation was very important. We also collaborated with her and her dancers, which was very important.
In 1960, when we did the first series of concerts at the Conservatory, dancers from the Dancers Workshop collaborated with us. They were principal dancers in this company at the time. And she was very involved in theater, dance theater. People were saying, "This is not dance." You know. But they came and improvised with us. We had really some very marvelous evenings. They were outrageous.

Crawford: I read about a concert that featured Duo for Accordion, with possible mynah bird obbligato.

Oliveros: Oh, yes. Okay. That was in 1964. That was at the Tape Center. I had met David Tudor in 1963, and we together organized this festival. I had written this piece for David. He played bandoneon.

So I wrote a piece called Duo for Accordion and Bandoneon, but we were rehearsing it at my house, and we had a mynah bird, and the mynah bird went crazy when we started playing. It always was chiming in. I tried to cover up the mynah bird and suppress it, and then all of a sudden. Well, it was really kind of interesting. So I thought we should just include the mynah bird, because the mynah bird was taking up our music here.

So then Elizabeth Harris, whom I had done some collaboration with, created this seesaw, which was on a lazy Susan and it went around--up and down. There were swivel seats also.

So David and I were on the seesaw, and she suspended the mynah bird in a mobile over the center of the teeter-totter, so we played, going around. I mean, swiveling the chairs.

Crawford: The mynah bird must have been just stunned. [laughter]

Oliveros: The mynah bird was interested. But the first performance of it--we did two performances. The first night, Tony Martin did some projections, and as soon as the light was out and changed, the mynah bird stopped sounding, so the critics then decided that the mynah bird was mum, you know? Which wasn't true. It really wasn't true.

Crawford: That's real improv, isn't it?

Oliveros: Well, it was the fact that the mynah bird hadn't been rehearsed with the lights.

Crawford: David Tudor is said to be descended from Henry VIII, who also composed aleatory music. I wonder if it’s true. Well, You are quoted in Heidi von Gunden's book [The Music of Pauline Oliveros, Scarecrow Press, 1993] as saying: "The [Tape Center] begged, borrowed and stole equipment," in the early years. Then in 1965 you applied for a large Rockefeller grant, which you got. What were you doing then and what were your needs?
Oliveros: Well, we needed everything. We needed equipment.

Crawford: Let me first ask you: What did you have?

Oliveros: What did we have? Well, we had various equipment that had been pooled and gotten in from various sources. There wasn't any equipment that was really intended for music. Most of what we used had been test equipment that technicians used to test other equipment with, like signal generators and so on. So we had a few oscillators, we had tape recorders, we had a few items like a ring modulator, maybe, and other things.

But both Mort and Ramon were very interested in the idea of designing equipment, especially for music, and they had been seeking an engineer that would be able to do that. And so there were a couple of them that had shown up and had not panned out, but then Don Buchla came along. Don built his first synthesizer really based on conversations with Mort and Ramon.

Crawford: That was of huge importance.

Oliveros: Yes, it was indeed. And he was smart enough to do it. In the meantime, there had been Robert Moog on the East Coast creating his instrument, his synthesizer, which was slightly different.

Crawford: What were the basic differences?

Oliveros: Don's instrument was more avant-garde. He didn't have a keyboard in the traditional sense. Moog used the regular keyboard. Don provided a touch-sensitive keyboard, which meant that you could tune it any way you wanted to, and play--it was a different feel altogether, so it took it into a different realm, I think. His concept just had a bit more flexibility, in terms of what you could do.

Crawford: So it was more versatile?

Oliveros: Yes, I think it was versatile.

Crawford: What would have been the counterpart performance activity in New York or on the East Coast?

Oliveros: Equivalent to what we were doing? There wasn't much in terms of what we were doing, because the improvisation started here. The notion of improvisation started with Loren and Terry and I.

The only other improvising that I had heard about was Lukas Foss. He was at UCLA at the time, and he had what he called an improvisation ensemble, and he came to town, came to San Francisco, and so we all went, excited, wanting to see what an improvisation ensemble would do. And so we were there, and
they had music stands, which was mystifying to us because improvisation, from our point of view--you didn't have music stands because there wasn't any music. [laughter] There was nothing to read.

So we asked Lukas at the end of the concert, "Well, what would happen if you just did free improvisation?" And he looked at us and he said, "That would be utter chaos." So our understanding of improvisation was very different. It had a different basis.

There wasn't that kind of improvisation going on in art music in New York that I know of, not until much later, that filtered in. The only equivalent was what Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman were doing, which was breaking the frame from sort of traditional jazz to a free music style. So that's where the equivalence was.

In New York, the people who were noted at the time were Mario Davidovsky, for example, and Vladimir Ussachevsky, and they were busy splicing tape--making sound and splicing it together to make their tape music, so that wasn't involved with performance.


Oliveros: Strict? No, it wasn't! [laughter]

Crawford: Were you ever involved with Harry Partch? He was here at the time.

Oliveros: I met Harry, and I played in his ensemble briefly. Yes, yes.

Crawford: What were your impressions of him?

Oliveros: Well, he was a cranky old cuss. He really was. But I met him later, and he wasn't so cranky.

Crawford: I talked to Donald Pippin about him, because he lived with him for a while up in Gualala. Fascinating character. His experimental instruments, wonderfully named chromelodeons, blowboys and cloud-chambered bowls.

Well, you were sort of the high priestess of all that was going on in new music at the time.

Oliveros: High priestess? I didn't feel like a high priestess, I can tell you that.

Crawford: What did you feel like? What were the high points of this time?

Oliveros: Well, the high point was the excitement of actually making sound with electronics and tape, and being able to realize things that way. I mean, sounds were--it was liberating. It was really wonderful. It became more and more
engaging, as I began to work with that medium. It felt really new and exciting. You know, it was an exciting time. And then all the things that we were doing at the San Francisco Tape Music Center were exciting. People that came there.

The high point I think was the coalition, the collaboration that went on. It had a community of interest. We felt a sense of support with one another.

Crawford: And certainly the community supported it.

Oliveros: Yes. Yes, as I say, it was a very unusual time, because in the seventies it wasn't like that at all. For example, Robert Ashley was here, working with what became the Center. After I left. The press became very hostile.

Crawford: Was it just the change in the people writing for the press?

Oliveros: Robert Commanday was not supportive of it, no. He really wasn't. I mean, the climate changed. It changed quite a bit.

Crawford: Frankenstein wrote that "electronic music is a romantic expression." What do you think he meant?

Oliveros: He's funny.

This is interesting, I think. You know, Judith Tich has written a wonderful biography of Ruth Crawford Seeger. She's a musicologist at Northeastern University. The reason I bring this up is because Ruth Crawford Seeger was discovered in the thirties as a composer and was discovered by Henry Cowell, and she was a leading composer of the modernist movement. Now, guess who wrote about her in Chicago. Alfred Frankenstein. As a matter of fact, he became very enamored of her, and I think he wanted to be her suitor for at least three years there. But he did write about her. And then he wrote about me and my work, when he heard the *Variations for Sextet*.

Crawford: He liked your work very much.

Oliveros: Yes. And he also wrote about it at the Tape Music Center, too.

Crawford: He also championed Stuart Dempster quite a bit.

Oliveros: Yes, definitely.

Crawford: You worked with machines such as vacuums and garden hoses. Talk about where those ideas came from.

Oliveros: Stuart was a generator of a lot of sounds. He was very interested in all kinds of sounds that he could make and make with his trombone, through his trombone and his garden hose and eventually his didjeridu. He didn't play the
didjeridu at that time. He was the first to go and study with the aboriginals in Australia.

