

Sonic Genealogies

Stephen Vitiello on Pauline Oliveros

Hello, this is Stephen Vitiello, I'm an artist and an electronic musician based in Richmond, Virginia. My work includes site specific sound installations, CDs, performances, soundtracks for films, video, and dance. Many of the recording projects that I do involve collaboration as well as performances. I've been fortunate enough to work with so many great artists, including Pauline Oliveros, Steve Roden, Robin Rimbaud (aka Scanner), Taylor Deupree, Ryūichi Sakamoto, Nam June Paik and many more.

I first met Pauline when I flew to Cologne, Germany, at the invitation of Anthony Moore. I was invited to participate in Per->Son, this was a series of events mostly held in a church near the Academy for Media Arts in 1988. There were series of evenings that involved solo performances and collaborations, featuring Scanner, Frances-Marie Uitti, Pauline and myself. We were all utilizing a 64-channel sound system designed and performed by and with sound artist Andres Bosshard. I was by far the newest and least known of the feature participants. That experience set up a lifetime model of ways to move ahead, set a path of creativity, new friends, collaborators... Up until then I knew of Pauline, but if I'm honest, I hadn't paid attention. I knew her name as someone I would hear on late night radio, on WNYC, but I'm not sure that I ever took her as seriously as I should have.

When I arrived at the church, there was a sound that was just making the whole building shake. I was kind of struck and I stood still, and I thought that it was one of the most interesting things I'd ever heard. I asked, I think it was Anthony, I asked: "What's going on?" and he said: "Oh, that's Pauline, she's just testing the sound system and Andres is showing her what can be done". Sounds were flying around the space, but they were also just... They were deep, they were resonant, they were beautiful and if I had just five, six life changing moments in my career as an artist, that was, definitely, one of the big ones. From there, we each had our own evening. We performed solo, but then we also were

Compartir

Realización: Arnau Horta

Licencia: Creative Commons by-nc-nd 4.0

encouraged to collaborate. The 64-channel sound system meant an engagement with the architecture, with multichannel performance, so it became very site specific. I was the youngest, the newest... Well, actually, Robin and I were the same age, but I was the newest in terms of being well-known. I had the least experience in this kind of environment, but I was thrilled and honored and maybe a little bit afraid to be part of it. I did my own solo set and invited the others, including Anthony, to perform with me. Through that experience, and I'd say, probably, particularly the experience of getting to be in and around Pauline, I started to understand and take seriously the value and the exciting potential of improvising. I believe that when Pauline would speak about it, she would talk about both work set and work compose, but also have room for freedom of expression. So, I don't know precisely where improvisation would be used or not used, but for me that was what I was feeling.

All of this gave me the confidence to move ahead and helped shape my interests. Prior they had probably been more within music, prior, you know, they were more often focused on creating soundtracks for other artists. This was on a moment of emergence when I started to think as my own artist, and I think that a lot of that came from the generosity of the others and getting to work with them and being treated as an equal. On the plane right home, I kind of meekly asked Pauline if I could study with her, and she said: "No, you'll perform with me and John McPhee me next week at the Experimental Intermedia Foundation". I said something about imposter syndrome, and I wasn't sure I was really ready, whether I really belonged there, and she told me very simply: "Get over it". One other maybe set of instructions or homework she offered me on the plane right was start going to the New York Public Library and looking at John Cage's scores. And that was it. That set me forward. You know, from everything that I know, Pauline treated her students that way. She treated younger musicians that way all the time, so I'm not trying to suggest that I was special on my experience, but I still feel very fortunate and will be forever grateful for that performance with Pauline and John. I remember asking her, you know, how long it would be. And she said: "Well, as long as it needs to be". And I said: "How long should I play?". And she said: "Well, if you're worried, you can play the first ten minutes". And when I got on stage, she said: "You play until the end" and I asked her: "When do we stop? How do I know it's the end?". She smiled. Somewhere at 43 minutes and 51 seconds we all stopped, and it felt exactly right. It also felt like magic. I had never been part of a performance that way, but because I was with her and understanding and respecting the experience, I was listening, and we were all listening, and that moment felt right. We stopped, we sat still and then it was over.

