



Ollveros, a/k/a Dr. Pinchus Olinsky

LINDA ROSIER

Listening for Peace

Where Is the Male Pauline Oliveros?

By Kyle Gann

Rich, to be rich, is to be so rich that when they are rich they have it to be that they do not listen and when they do they do not hear, and

recordings. One, *Crone Music* (Lovely Music), is a digitally expanded accordion album drawn from the music she wrote for the Mabou Mines production of *Lear*. *Troglodyte's Delight* (What Next?)

("gateway of the African diaspora") for research. This spring they'll visit Angola, and the production of *Nzinga*, scheduled for the '92-93 season, will incorporate musicians from both locales. (The

has metamorphosed continuously over the decades, but *Queens of Space* reflected two principles that her music has long been concerned with: free improvisation and delay. Oliveros started impro-

culture men composers have become overspecialized for mode number one; mode number two, the "intuitive" approach, is relegated to women. And those critics who ask "Where are the great female composers?" inevitably define their terms in such a way that creative mode number two is ineligible.

Oliveros is no stranger to mode number one. In 1959, she wrote a Webern piece that won a Pacifica Foundation Award along with works by Charles Wuorinen and Donald Martino, two of the bone-driest academics who ever matrixed an interval set; the judge was Roger Sessions. Since then, though, her activities have run toward healing music's imbalance by nurturing the intuitive mode. In addition to composing and performing, she runs workshops in teaching people to listen more carefully. She's done resonant frequency therapy in which she finds the tones that resonate in each person's bodily cavities, such as the head or solar plexus. In other seminars, she focuses alternately on the qualities of sounds and on the act of listening. In June she'll lead 15 to 20 people in a listening retreat in New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo mountains, to practice t'ai chi and breathing exercises, create music, and explore interesting acoustic sites in the area.

"Listening is neglected in our culture," she explains. "That's why we have to have such loud feedback from our machines. People used to have to be more sensitive in order to survive. Can you imagine going into the jungle without listening and surviving? An awareness comes about that connects people to their sound environment. The more awareness, the more information, and the more information the better you can make decisions. And move away from those things that are not good for you, those sounds that affect you adversely. There was a guy in my seminar who was

when they do they do not hear, and to be poor, to be poor, is to be so poor they listen and listen and what they hear well what do they hear, they hear that they listen. . .

—Gertrude Stein, *The Mother of Us All*

Nikola Tesla, electrical engineer and inventor, predicted that women would someday surpass men in all fields of endeavor because their tremendous creative potential had so long been dormant. Pauline Oliveros quoted Tesla in a 1970 *Times* article that began with a common critical question, "Why have there been no 'great' women composers?" In a later *High Fidelity* article, Oliveros turned the query around: "Why do men continue to ask stupid questions?" Whenever some unthinking critic asks, "Where is the female Beethoven?" I reflexively counter with, "Where is the male Oliveros?"

Today, Oliveros has given up polemics, and won't be pressed into them. Instead she's hoping that a combination of action and meditation will more efficiently change the world in ways that words have failed to. And she's very, very busy. Besides two fall concerts in New York, she composed a detailed electronic score for Susan Marshall's *Contenders* dance at BAM. She's just published her fourth book, *Deep Listening Pieces* (Deep Listening Publications). And, in the last few months, she's completed four new

Iroglodyte's Delight (What Next?) features her Deep Listening Band in Tarpaper Cave, an abandoned quarry in the Catskills, with the group's sounds accompanying a constant trickle of water. Her *Lion's Tail* for digital sampler appears on the latest volume of the CDCM Computer Music Series (Centaur). Finally, her arrangement of "Norwegian Wood" has just appeared on Aki Takahashi's *Hyper Beatles 2* (EMI).