Crawford: Talk a little bit about that instrument, would you?

Oliveros: Of course, it's an amazing instrument. Actually, it was Robert Erickson who encouraged Stuart to learn to play it, because he had one. Robert Erickson had a didjeridu—an aboriginal instrument used in ritual. Today everybody under the sun plays the didjeridu, but nobody was playing it here.

Crawford: Not in the sixties.

Oliveros: No. But Stuart was. And he had a genuine didjeridu class at the University of Washington, so a lot of that spread out.

Crawford: Is that a strong center for new music?

Oliveros: Well, only in the sense that William O. Smith taught there. He's retired now, and Stuart is now emeritus also. So it had some interest in new music, but it's not a strong center of new music, no.

Crawford: I think Milhaud was William's teacher. Is that right?

Oliveros: That's right, yes. William O. Smith studied here with Milhaud, along with Dave Brubeck, and also plays with Dave Brubeck. A great clarinetist.

Crawford: I’d like to finish today with the Tape Center.

Oliveros: Yes, okay.

Crawford: Who was sponsoring new music then? I think some of the European radio stations were big sponsors?

Oliveros: Yes, the WDR, West German Radio in Cologne was one of those. Different one in Frankfurt. All those German radio stations did support it, but particularly Cologne. That's where Stockhausen was also. Interestingly enough, they're closing up certain studios now at the WDR, and Stockhausen is having trouble getting his tapes.

Crawford: I think a lot of their arts funding has gone thin because of East Germany.

Oliveros: Oh, yes. Yes, a lot of stuff happened, as a contraction of certain things.

Crawford: Well, talk some more, if you would, about the high musical points of those years. You were head of the Tape Center for a while.
Oliveros: I was the director of the Tape Music Center here at Mills when it moved here, in '66, '67.

Crawford: What made that move necessary?

Oliveros: Fiscal responsibility. You know how artists are. They can't be fiscally responsible. It needed a fiscal sponsor.

Crawford: And that was Mills. That was when the Rockefeller Foundation gave you the grant?

Oliveros: Yes. It was $400,000 for four years, and it was to cover the studio and running it and so on, operating costs, and to pay a director. Actually, Anthony Martin and I were co-directors of the Tape Music Center at Mills in that year.

Crawford: How did the situation change? Was it as fresh and interesting?

Oliveros: Well, it was different. Certainly, we all talked about that. It didn't have the same free-wheeling spirit as it had there on Divisidero Street. That was our place. And coming into Mills was coming into Mills.

I remember that when we were talking about the contract, I insisted that we should have a clause in the contract that kept the center open as a public access studio, so it wasn't just confined to Mills people, the Mills community; in other words, so that it could be open to everyone, because I had had understood that was the spirit of the Tape Music Center--

[Begin Tape 2]

Oliveros: So keeping it open and having public access was important, because that was the thing that made it so interesting, was all of the different kinds of people that came through and either worked there or performed there. I thought that was important. So that was in the contract, and Mills was open to outside people coming to work at the Tape Music Center for many, many years.

Crawford: Who used it in particular? Was there correspondence with IRCAM, for instance?

Oliveros: Probably. I don't know for sure because I was here for one year and then took the job at San Diego. There was a succession of directors. Robert Ashley was here, and certainly Bob--he kept it very open and very interesting during his tenure here.

Crawford: What was the physical setup here?
Oliveros: Where it was--up in whatever that wing is of the building at the end of the practice rooms. There's a recording studio there and a studio with work stations now. When I was here, we were in what had been a practice room, two practice rooms. I think a wall had been taken down to make it a little bit larger. And so there was that, and then there was one more practice room which had older equipment in it that we had. And so that was it, just that much. It wasn't very big. I think maybe I might have had an office. I can barely remember that.

But as the years went on, other directors came and made changes. Bob made the most changes, I think, by having a renovation for a recording studio and so on.

Crawford: And the concerts were here.

Oliveros: Yes, there were concerts here. And some were done outside, elsewhere as well.

Crawford: The audience stayed as vibrant and interested at Mills?

Oliveros: Well, when I was here very large audiences came to Mills for the concerts. In those days, there was much more in the way of publicity. In the sixties. Right now there isn't any publicist on this campus.

Crawford: The music programs are not covered by the newspapers either, as far as I know.

Oliveros: There's a half-time person who does some P.R. and gets the word out, but there's not a publicist. You know what I mean? A publicist who really gets out there and hustles and makes connections and makes certain that there are features about what's going on.

Crawford: What changed that?

Oliveros: I don't think I can say over the years, since I was not here, what happened. I think they may be heading in the direction of having a campus publicist again, but for some reason--

Crawford: Because there's a lot of music here.

Oliveros: I know. There's an extraordinary amount of music that happens here, and it is really a shame that there aren't students being bused in here to hear it, because it's amazing.

Crawford: There are four or five so-called contemporary ensembles around. Is the programming interesting to you?
Oliveros: Well, I went Monday night particularly to hear a piece by Ushio Torikai, played by the ensemble Ear Play. I believe they're based at San Francisco State. It's very good. They're excellent players, very good players. The program was mixed, for me, as far as interest was concerned. Ushio's piece was very interesting. Actually, it was for fifteen players. It was called *Fuse Seven*, the idea of fusing Asian and Western ideas.

But to me it was very interesting; it was more interesting than a lot of pieces I've heard by other Asians who have adopted Western music as their modus operandi. She was really bringing in some ways of sounding that were very different. You really did hear her voice in a very interesting way, I thought.

The other piece that was interesting was by Steven Blumberg, who actually was a student of mine at UCSD in 1980. He's developed very well.

Crawford: How did the San Francisco Tape Music Center develop?

Oliveros: It continued as a production facility, where composers and technologists and artists could work together and collaborate and make pieces. Presentations were given here, and it continued to develop in pace with new developments in technology, music technology, which certainly became a very big thing industry-wise as well as in art music. There's been a huge development from the sixties to now, to 2000.

Crawford: Has it opened avenues for women--made it easier for women composers?

Oliveros: Well, the ones who are here. [laughter] But I don't think there's been enough done in that, because the graduate program in music is predominantly male, and has been since the time of Milhaud. I don't think that that's right.

Crawford: Why is that? Are women not aspiring to become composers?

Oliveros: They don't apply here, not in enough numbers to balance out. I've been teaching composition here in the fall since 1996. The first year I had a seminar of maybe twenty, and there were five women. That's the most women at one time that I've had in a seminar.

After that, every year the ratio has been something like seven to two; seven men, two women. This semester I have a smaller seminar. Enrollment is down this year. I have about eight, and there are seven men and one woman. I don't think that's right, at a women's college.

Crawford: I'm surprised.

Oliveros: Well, wherever I go, it's generally like that. I taught at Oberlin, and the seminar was twenty, and again it was fifteen to five.
Crawford: Is that true of the general music faculty as well? Are the proportions similar?

Oliveros: Yes. It's more men than women in music. I can't exactly say why it is except that women are not supported to compose or to be in technology or to conduct or to do any of those things. It's less so than it was, but the programming is still there, the programming not to be a composer or not to be in a role that has directorial capacity.

Crawford: It goes right through society.

Oliveros: Yes.

Crawford: Before we move on maybe you could talk about some of the outstanding composers who came through the Tape Center.

Oliveros: Well, there were composers from Sweden who worked with us. Steve Reich was studying here at Mills at the time, and he also had some relationship to the Tape Music Center, but not as much as others. Of course, Morton Subotnick and Ramon. Those are the main people that I can remember. It was actually a relatively short time, from 1960 to 1966. Very, extraordinarily active.

Crawford: I read about a marathon of your own work.