To prepare for this talk, I rewatched the TEDx Talk that Pauline did fairly late in her life, and she spoke of working with musicians who became the deep listening and the unique opportunity of being in a cistern in Washington state. I love when she speaks about being in that space and how they had to listen and perform in a whole new way, but also how the space became a performer, that as they sent sound out into the space, it received their sounds, but it became a performer, I'm not sure if she said "a musician", but it was giving their sounds back and it was manipulating their sounds through its architecture. And it was a gift, and it was a learning experience. When I do site specific installations, the site visit is essential, to fly wherever the site is. I still don't think we can do it with Zoom or virtual reality. When you go to a space, and you take in the encounter... I listen, I feel, I try to modify my breathing and clear my brain. I try not to go there with a preconceived notion, but just to go and see what the space gives

me. And part of that sound, part of that it's the acoustics, maybe the interesting problematic acoustics... I'm thinking about the sounds that bleeds in, the vibration that might be picked up through the floor, the walls... I think about what can be amplified and would that be a contact microphone or accelerometer... Or maybe not a microphone, maybe it's bringing in a sound that harmonizes with whatever is going on in that space. And it's not just about sound, it's also about the culture, what is that building or what is that bridge or what is the history around that space, what else happens there. Is there a way to play with it? To think about it, to consciously engage with it, hopefully, without illustrating anything, but some kind of poetic connection that you can bring through sound.

For me, field recording could happen in Grand Central. It happened in a different way in the World Trade Center in 1999, when I had a six-month residency. In that case I was recording with contact mics that were fixed to the wall, so it wasn't the traditional kind of concept of field recording with a beautiful mono or stereo or multichannel microphone, but it was hearing vibration, and that was something that I later did also with much more high-end scientific devices working with biologists, listening to insects that can only be heard through the surface of branches, flowers, streams of winds... And I think, you know, part of what I love about field recording and part of what I love about the act of listening is something that Pauline spoke about many times, which is that AI gives you a focus. I believe that a turning point in her life was when she was a child and given a cassette recorder, an early tape recorder, and started to listen to technology before it just became full bodied with or without technology. But also, the listening in the dark with eyes closed, pair of headphones on, whether it's in a field of frogs, whether it's at the base of a mountain in West Virginia with the wind howling through the trees... It's that listening in such a way connects one to the world and connects one to the environment, but it also allows for an internal kind of experience, an internal listening, a listening that allows for one's own creativity to come forth and to tell our own stories through listening. I remember a co-curated series of events at the Whitney Annea Lockwood presented her recordings on the Hudson River, and everybody in the room was lying down or standing or sitting with a friend and there was no visuals, but it occurred to me that probably everybody was listening, but they were listening differently, because we weren't looking everybody's associations were now different. For somebody those recordings might have brought up a kind of calm and a memory of being by the water. For somebody else it might be a fear of drowning, it might be a focus on the intensity of the rapids that might be creating an edge. For somebody else it might be very carefully tuning in to the different kinds of patterns of rippling. People might be coming with field recording or phonography background, but quite likely, many people in the room just stumbled in because they were at the Whitney. They opened a door and there was a whole room full of people listening and they came in, sat down and very likely had an encounter that was very different than what they expected and that they came to look at paintings, photographs, sculptures...

I remember Pauline and I performed in Boston, and she dropped me off at the train station and I think she said she had something like a four-hour drive back to Kingston and I said: "Are you going to listen to an audiobook or do you have any CDs?", and she said: "No, I'll just listen". And I smiled and laughed and thought: "What?". And then I was: "No, she will listen, and she will take it in and, unlike anybody I know, she will give it concentration for whatever that time and appreciate it and make the time move by

the way maybe for me I would need, you know, an electronic music soundtrack or whatever I'm going to listen to on that day.

