

Pauline Oliveros, Composer Who Championed 'Deep Listening,' Dies at 84

By Steve Smith

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Pauline Oliveros, a composer whose life's work aspired to enhance sensory perception through what she called "deep listening," died on Thursday at her home in Kingston, N.Y. She was 84.

Her death was confirmed by her spouse, Carole Ione Lewis, a writer and performance artist known as Ione.

Early in her career in the 1960s, Ms. Oliveros avidly adopted cutting-edge technologies, working with magnetic tape and prototype synthesizers at the San Francisco Tape Music Center.

Already active as an improviser, she approached electronic music with a performer's instincts; to make "Bye Bye Butterfly" (1965), which John Rockwell, The New York Times music critic, called "one of the most beautiful pieces of electronic music to emerge from the 60s," she manipulated a recording of Puccini's opera "Madama Butterfly" on a turntable, augmenting its sounds with oscillators and tape delay.

The resulting piece, Ms. Oliveros wrote, "bids farewell not only to the music of the 19th century but also to the system of polite morality of that age and its attendant institutionalized oppression of the female sex."

Gender inequality would be a theme that she addressed repeatedly and tenaciously. An essay she wrote for The Times in 1970 started with a provocative question – "Why have there been no 'great' women composers?" – and then enumerated reasons, including gender bias and societal expectations of domestic compliancy.

Ms. Oliveros said in a 2012 Times profile that in 1971, after a period of intense introspection prompted by the Vietnam War, she changed creative course, eventually producing "Sonic Meditations," a set of 25 text-based instructions meant to provoke thoughtful, creative responses.

"Native," the most commonly cited example, is also the most succinct: "Take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears."

Embedded within that poetic instruction and the other meditations was a substantial proposition: a total inclusivity, meant to free music from elite specialists and open it up to everyone, regardless of status, experience, or ability.

"All societies admit the power of music or sound. Attempts to control what is heard in the community are universal," Ms. Oliveros wrote in a preface to the meditations. "Sonic Meditations are an attempt to return the control of sound to the individual alone, and within groups especially for humanitarian purposes; specifically healing."

Ms. Oliveros never quit composing, but from the 1970s favored improvisation, adapted elements of ceremonies and rituals encountered in her studies of Native American lore and Eastern religion, and conducted meditative retreats to share her artistic discipline.

One more turning point came in 1988, when Ms. Oliveros and two colleagues — the trombonist, didgeridoo player and composer Stuart Dempster and the vocalist and composer Panaiotis — descended into an extraordinarily resonant disused cistern in Port Townsend, Wash. Their drone-based improvisations were recorded, and selections issued on CD under the title "Deep Listening" in 1989.

Beyond a self-evident pun referring to music played 14 feet underground, "Deep Listening" signified Ms. Oliveros's emerging aural discipline: a practice that compelled listening not just to the conventional details of a given musical performance — melody, harmony, rhythm, intonation — but also to sounds surrounding that performance, including acoustic space and extra-musical noise.

The process lent its name to a working ensemble, Deep Listening Band, for much of its duration a trio comprising Ms. Oliveros, Mr. Dempster and the keyboardist and composer David Gamper, who died in 2011. Over time, the Deep Listening banner would extend to cover retreats, workshops and lectures in which Ms. Oliveros shared her artistic discipline.

In 2005 Ms. Oliveros rechristened her Pauline Oliveros Foundation the Deep Listening Institute, defining as its mission "creative innovation across boundaries and across abilities, among artists and audience, musicians and nonmusicians, healers and the physically or cognitively challenged, and children of all ages."

Among other projects, the institute supported the design of software that would allow children with severe physical or cognitive disabilities to improvise music. In 2014, the institute merged with the Center for Deep Listening at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y.

In her final decades Ms. Oliveros formed close bonds with groups like the International Contemporary Ensemble, which brought her work closer to the mainstream canon with performances at Lincoln Center, Miller Theater at Columbia University and elsewhere.

“I’m not dismissive of classical music and the Western canon,” Ms. Oliveros said in 2012. “It’s simply that I can’t be bound by it. I’ve been jumping out of categories all my life.”

Pauline Oliveros was born on May 30, 1932, in Houston to John Oliveros and Edith Gutierrez. Her childhood was accompanied by the sounds of piano lessons taught by her mother and grandmother, bird song and buzzing cicadas, and the curious special effects used on favorite radio serials like “Buck Rogers” and “The Shadow.”

Taking up the accordion as her principal instrument, she also learned to play violin, piano, French horn and tuba.

At 20 Ms. Oliveros moved to California in search of a compositional mentor. She found one in Robert Erickson, a prominent composer, who as the music director of KPFA-FM, a Berkeley radio station, introduced Bay Area listeners to the latest trends in European avant-garde composition.

She explored free improvisation with colleagues like the composer Terry Riley and the bassist and koto player Loren Rush in the late 1950s, and joined Ramon Sender and Morton Subotnick at the trailblazing San Francisco Tape Music Center, founded in 1962.

When the center was absorbed by Mills College in 1966, Ms. Oliveros served for a year as its director. In 1967 she joined the faculty at the University of California, San Diego, where she taught until 1981. From 2001 she served as distinguished research professor of music at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Her honors include a John Cage Award from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts.

In addition to her spouse, Ms. Oliveros is survived by three stepchildren, Alessandro Bovoso, Nico Bovoso and Antonio Bovoso; a brother, John Oliveros, and eight grandchildren.

A correction was made on Nov. 30, 2016: An obituary on Monday about the composer Pauline Oliveros misstated part of the name of the organization that presented her with the John Cage Award. It is the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, not the Foundation of Contemporary Arts.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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