Oliveros: Oh, yes. I was here for 1966-'67, that one year. In August of 1967 I was going to leave to go to San Diego and take my job at UCSD, and so my parting shot was to do this tape-a-thon, which was to play all of my electronic music, which went from six o'clock in the evening till six a.m. In the morning, at a friend's loft on Embarcadero.

Crawford: And it was a public performance?

Oliveros: Oh, it was marvelous. They kept coming and going all through the night, and Morton Feldman was there.

Crawford: He liked it.

Oliveros: Yes, it was great having him there. [laughter]

Crawford: In the theater pieces of the late 60s, early 70s you did a lot of interesting things that required lights and props and character portrayal, and collaborated with such groups as the Mime Troupe. You also asked performers to serve as magicians and jugglers?

Oliveros: Well, I did a piece for William O. Smith that was called The Wheel of Fortune(1969),and he was a musician-magician, yes. He does magic as well as music.
Crawford: How was it structured?

Oliveros: There's a score for him, kind of a script, which involves sort of ritual actions that involved his ability to do magic tricks and things, and then finally, of course, he does an improvisation with a tape that I had made for him to improvise with.

Crawford: In other words, he would not have heard that before, but he would just react to it. Is that performance taped?

Oliveros: It wasn't recorded, no. It wasn't documented. The score is available, but there's no documentation. I had very little in the way of documentation from that time. Everything is documented up the wazoo these days, but in those days, I mean, you were lucky if you got a photo or something, maybe.

Crawford: Smith was with the Brubeck Octet at the time, and they have virtually nothing documented from those years.

The Sixties Environment for Music
Setting up an Electronic Music Program
Composing in the native American Community
Women and Technophobia; the Lack of Diversity in Academic Thought about Teaching
A 1965 Tape Music Center Tour

[Begin Tape 2]

Crawford: In 1967 you then went to San Diego. You taught there for fourteen years. You have said that you felt very anti-establishment, but you were happy to take the job and be salaried and so on. What was the environment like there? You were hired by Erickson?

Oliveros: Yes. Actually, Will Ogdon was the chairman of the department at the time, but Erickson and Ogden were the founders of the department. The reason I could go there was that their vision was to create a music department that was centered around composers, so this was attractive. I mean, Bob's statement was that he wanted a place where a composer could feel comfortable to come and study.

They wanted me to come to establish an electronic music program for the graduate students. At the time, I was one of the few people that could do that.

Crawford: You didn't have to have a Ph.D. for that.

Oliveros: I didn't have a Ph.D., nor an M.A., because I had dropped out of the M.A. program at San Francisco State and instead had accumulated experience through the Tape Music Center and so on, just doing my work.

Crawford: So you were supported at UCSD as a composer.

Oliveros: Oh, yes, of course. I came there as a composer, so yes, that's true. And we did very wild things there.

Crawford: What do you think of as especially wild?

Oliveros: Wild. Well, I continued to do the theater pieces that I had started, and we had concerts that you just wouldn't dream of having in an academic environment, I would say. I mean, they were very sixties. There was an openness and a willingness to have programs that were inclusive and interesting. There were all kinds of music being played and performed.

Crawford: I'm wondering about the community--San Diego is conservative.

Oliveros: Oh, yes. Well, of course, we managed to rile up a lot of people. [laughter] I mean, the most conservative people of all are the scientists, you know? And
UCSD is a school that has a lot of scientists, right? What they're into is Baroque music.

Crawford: So they didn't come out in numbers?

Oliveros: Oh, no. Eventually, you know, we won some people to our interests. One person, I guess, that was on the faculty there at UCSD before we got started, really, was Rosalyn Tureck, the harpsichord player, right? So the scientists there were really used to much more sedate kind of musicmaking.

Crawford: Did that hamper your output, did you feel a change of climate?

Oliveros: I felt the difference, but certainly it didn't stop me from doing what I did. I was engaged. I had already had enough support in the Tape Music Center environment that I felt very confident in what I was doing.

Crawford: So that was a positive switch for you. Moving from the Bay Area?

Oliveros: Well, I didn't really want to leave the Bay Area, no. It was a change which I felt ambivalent about. I wasn't sure that I was doing the right thing for myself by joining the establishment.

Crawford: You stayed a long time.

Oliveros: Yes, I stayed as long as it felt like I could grow in that environment, and then there came a time when I felt I had to leave it.

Crawford: You did get tenure.

Oliveros: Yes, I was a full professor, step-three, senior-level, when I gave up my tenure.

Crawford: And you had been a Guggenheim grantee.

Oliveros: Yes.

Crawford: Talk about that.

Oliveros: I remember applying once and not receiving it, and then the next application I did get it. It was early seventies. I don't remember the exact date. But I had made an application, and I had proposed that I wanted to go and study ritual and ceremony in the Southwest, which I did do. By "study" I don't mean scholarly study. I just went to the pueblos and observed the ceremonies and went to different places.

Crawford: Is that what the funding was for, a focused kind of thing?
Oliveros: You make a proposal. I was going to compose something, and I did. I think it was a piece called *Crow Two* that I composed after that time, 1974. So basically it was in support of me as a composer who happened to be going to look at Southwest Native American work also.

Crawford: What were your impressions of their music?

Oliveros: Well, it was really impressions of their ceremony, of music in ceremony. Ritual and ceremony are integrated. It's not about the music, so to speak, but is about how it all works together and balances to bring about the result that is intended, I would say.

But I can remember one thing that was very powerful, which was going to the corn dance at the Santo Domingo Pueblo in New Mexico. That's an eight-hour dance, so you go and it's eight hours. The drumming starts, and the whole community is dancing; from little children to elders are dancing together and they dance, and it goes all that time, all day long.

I noticed that the drumming is in the heartbeat range, and you would think it was regular, but I noticed somewhere along the way that once in a while there would be almost like a comma, where the drum would [raps on table four times, pauses, raps once]--a little comma. And the whole community would feel that and express it. Very subtle. Very subtle thing. I also noticed that I felt the drumming coming out of my own heart by the afternoon. It was very amazing.

Crawford: Were you welcomed by the people?

Oliveros: Well, yes. There were a lot of people there that were not Native Americans. As long as you behaved yourself. If you seemed to be out of line, I think you would have been addressed, yes.

Crawford: What was your impression of the whole situation as ritual?

Oliveros: Well, I felt that there was something very, very deep and important being expressed in that ceremony, and to see the whole community together in that way.

Crawford: Did you read a lot about that before you went?

Oliveros: I read a lot of different things, yes, but I'm not a scholar and never have been, and wasn't. I always read a lot and check things out, but I don't study in the way that I perceive scholars studying, writing footnotes.

Crawford: We have a composer friend named Leo Smit, who you may have known of, who went and lived with the Navajos for a while, and he shared the texts with us, and composed for them.
Oliveros: Learning Navajo is something that would take a great deal of time and effort. It's a very, very complex language.

Crawford: What sort of a time frame did you have to produce that work?

Oliveros: That was probably within a year or two, yes. There is a recording of it at UCSD.

Crawford: AT UCSD. I often find that they have things that we don't have here at Berkeley.

Oliveros: They have my archive there. I mean, one of them. I have archives in four different places, four or five different places. When I left UCSD, I left all my stuff there, up to 1981. I gave forty years of correspondence to the New York Public Library, and then there are twenty-five years of letters between my mother and I, from 1952 up until the seventies, the middle seventies, that are in the Houston Public Library now.

And then there's stuff here at Mills, in the CCM archives. And then, of course, I have stuff still myself.

Crawford: You wrote somewhere that UCSD was in some ways a sexist, racist environment. "Males bond through technology, and they take charge. Women often suffer from technophobia."