And that's for starters. Oliveros wrote her first piece in 1951, and she's celebrating her 40th year of composing by initiating a 10-year collaboration project. The project's first phase is *Nzinga*, a music-theater piece with a script by Oliveros's poet friend Ione. "It touches," she says, "on four continents, and involves Brazil, Africa, Portugal, and the United States. *Nzinga* the queen-king was a 16th century regent who ruled Ndongo, which is present-day Angola. She was trained as a warrior by her father, and became the queen when he died. When the people said, 'We can't have a queen,' she put on her father's leopard-skin robe and said, 'Then call me king.' She took 40 concubines, which was the custom. They were male warriors that she dressed as women. She was very fierce, and led battles. People stopped in their tracks when they heard her war cry. She held off the Portuguese for 40 years from colonizing their territories."

In October, Oliveros and Ione traveled to Salvador, Brazil,

musicians from both locales. (The sex-switch in *Nzinga* is a theme that runs humorously through Oliveros's career; she plays klezmer accordion under the pseudonym Dr. Pinchus Olinsky, and on one of her records, the photo over her name is of a balding, mustachioed young man.) The world situation, though, is already suggesting new directions. "I have Arabic musicians in mind, and I'd welcome working with an Iraqi." In between jet-setting, Oliveros devotes much energy to her hometown concert series in the upstate Kingston-Woodstock area.

Before getting *Nzinga* off the ground, though, Oliveros turned her attention to other matters. February 24 on John Schaefer's "New Sounds" series at Merkin Hall, she presented *Queens of Space*. Dedicated to the gulf war dead, and performed a few hours after the ground war began in Kuwait, it was inspired by passages from the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, intended to be read into the ear of a dying person. "It's important to dedicate work," she told me. "I saw Alvin Curran at a concert, and he said, 'Well, we couldn't stop the war with our music. We wished we could.' As awful as it seems, all the tensions and angers that have built up all these years have to be expressed. I think the best we can do is tend to our own anger, and to sincerely meditate for peace. I do it with my music, because that's what I do best."

The sound of Oliveros's music

and delay. Oliveros started improvising in 1957 with Terry Riley and Loren Rush at San Francisco's KPFA studios. Electronic delay has figured in her music since the '60s; her Odyssey recording, *I of IV*, creates a minimalist texture by echoing synthesized tones. Even more at the heart of her music, though, is a meditative approach to listening. She played in the 1964 premiere of Riley's *In C*, and one of *In C*'s triumphs was that it created a context in which performers had to listen to each other to shape the piece. Oliveros's ear-responsive approach—she calls it "deep listening"—to improvisation distinguishes it from the virtuosic, neo-expressionist improv common downtown in the '80s. Like Susan B. Anthony in Gertrude Stein's *The Mother of Us All* (and who is music's Stein if not Oliveros?), she's evolved a receptive life view with listening as its primary metaphor.

In 1984 Oliveros published "The Contribution of Women as Composers" (in *Software for People*, Smith Publications), in which she distinguished two modes of creativity: "1. active, purposive creativity, resulting from cognitive thought, deliberate acting upon or willful shaping of materials, and 2. receptive creativity, during which the artist is like a channel through which material flows and seems to shape itself." She quotes letters by Mozart and Beethoven to show that a balanced creative process uses both modes, but points out that in this

was a guy in my seminar who was struggling with a truck that used to grind its gears as it went by his house. I told him to listen to it more carefully. And he finally moved. He went to UCSD and got a Ph.D. in music."

Receptive listening, resonant frequencies, breathing exercises, sonic awareness—that's easy stuff for the male music establishment to laugh off, and in some circles Oliveros has been relegated to the category of New Age music. (One thinks of Stein's debate between Susan B. Anthony and Daniel Webster, in which Webster—a proto-Reagan—can't hear a word Anthony says.) Mention New Age music, though, and Oliveros's wise, generous eyes narrow to slits. "Most New Age music has a noticeable lack of content; it just provides a kind of wash that doesn't draw anyone's attention. It has a neutralizing effect." Almost by definition, though, New Age music conduces to shallow listening, and follows an aesthetic opposite to Oliveros's. "My music is too thorny to be New Age. There's too much going on. Otherwise, by now, it would be more widely heard in those circles. You don't find my work in the health food stores."

What can't be laughed off—besides her underground influence on hundreds of artists, especially women—is the melting, atmospheric beauty of Oliveros's recent music, and the complex technology used to create it. *Queens of Space* was a collaboration with