Maybe one other shared memory... We performed at the Paradiso together, in Amsterdam, and we're on stage, there's a video that I prepared. I asked her if she wanted to look at it, she said no, that she would play to it, but she wasn't going to look at it. So, she was in front of the screen, and she never did look at the image, but of course, she played beautifully to it. But there was so much noise coming from over in the bar area. They were... Particularly at one point in the show, they were clinging dishes and washing and moving things and I got tense and I probably stopped breathing properly. After the show, she said: "Did you notice what I was doing?". And I said: "No, what do you mean?". And she said: "Well, I heard all those sounds, so I started to play to them and that changed my rhythms, and I became attuned to the kind of soundscape and space". And it impressed me so much, I still think about that, that I stopped breathing and I got angry, I probably started to perform badly. For her, she took it as a challenge, but also something interesting.

Almost every time I ever saw Pauline perform, she was playing accordion, that was her signature instrument. For many that would seem an unusual instrument and I don't know if I ever heard why she gravitated to it, but it does seem that she had a unique career. She was a woman who came through a very male dominated field, particularly with technology in the 50s and 60s. It allowed her to stake her own claim. It's also an instrument that breathe like a human body and to move it is to give breath and to play with a breath. The only time I remember her not playing accordion was for a show that I curated at Town Hall, it was a Kitchen benefit, and Laurie Anderson performed, Steve Reich, Meredith Monk, Philip Glass... And I asked Pauline if she had sound checked, and she said no. And I said: "What are you going to do?" and she smiled. And when her part of the performance came up, they put out a chair and a microphone and she went up on the stage and she introduced the audience to the idea of The Tuning Meditation. She gave the word score to perform it, it was a piece to be performed by the audience. She asked that people listened, that they localize, they pay attention to others in the room. Again, she didn't give a timeline, but invited the audience to perform The Tuning Meditation. And I swear that my heart was pounding, and I thought: "What?", you know. This could so easily fail, but she sat there, and the audience started to vocalize. Sounds started to build, they rose, there was a peak, a spectacular peak. And I looked around, and some people had their eyes closed, some people were smiling... And at a certain point, I don't know if it was at nine or ten minutes, just like that, there was a fade out and it was over. And there was such a beautiful harmonizing of the audience and the composer, harmonizing of voices and the space and being uniquely participants in a moment in time. I don't know if others could pull that off, but she could pull it off, and gave the audience the power to do that.

The music you've been hearing at the background is Golden Offence Orchestra's Recording of the Composition to Valerie Solanas and Marilyn Monroe in Recognition of their Desperation. Pauline wrote the score to Valerie Solanas in 1970. The work has a political background, a specifically feminist background. I was just reading an interview with Pauline in Pitchfork where she said, I quote: "The structure is based on her manifesto of equality and community, so everybody in the orchestra has the same part, but the way each part is differentiated is up to the individual. One principal instruction is that if anybody takes leadership in the piece for too long, then the rest of the

community rises up and absorbs that. So, I was expressing how an individual can make a difference and at the same time be part of a community". End quote. My understanding is that the Golden Offence Orchestra was formed to perform this composition and I often wondered whether someone as distinct as her... What would hold up in terms of... Is it just the memory, her texts or teaching, individual recordings...? For me those are the deep listening bounds recordings that I always go to first, but also, this is a piece which was scored for others to perform without her, and I think it's a lovely example. I hope this piece would be inspiring to you as well.

Now that Pauline has passed away, there has been probably growing attention, as often happens, but I have to hope that her legacy will just continue, that more attention will always be brought... perhaps that the respect she didn't earn in her lifetime to the level of some of her peers, you know, great peers such as Terry Riley, Morton Subotnick and others, but nevertheless, she was probably in the historical shadows in comparison... but I hope that younger generations will continue to learn about her, to appreciate her, to listen to her works, to listen to her ideas and to become better musicians than they might have been without her, to be better thinkers, to be better poets. It's a mistake I probably make, and others, to only talk about this narrowly within the idea of people who consciously appreciate sound, but I think to learn from Pauline and learn of Pauline should make the people just enjoy the world that much more. It should encourage writers to listen to the world around them to write, to describe a sound as they hear it. But more than anything, to give us moments where we take pauses in our own lives and listen and appreciate and feel fortunate that there are so many beautiful sounds all around us.



Pauline Oliveros. Photography courtesy of The Center for Contemporary Music Archives, Mills College at Northeastern University