Oliveros: Yes. I did say that. [laughter] Technophobia. Women often recoil in terms of using technology, using the computer or using any equipment. I found that they don't know how to do that or don't feel confident or competent to engage in using technology.

Crawford: And the racist, sexist comment. What does that apply to?

Oliveros: Well, talk about the lack of diversity. You can look at this music department or the music department at UCSD that was mainly white male. Most of the educational institutions are like that. I'm going to be in Madison, the University of Wisconsin, in the spring. We did auditions there for a new work that we're going to do, and there are two roles that are for African Americans, and there wasn't a single African American showed up for the auditions, not one.

They were trying to do Raisin in the Sun. They're doing it right now, I think. It'll soon be over. They had to go to Milwaukee to get people. And this is also the school where the admissions department made a brochure, and somebody had cut out pictures of people of color and pasted them on the brochure. So that's what I mean.

Crawford: You took a sabbatical in 1980. What did you do during that year?
Oliveros: I went to the East Coast. Actually, I went via Seattle. I went to Seattle and did some performances there, with Stuart and others. I was remembering that. And then went on through Minneapolis, where I also did some performances, and then on to the East Coast, where I spent the summer in upstate New York.

Crawford: Let's talk a little bit about your teaching. You taught as a teenager, I think.

Oliveros: Yes. Private lessons.

Crawford: Did you have any blossoming accordion players--anybody become a great professional?

Oliveros: Mmm, I don't recall any. No, nobody from that early time, no.

Crawford: But you said that teaching has been a major part of life, very rewarding.

Oliveros: Oh, yes, I enjoyed it, and I do enjoy it a lot, and I'm in touch with a lot of my students from way back.

There are many from the sixties up to the present time who have been students or were involved in deep listening or whatever, so I've had a long connection with people from this time.

Crawford: When you were at UCSD, did you have to teach classes that you would have preferred not to?

Oliveros: I only taught classes I wanted to teach. I taught composition, and I taught electronic music, and I taught musicianship, which I liked, and special courses, experimental studies, they were called.

Crawford: Musicianship. What was your approach to that?

Oliveros: Well, it was mainly to get the students listening and to train their ears, and I had a variety of exercises that I would do, and they always involved some form of composing for them, so they composed a lot of the exercises that they did. Everybody composed.

That was important. I would walk in and say, "Sing C," and I wouldn't allow them to reference a pitch, and finally they could do it.

Crawford: Really?

Oliveros: They could do that.

Crawford: That's a tough task.
Oliveros: Yes. I did a lot of passing rhythms around. The group was responsible for keeping the pulse. If somebody made a mistake, they'd have to correct it. The next person would correct it. These are ways of ear training. They're a little different from just reading, just reading from a textbook.

Crawford: Did you teach them to read music?

Oliveros: Well, yes. For instance, every morning I composed the sight singing. Before I went to school, I'd write the melodies that they would have to sight sing.

Crawford: That was very challenging. They have not forgotten you.

Oliveros: No! [laughter]

Crawford: Did any of the regular students go into composing, from musicianship?

Oliveros: Yes. Oh, yes. Always. I think it's really important to get people to make their own music. It should start early, with very young children, that they should make their own music and they can improvise, as well as learn to read and do traditional things, but they needed a balance of the created work, so that's always been important to me.

Crawford: Was musicianship largely a listening class?

Oliveros: No, music appreciation. We didn't teach it that way. We taught what was called "The Nature of Music," and I taught that a few times. "The Nature of Music" was designed for people to create music, instead of just listen to records, so the students would make tape pieces.

They would be given a tape with a lot of sounds, and then have to edit the tape into a piece, for example, or they would have instruments that were easily activated and do improvisations. These are students that were not necessarily music students. This was a general student--they would learn to do graphic scores and perform those. So it was all about making music, rather than listening.

Crawford: What do you mean graphic scores?

Oliveros: Draw a picture of some sort and then tell what it means, and play it. In other words, some kind of a graphical representation of a sound.

Crawford: What was the approach in the composition class?

Oliveros: Well, the composition seminar was treated as a seminar in that the students were expected to compose pieces. It wasn't about teaching them some technique or some craft, but it was for them to actually compose a piece based on something they wanted to compose, and to get the piece performed by the
end of the semester. Maybe there would be a couple or three pieces that were
done.

Sometimes I'd give some kind of a strange assignment, like "Write a one-note
piece" or "write an unusual melody," something like that.

Crawford: Did you encourage them to use all kinds of materials, as you did?

Oliveros: Sometimes. Sometimes I'd make a piece using found instruments, an
assignment like that.

Crawford: Or identify things from nature?

Oliveros: Possibly. But mainly when I teach composition, I don't teach it. You learn
composing by composing. I mean, academically you can study models, but I
don't go for that, unless the student chooses the model they want, but I don't
like doing it.

Crawford: No fugue writing.

Oliveros: Absolutely not!

Crawford: One more thing that I wanted to cover when we were talking about the Tape
Music Center was the touring. There was at least one tour.

Oliveros: There was one tour, and that was in 1965, I believe. We went to Muncie,
Indiana. I remember that. We went to Mount Pleasant in Michigan. I think we
might have been in Cincinnati. I can't remember exactly. And then we ended
up in New Hampshire. There were about maybe four places that we went on
that tour. In Michigan was when we got together with the ONCE Group for
the first time. The ONCE Group had Bob Ashley and Gordon Mumma. They
were probably the only group that we knew of that was of any kind of
equivalency to what we were doing.

Crawford: Where were they?

Oliveros: Ann Arbor. They were performing, and Gordon was making all kinds of
electronic instruments at the time. I mean, he was very engaged in electronics.
Bob Ashley was more involved with recording. He actually was a producer of
some kind.

But they all worked together, and they did, I would say, performance art
pieces that were very sound-oriented but they had performative elements that
were really quite amazing. So we met them. I mean, we had played their
music at the San Francisco Tape Music Center before that time. So that was
the only real tour that I know about, that I can remember.
Crawford: Is that when everybody got in one car, eight musicians and all your equipment. You must have been on short funding strings then.

Oliveros: Very short! [laughs]

Crawford: You were ambitious.

Oliveros: Yes, I guess so, yes. It seemed to be.
Crawford: This is interview number two with Pauline Oliveros for the Composers Series. Let's talk more specifically about your work in the fifties and sixties. You started out with traditional notation. What works would you pick out as most important? I think you even experimented with twelve-tone music.

Oliveros: No, no, I was not a twelve-tone composer. I maybe wrote a piece or two using twelve tones, but I really made it sound tonal.

Crawford: Did you consider it restricting?

Oliveros: No. No, not really. It just wasn't something that I wanted to pursue. My work was done by ear. I compose by ear. I know all the systematic stuff that was happening after World War II, determinism and chance, aleatoric procedures and so on--that was not interesting to me. What I was interested in was what I could hear.

Crawford: What about the scene here and your work with poets, with Robert Duncan and Charles Olson.

Oliveros: It was really wonderful. I was graduating or had just graduated from San Francisco State College, and I wanted to write some songs, and I wanted to work with a poet, and so I went to the Poetry Center at San Francisco State. At the time, Robert Duncan was the director, and so he greeted me at the door, and I told him I was looking for a poet, so he offered himself.

And so that was the beginning of a wonderful relationship, meeting Robert and his partner Jess Collins, and then meeting many of the poets of that time, which was a very exciting time in poetry.

Crawford: Where was it heard?

Oliveros: It was heard in a variety of venues all over--I mean, the big buzz was poetry in jazz, in clubs and things, and the Coexistence Bagel Shop, for example, too. Around North Beach. There was a lot going on. I took a writing course from
Jack Spicer at San Francisco State, and that was really a very significant, life-changing experience to take a course from him.

Crawford: How so?

Oliveros: Because I was afraid of writing and felt that I needed to learn, and so he was the first one, the first instructor—first of all, he was a poet, and the way he went about assignments in class was unique. The first assignment was "write one sentence that's worth saying." And the next assignment was "write a paragraph." And then "write a letter." Again, very non-threatening and very exciting and creative.

Crawford: It seems to me that you had serendipity in finding people like you, wouldn't you say?

Oliveros: It was important, those kinds of connections, yes. And so that one was a very significant one. It really helped me a great deal, and I value that very highly as a class experience, an experience in a class, in a state college. It was very rare, I'd say.

Crawford: San Francisco State was a rich place in all the arts, wasn't it?

Oliveros: At that time, yes. And I think the Poetry Center was a very important aspect of it. I mean, it's still there and it's still happening. I don't know. Everything has exploded and proliferated in so many different ways that I wouldn't be able to assess what it is today.

Crawford: Who made that center?

Oliveros: I'm trying to think of the name of that woman. [Ruth Witt Diamant] She was a professor at San Francisco State, and her name is not coming to mind readily, but I think she was instrumental in establishing the Poetry Center, and she got Robert to be the director of it, because it was new then.

Crawford: He was well known then.

Oliveros: Oh, yes, yes. He was one of the major poets of the San Francisco scene. Jack Spicer was another. Robin Blaser and Allen Ginsberg--

Crawford: Did you work with Ginsberg?

Oliveros: No. I didn't hear him at the time. I didn't frequent the places where one might hear him. Kenneth Rexroth was another. I used to read his columns in the San Francisco Chronicle.

Crawford: Imagine.
Oliveros: It was very different at that particular time, yes.

Crawford: Why?

Oliveros: Why was it different? I don't know that I could analyze that exactly. Perhaps it had something to do with postwar in that there was a lot of new energy with people coming back from World War II, that that gave rise to a lot of different interests that had been suppressed or had to be put aside. Maybe something like that. I'm not sure.

Crawford: Where did you go from there? You were still using traditional notation.

Oliveros: Yes, I was. I was composing notes on five lines and four spaces.

Crawford: Yes. Then what happened?

Oliveros: Well, at the end of the fifties I began to get interested in making tape music. I had a tape recorder. I worked with my tape recorder. I made my first tape piece in 1959. It was called *Time Perspectives*. It's coming out on a CD shortly, with some of my other early electronic pieces. One label is Sub Rosa-these are independent labels. So this 1959 piece--actually, I played it the other day at San Francisco State, because I gave a lecture demo over there. It was really funny because [laughs] there I was, at my alma mater, and I'd never really been invited to do anything there.

Crawford: That's surprising.

Oliveros: It's not surprising.

Crawford: Did they turn conservative?

Oliveros: They always were. In music it was always conservative. In fact, I was looked upon as a very edgy sort of figure.

Crawford: You were?

Oliveros: Oh, yes.

Crawford: I know a lot of the jazz musicians were there.

Oliveros: Yes. Well, that's different. That was a different kettle of fish.

Crawford: How was it received?

Oliveros: My piece? Oh, you mean the other day, just the other day. Well, it seemed to be received just fine. I mean, it's forty years old, forty-one years old, so it's
interesting. I told them how I made it and so on, and it was before synthesizers or any equipment that was meant for electronic music.

I made it using a tape recorder and using cardboard tubes to filter sounds, and a bathtub to make reverberations. And stuff like that. It was interesting actually to listen to that piece after all this time has passed. I hadn't heard it for a long time.

Crawford: What work do you have from the early sixties that you stand by and especially want to be remembered?

Oliveros: I had a retrospective concert a year ago in Switzerland, in December, and those songs that you mentioned, the Three Songs for Soprano and Piano, were performed, and the Trio for Flute, Piano and Page Turner and Variations for Sextet. Those were the early pieces, I guess, that were performed.

Crawford: You got a lot of fame from those pieces.

Oliveros: Well, yes, they took note. Alfred Frankenstein wrote about my Variations for Sextet and hailed it. Roger Sessions was one of the judges--I guess it was Roger Sessions who was the judge of that.

Crawford: Let's talk about the Page Turner. Was that meant to be theatrical?

Oliveros: No, it was just that the page turner needed a pair of extra hands at one point to hold some keys down for the pianist so they could make harmonics.

Crawford: They were silently depressed?

Oliveros: Yes, they were silently depressed. Then the pianist struck a chord, and those silently depressed strings made the strings ring, so that was what it was for. So it wasn't theatrical, although the title itself is.

Crawford: There was notation and improvisation?

Oliveros: No improvisation.

Crawford: Where you use improvisation with notation, how does that work? Does it set up a kind of a conflict?

Oliveros: Not necessarily, depending on the players. The first one I guess that did that was Outline, it was called, Outline for Flute, Percussion and String Bass. And so it had written material and places for improvisation, and I think a spot or two for free improvisation. It mixed written material with--say, one line was written and another line was improvised, and just mixed through the piece, and then some places there was free improvisation for all the players at once.
Crawford: Is that a generally happier situation for the players?

Oliveros: Not necessarily. Some players are simply at a loss if they don't have written notes to follow, which I think is very sad because it's a very wonderful thing and experience to improvise music. I feel they're deprived.

Crawford: I do, too. I got my musical degree from a terrorist organization known as the Royal College of Musicians.

Oliveros: Oh! [laughs]

Crawford: I'm unable to improvise. I wish I could.

Oliveros: Well, you probably could. You probably could. I don't believe that people can't improvise. It's a matter of dropping a few things.

Crawford: Jumping in.

Oliveros: Yes.

Crawford: Would you talk about the Variations for Sextet from 1959? What about the idea of drones or what are described as drones in your music.

Oliveros: Yes. Well, that in a way is unfortunate. Only because of the attitude that if you're just listening to one note, that there must not be anything happening, but that's not true. Every tone, every note is a dynamic system which has myriad fluctuations and things to listen to. But if your expectations are melodic or harmonic, well then, you're going to turn up your nose at listening to a note for a long time.

Crawford: It's not uncomplicated listening.

Oliveros: No. Nothing is ever that simple. But first of all, Variations for Sextet is not a drone piece. It has one point where the cello holds a note for a long time relative to everything else that has happened, but I don't see that as making it a drone piece.

Oliveros: The first piece that I made that you could call a drone piece was a piece for David Tudor. He was asked to play D-flat, the third line of the bass clef, and to play that in a lot of different ways.

There was a four-channel tape that went with that, which was doing the fundamental harmonics of D-flat in quite a few loops, tape loops. And it was very funny because at the San Francisco Tape Music Center we had these tape machines, one of which was a drive machine and then there were so-called slaves. I hate that terminology, master and slave, but it's embedded in technology, so that's something that needs to be rooted out.
Oliveros: But in any case, the Center had a driving machine and then slave machines, so you could make tape loops with these machines, and I did do this, but to my surprise, what happened was that none of the machines ran at the same speed. You think that technology is so precise. Try setting a bunch of mechanical alarm clocks to go off at the same time. Or try to keep them in sync. [laughs]

So these loops, instead of being right on, which I had imagined building up these very interesting textures with harmonics, overtones that would be adding and subtracting together to create a kind of fluctuating kind of wave form—well, it wasn't like that because the machines didn't run at the same speed. It was different, you know?

Crawford: Not a science.

Oliveros: No, there were these microtonal variations of the D-flat, which was also very interesting. It wasn't what I had started out to do, but what I ended up with. [laughs]

Crawford: I remember Theater Piece for Trombone that you wrote in the sixties, for garden hose among other things.

Oliveros: That was the first half of 1963 or '4, for Stuart Dempster. Stuart took it all over the world, yes.

Crawford: What did that mean for you in your career?

Oliveros: I don't really know! [laughs]

Crawford: Was that your first piece played in Carnegie Hall?

Oliveros: Probably, yes, yes. Probably, sure. Big deal. [laughs]

Crawford: I'm interested in the other musical portraits, and you might want to talk about where the ideas came from.

Oliveros: Well, as I've said the Wheel of Fortune was composed for William O. Smith, as you know. I had composed several pieces. One was the Wheel of Fortune and one was Night Jar Jacob Glick, and then Theater Piece for Trombone Player.

All these pieces were really in consideration of the special characteristics of each person, and so Bill Smith turns out, is a magician as well as a clarinetist, so I wrote a piece for him which had a kind of ritual and ceremonial aspect and the opportunity for him to do some of his magic tricks as well.

Crawford: According to what I read, he is directed to tell the audience a story about himself in French and a little-known fact about Benny Goodman, and to play.
Oliveros: Yes. I can't remember the score right now, but there were a variety of things that were really taking advantage of who he was, and at the end, then there was a clarinet improvisation. Sort of in balance with what had gone before, but a genuine musical moment, because he's a fantastic clarinetist.

Crawford: Did he perform it again?

Oliveros: Yes, he worked with it. I think he performed it a few times. And Jacob Glick performed the piece that I wrote for him. He's a viola player.

Crawford: How many of those were there in all?

Oliveros: Hmm. Well, let's see, I think maybe three or four. I did one for the Aeolian Players also. That was a group, a theater group.

Crawford: You asked them for a photo, to tailor the piece to their pictures?

Oliveros: I'll tell you the story about it. I had never met them, and so I asked that they send me a picture of the group. I used the picture to decide on how the theater of the piece would develop.

So then I was there for the premiere performance of it, and it turns out that they had replaced the pianist. He did the part okay, but Elliott Schwartz commented that he realized what a vehicle it would have been for the pianist that they had before.

Crawford: So a new player would of course change the work. Well, at that point you were beginning to write electronic music more and more, weren't you?

Oliveros: Yes.

Crawford: What is the balance today?

Oliveros: Well, I think it's pretty well balanced. I do a lot of different kinds of things. I'd have to sit down and look at my catalog. In this current period, for example, I'm writing a chorus for the University of Wisconsin at River Falls; it's a forty-voice choir. And I have to do a solo percussion piece for a percussionist. I'm working on *Io and Her and the Trouble with Him*, which is a dance opera. I'll have music on CD that's generated acoustically plus electronically, so it's a mix. I just use whatever I need to use.

Crawford: When you get a commission like that, what comes to you, and how do you approach it?

Oliveros: Well, sideways! [laughs] Edgewise. I just kind of open myself up to see what comes.
Crawford: The ideas just come to you, and they come in whatever form it takes.

Oliveros: Right. It might be on an airplane, or it might be sitting here, or it might be anytime, anywhere. But I don't go off in a corner to write music.

Crawford: What is your composing environment?

Oliveros: It varies a great deal, and so does my work; it varies a lot. In the fifties and sixties, when I was writing in conventional notation, I used to write my pieces on--I used to like to have a certain kind of paper, for example, a certain size that I wrote, and that seemed to be important to me.

Crawford: Like a canvas for a painter?

Oliveros: You understand the time space of the paper, you know, of the music that you're writing, and it lends itself to that particular way of composing, at that time. But I wouldn't feel the same way now.

Crawford: Wouldn't be so important to you.

Oliveros: It wouldn't be. No, I don't think so.

Crawford: Do you think in formal shapes? For instance, as a person writing a symphony knows there has to be this many movements and so on. Is there a kind of architecture when you're conceiving that piece?

Oliveros: There's always an architecture. Currently my deadline for this chorus is tomorrow. What I'm working on right now is exactly that: what shape is this chorus going to take? Because it's full of performer choices.

Crawford: Such as.

Oliveros: Well, for example, the word "cluster." Cluster comes about if a singer starts a pitch and another singer joins and differs from her pitch and so on, until they have a cluster of sound, see? And so that can be like a cloud, and it can take any kind of dynamic shape, but they're creating this cluster. So the question is what will trigger them to do that, and how many times would they be able to choose that particular item as a choice?

Crawford: Are there designated leaders within the ensemble?

Oliveros: No. My pieces are kind of a microcosm of the kind of freedom I want people to have.

Crawford: Does it work? We are used to hierarchy.
Oliveros: Yeah! Sure, it works! See, that's what I try to do, is flummox that as much as possible. [laughter]

Crawford: You fought for improvisation at a time when it wasn't very respectable.

Oliveros: That's right.

Crawford: Let's talk a little bit about that. You have said that there are two kinds of improvisation: one is historical and one is purely creative. I think you said Ornette Coleman would represent the second type.

Oliveros: Ornette is the one who--Ornette and Cecil Taylor started moving away from traditional jazz.

Crawford: Can you give me examples?

Oliveros: Okay. Traditional jazz has a beat. It generally is based upon chord progressions that derive from some tune. A tune is always played in a particular jazz style, for example, and then there are variations, continual variations upon that tune. But the chord progressions and the beat are codified, so improvisation is based upon--there's a trope on a popular tune. But Ornette and Cecil broke away from that entirely. Ornette didn't want to have a piano player. He didn't want to lay down chords, a very different way of making music. It got very free.

Oliveros: Cecil Taylor is working in very, very free forms. It's just music. It's not jazz. I mean, jazz has become the term that some people would rather not have anything to do with. They would rather not be categorized. They just want to play music. And I can certainly understand that.

Crawford: Was it more difficult?

Oliveros: Classically trained performers were not ready to improvise, because improvisation was suppressed.

Crawford: You said it was some kind of a racist reaction, almost. There was something racist about not accepting improv.

Oliveros: I meant that improvisation is certainly a very important part of black music, and also there was the dichotomy between so-called art music and jazz, looking down. Music that is written and printed and learned and performed by players who were trained in the classical tradition was one thing, sort of the so-called "high art."

Jazz being something that's not written, although a lot of it is, and played by people who are not schooled, are self taught, so that there is the high art/low art. This is something that needs to be changed.
Crawford: What about improvisatory music? Is that just for young children? Is it practiced?

Oliveros: I'm talking all ages. Yes, I'm talking all ages. I don't think so. I mean, the only thing that could have come close was the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock in the seventies, and that was started by Carl Berger. The Creative Music Studio existed, and people came from many parts of the world to study music there with all kinds of people at the time, including Ornette Coleman and John Cage. Many, many great players, composer-performer types. It was very mixed. And it had a pretty large impact. A lot of people went through there. But a lot of people from Europe came because they were interested in these different forms of music.

Crawford: You have worked with Cage. What about the other important collaborations that you have had.

Oliveros: Well, certainly collaborations in the San Francisco Tape Music Center were the initial collaborative works, doing improvisation with Terry Riley and Loren Rush and Ramon Sender and Morton Subotnick and people from Anna Halprin's Dancers Workshop were very important in the sixties.

I met David Tudor in 1963, and then we began to perform together and had the festival, the Tudor Fest at San Francisco Tape Music Center, and then John Cage came through and I met him for the first time. I was commissioned by Merce Cunningham for a piece [on which he based his dance] "Canfield." My piece was called In Memoriam Nikola Tesla, Cosmic Engineer [1969].

That was certainly a piece that was a design for performer choices, and John, David and Gordon Mumma were the performers, so it was collaborative in that sense. That's how I worked with John. He performed my piece! I also performed pieces of his.

Crawford: According to the notes, Tesla was working with an oscillator, and was about to destroy the building he was working in, creating tremors like earthquakes with such high frequencies.

Right. What was Cage's comment about your music?

Oliveros: This was because of the conference at the Sky Walker Ranch in Sonoma. He said he understood harmony for the first time.

Crawford: What did he mean?

Oliveros: Well, I had played a couple of excerpts, one was from Deep Listening, that Stuart and I made in the cistern [New Albion Records, 1989]. I think John's understanding of that, what he was so excited about was that there was harmony there, but the harmony came about through the interaction of our
sounds with the space of the cistern, so that the harmony arose naturally, like geese flying over a lake.

There's a reflection of the geese, and the geese don't know that they're being reflected; the lake doesn't know, or whatever; but there is this natural interaction that's very beautiful.

Crawford: It is very beautiful.

Oliveros: This was the nature of that harmony that came out of listening and performing in that cistern. We didn't go down with any idea except that we wanted to use the sound and the space. The recording of it was sort of an afterthought. I'm glad we did it.

Crawford: You wrote another work shortly after that, one that brought about some give and take between you and Donal Henahan in the *New York Times* was *To Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of Their Desperation*.

Oliveros: Well, yes. I wrote that in 1970. I had read the Valerie Solanas *SCUM Manifesto* in 1968, when it was printed.

Crawford: Talk about SCUM.

Oliveros: SCUM means the Society for Cutting Up Men. This manifesto is written in street language. Valerie Solanas was kind of a street person, I guess, and she was part of Andy Warhol's entourage. This manifesto really articulated all of the feminist principles, in street language. Later, I think, Kate Millett recognized what she had done and began to shape that in other styles of language.

But my interest in that *SCUM Manifesto* was the principle of the relationship of individuality and community, and how the reciprocity of individuality and community--how that could work. So when I was going to write this piece, I was in a residency at Hope College in Michigan. I used those principles to articulate the structure of that piece.

What it was was that each performer had the same part, but each performer differentiated their part, according to their own choices. But at the same time, everyone was responsible to keep a certain kind of texture and listening going, so if one person began to stand out, well, then, the community would begin to bring that person back into the texture.

So there were moments when someone would be visible musically and then where the texture of the music would be governing the moments. And this really translated what Valerie Solanas had written in her manifesto about that relationship. It has taken thirty years or more to really catch up with that!
Several musicologists have written about my work and have picked up on the political nature of what I've done, in the deep structure of the music. It's in the deep structure. It's not on the surface. But I see that hierarchical relationship in music that came out of the first Viennese school to be the seat of the patriarchy. I hear it that way, too. I mean, I hear the regimentation that comes from that.

Crawford: You wrote a very long and moderate letter to Henahan taking issue with his description of you as "a composer of militant feminist inclinations," and your music as "ocasionally interesting random antiphony"—the word random indicating that there had been no guidelines. Did he ever respond?

Oliveros: No. Well, the thing is, he got off on a tirade about militant feminism in relation to this. I guess he knew about Valerie Solanas's Society for Cutting up Men. Valerie Solanas was the only member of this society. It was just one person. But I was listening to what was being said, not the rhetoric.

Crawford: Do you think that critics now have better ears to hear?

Oliveros: It depends on who they are, what investment they have in what kind of music, because if you come to a concert all cocked and ready to follow melodic and harmonic progressions and the music doesn't work that way, you won't be too receptive to it because it's not doing what you came for. But if you come to the music in a more open state, ready to listen to whatever it is, without this prepackaged judgment, then maybe we can get somewhere.

Crawford: Do you think it makes a difference that there aren't many women critics at the major papers?

Oliveros: Yes, I think so.

Crawford: The Wall Street Journal has a very good critic, a woman. But I don't know that she covers contemporary music.

Oliveros: Well, there you go! [laughs] No, I didn't hear back from Donal Henahan. But I couldn't let it go by.

Crawford: What would you say about the development of musicianship in the last several decades?

Oliveros: I would say in recent times players are really wonderful. It's amazing, really amazing how musicianship has evolved over the last fifty years. I mean, things that I couldn't possibly have expected of performers twenty years ago, they do just fine now. For example, they're all ready to do improvisation and performer choice.

Crawford: I know you're on the faculty at Oberlin. Is that a pretty wide open place?
Oliveros: Oberlin. Well, I'm not on the faculty. I was there for a semester.

Crawford: You're not regular faculty.

Oliveros: When I came on, I think that was the idea, that they'd like to have me on the faculty, but I had already a contract with Agnes Scott for last spring, and then I got out of going back there again because I had the University of Wisconsin at Madison this spring.

Crawford: Is that a place that's very fresh?

Oliveros: I think the students at Oberlin are fantastic. I always had incredible contact with students at Oberlin. I've been there off an on, like short visits, from maybe the seventies on up till now, and I've always connected with the students very strongly. There are very, very interesting students there.

Crawford: What other places strike you as being very open to this kind of music? Yale has a good music school, I understand, but are they?

Oliveros: I haven't been to Yale for so long that I couldn't possibly answer.

Crawford: Have you taught at Yale?

Oliveros: No. No, I gave a lecture there once, but that was twenty years ago, I guess, or more, so it's not a school I know much about except that the Bang on the Can people came out of there. David Lang and Julia Wolfe and the others. They seem to be doing wonderful work.

Crawford: Going back now to the Tape Music Center, let's talk more of the principally electronic works that you were doing there. Which ones stand out for you?

Oliveros: *Bye Bye Butterfly* was one that I did in 1965. Of course, it's been issued on CDs and so on, and it was cited as one of the ten best in the sixties in electronic music and all of that by John Rockwell [*New York Times*, 5/25/80; 7/27/80], so it's had a lot of play. So that was one piece.

Crawford: Talk a little about how you selected the title.

Oliveros: Well, it was total serendipity because all I knew was that I wanted to use a record, because I wanted to have some recording to play with, and I didn't care what was on the recording. I looked over. There was this record laying there in the studio, and so I picked it up and put it on the turntable. And that's what came up. It was really serendipity that it turned out to be "butterfly."

Crawford: There is real-time performance in the piece?
Oliveros: Well, yes. I was playing with--I played with the record. It would be what you'd call an early remix. Right now, that's one of the very popular thing that DJs and people do: they remix different music to make new music, and so this is what that was, in 1965, but that's not what was happening in popular music. And I didn't have a mixer, either.

Crawford: So how did you work that out?

Oliveros: Well, it was because of the way I had set it up with tape delay and patching the phonograph into the tape machine and the generators that I was using, but there was no mixer.

Crawford: What has been the major development that your music has taken since the sixties?

Oliveros: At the beginning, I used tape recorders, and now I can use computers, but I have generally bypassed most of what people are using. I've worked for a long time with a system which is called the expanded instrument system. It's explained on the website. I wanted a system that I could use any acoustic sound or voice and process the sounds with delays and with modulation and layering, so that's what I use. I use that system.

It started in the sixties. It started with the electronic music pieces that I did at the San Francisco Tape Music Center: *Bye Bye Butterfly*, *I of IV*, and many others. I was using tape delay in those days. By 1983 I got a couple of digital delays, which I used with my accordion.

Crawford: How does that work?

Oliveros: You can play a sound. It's recorded in the delay system, and according to the time value that you set, it will come back again. But my idea was to use more than one and to build up a layering of delays. When the sound is delayed, then you can work with it. For example, I have foot pedals, so if a sound is delayed, I can bend it with my foot, change the pitch, and so on. And other things as well.

Crawford: So that increases the scope of what you can do.

Oliveros: That's why I call it the expanded instrument system because it expands the possibility of a single instrument or a voice.

Crawford: When you say bend, what do you mean?

Oliveros: I mean bend a pitch that otherwise would stay at its same frequency. I can change the pitch with my foot.

Crawford: What about the Deep Listening Band? When did that form and what was that?
Oliveros: Deep Listening Band was formed by accident, as Stuart says, when we went down into the cistern in 1988 and made that recording.

Crawford: And you perform mostly with them now, right?

Oliveros: I perform with lots of different groups, but the Deep Listening Band has got the longest history as a group that I work with, and we'll be performing together on March 17th in New York at a place called Engine 27, so that's coming up, and we perform together at Lincoln Center this summer.

Crawford: Was this The Long String piece?

Oliveros: No, that was earlier, 1995, 1996, with Ellen Fullman. That was terrific. We've commissioned a lot of different composers, about twelve of them.

When we commissioned Ellen, she was living in Austin, Texas, at the time. We went down three different times to have a residency with her, to work on the piece that she was writing and the one that I was writing. She had her instruments set up in a studio there called The Candy Factory, and we would do work-in-progress performances of the piece, and then we went down for the premiere of the pieces, which we did there in 1996, I guess.

And we made a recording, which is on--what was the name of that? I can't think of the name of the record company right now. Anyway, it's recorded. Her piece was called Texas Travel Texture, and mine is called Epigraphs in the Time of AIDS. It was dedicated to my brother, Peter.

Then we did this performance of these pieces in New York, at the library at Columbia University for a couple of nights, and so The Long String Instrument was installed in a very wonderful rotunda--by an architect, Gabriela Gutierrez.

Crawford: It's a difficult installation?

Oliveros: Well, yes, because it can't be freestanding, so it had to be anchored. It's a big production.

Crawford: But you don't let that stop you. In other words, when you're composing something, you don't think of problems with its future performance history.

Oliveros: Sure, I think of it! But no, it doesn't stop me.

Crawford: A last word about improvisation. It's the nanotechnology I'm interested in, in the idea of implanting a musical chip. It sounds fantastic, but then so did computers. What will these knowledge protocols contain?
Oliveros: I wrote that in my article, "Quantum Improvisation in the Cybernetic Present," and I believe that I stated all of the things that I thought I wanted. I can't remember everything that I said.

Crawford: Have you done some research in this area?


In any case, I read the book. It had just been published. *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. And in it he made a lot of predictions about the next hundred years. He gives a timeline. Maybe by 2030, for example, things will be very, very different already. He's talking about "nanobots" now. "Implant" is really sort of passe, in a way.

Crawford: I guess we're not talking about invasive surgery.

Oliveros: In my article, I say that thank you, I prefer something that's not invasive in that way.

Crawford: And that's a nanobot?

Oliveros: Nanobot. Nanobots would be microscopic robots that could be ingested, and they could go in and scan your brain, for example, and communicate to a computer from inside that way, so you could really actually scan the brain.

Crawford: That would have medical ramifications.

Oliveros: Oh, research is going on all over the world.

Crawford: What would it do for a musician or even for a nonmusician?

Oliveros: First of all, if you think about the incredible calculations that are made now today, we can't go back. We can't do what computers do in terms of calculation and running systems and all this kind of stuff. It has amplified our ability to calculate with numbers, yes?

Crawford: I'm sure.

Oliveros: But what Kurzweil is saying is where computers are deficient is in pattern recognition, but he is saying that it won't be long before computers catch up in that area, in the area of pattern recognition. And he's talking about music and the use of computers to amplify our ability to work with numbers.

Crawford: I see our time is up. Thank you.
Brief telephone interview, November, 2001

Crawford: Some thoughts to be added to our interviews: What is the climate now for electronic and improvised music now, and how is it different from the 60s?

Oliveros: At this point, I think it’s much more open than in the sixties, there is more understanding, and people have been exposed a lot more.

Crawford: What do you consider avant garde now?

Oliveros: The term refers to an older time. I don’t see it as being useful anymore, because there is a globalization of music going on. Influences are being integrated, so it is not so much avant garde as just a melting pot.

Crawford: How about performing places?

Oliveros: There are plenty of places in New York where one can perform. My career has been mostly in alternative places.

Crawford: You do things at Lincoln Center.

Oliveros: Lincoln Center? Sure but that is mostly Lincoln Center outdoors, the summer festival. It’s unpredictable, really. And that audience comes from anywhere, just people coming upon what you are doing.

Crawford: Is that a good audience?

Oliveros: Sure.

Crawford: Has electronic music come full circle, now that laptops can manipulate any amount of sounds?

Oliveros: Yes, as I’ve said it’s moving into another area, the hybridization of humans and computers. Scientists predict that by the end of the 21st century there won’t be much difference between humans and computers, both anatomically and otherwise. I’m not afraid of it—it is already happening. I think it’s happening in music. There are people working on it.

Crawford: Can you describe the music you are doing now? Ben Johnston wrote about your music as “self-effacing, with a carefully planned involvement of sense perception...and a freeing of affective states from artistic manipulation...”
Oliveros: When asked to describe my music I kind of freak out. I do a lot of different kinds of music, and have just written a work for Sara Cahill for the Ruth Crawford Seeger tribute. She commissioned a brief piece for keyboard.

Crawford: Did you write anything about September 11?

Oliveros: What I did immediately was a piece I’d done before at a deep listening seminar, a heart chant, with people in a big circle, one hand on the heart and the other on the back of the next person. In this way the heart is contained between the palms of the hands. They chant on “ah”–to resonate the heart, so that it is healing to oneself and out to the planet and the universe. This is a very effective kind of unifying action. I send that out to a lot of people and do it whenever I’m in a gathering.

Saturday I did a deep listening seminar in New York, a workshop given as the opening of a conference, and it worked very well. I did a heart chant in Cleveland at a cathedral and at a concert of the Deep Listening Band too. It works at any kind of spirit gathering.

Crawford: What about commissions now?

Oliveros: Mostly they come out of the blue. I’m applying to Creative Capital for a new opera with Moira Roth, about a library of maps. One is a map of the heart, made by a hermit in the desert, of branches. I’ve staged some of it in a studio setting. The idea is to record these for DVD, which is also going to contain projections of animated characters who can participate in the opera.

Crawford: You haven’t said much about your relationship with Ione.

Oliveros: Ione is a partner of 16 years. We live together in Kingston, New York. Sometimes she travels with me, sometimes not.

Crawford: Well, what is coming up?

Oliveros: Next week, I’ll be doing a solo performance, 50 minutes, in Porto, Portugal, at a show called “Entanglement with the Environment.” I don’t know what that is.

Crawford: You don’t have to know–just the time and place and turn up to perform. [laughter] Well, finally, what do you hope will be your legacy?

Oliveros: I hope I can leave a way for other people to realize themselves creatively.

Crawford: Have women come along?

Oliveros: The number of women in music has increased incredibly since the 50s. The International Alliance for Women and others are trying to change things. For
example, some change is going on in women getting into media programs, so they are more accepted, yes, but the field is still male-dominated.

Crawford: You have freed my thinking in the course of the interviews.

Oliveros: Thank you.

Crawford: So I’m sure you’ve had a substantial effect on your students.

Oliveros: I hope so.

Crawford: You have said you wanted to “flummox the hierarchy.” Have you?

Oliveros: I think it needs a little distance to find out.

[End interview]