LINDA ROSIER

Oliveros: more audience-directed, more intense

Yin / Yang Raga

By Kyle Gann

Pauline Oliveros
Rhys Chatham

The notes C, D, F, and G make up the 1960s raga. The four pitches encompass both tonic triad and dominant seventh, balancing in synthesis the harmonic duality within which the 19th century played out its febrile drama. The thirds of both chords are missing, in a refusal to commit to either major or minor. Sustained, that harmony expresses an ambiguous emotional stillness and the interpenetration of opposites, in a nested symmetry of seconds and fourths; it's the sonic analogue to yin/yang. You heard the sound in the early works of Terry Riley, and in all the '60s minimalism whose aim was spiritual centeredness. And you heard it again running through Pauline Oliveros's November 29 concert at Greenwich House Music School.

But first you heard a wall of noise. One of the thin, dark lines that separates meditation music from New Age glop is drawn by a refusal to issue value judgments against harsh or complex sounds. Anybody can make music pretty, and meditation composers, like Democrats, always have to prove they're not wimps. Percussionist Tom Goldstein began the concert with Oliveros's *Single-Stroke Roll Meditation*, in which he performed a quick, steady snare drum beat with virtuosic consistency. Perceptually, the taps fused into a pulsing, overtone-filled continuum. The effect was heightened by David Gamper's electronics, which softly projected a delayed version of the tapping to the back of the room. The noise melted into a strange timbre, and the delay came in so gradually that the sound seemed to grow in your head.

Oliveros's accordion entered before Goldstein ended. We're so used to her shtick now that it's easy to overlook how subtle it's become, how many devices she moves among within a performance. Sure, she squeezed the box and oohed lip-filter sweeps over that CDFG chord (B-flat always optional). But her accordion pitch somehow wavered in microtonal shifts, creating Doppler effects more vivid than any trombone-twirler could have managed. Gamper's long delay gave an illusion of the highly resonant spaces Oliveros likes to record in, leaving her free to smudge pointillistic dissonance into the continuum. When her voice dropped in a slow gliss from B-flat to G, it left behind a bending band of echoes whose ambiguity blurred the picture long after something else had started.

This music's challenge, after all, is to elude the conscious mind; "Deep listening," says Oliveros's latest manifesto, "is opening all of your attention to each moment of sound," and if you can pigeonhole a sound, you quit listening. That means the music can't keep still any longer than it takes your mind to figure out what it's doing, and it's in constant micrometamorphosis. Oliveros's extroverted mode came out in her music for Susan Marshall's dance at Brooklyn Academy (I went December 2). Overlaid with crowd sounds to match the footrace theme of Marshall's dance, it kept breaking into delicious tangos and polkas. (I loved the dance, too, but I'm not going to risk making the kind of inane comment about it that dance critics are forever making about music.) When Oliveros first went public with the accordion in the old *Horse Sings From Cloud* days, her breathing-meditation pieces could seem largely vicarious. Now, with subtle changes in her performing technique, her music's far more audience-directed, and more intense.

Despite its expanded forces, Rhys Chatham's *The Heart Speaks With Many Voices* at Brooklyn Academy November 30 and December 1 didn't materially alter the picture of his output. The guitar movements made melodies by bouncing notes back and forth at different rates in much the way he did in his 101-guitar piece in Montreal, *An Angel Moves Too Fast To See*. The movement for two trumpets quoted, with new syncopations, Chatham's *Waterloo* series of military brass pieces. There were rough transitions and kinks of the kind many composers iron out between world premieres and second performances. It's a shame composers don't, like playwrights, have a period of audience previews in which to make post-audition changes.

But the centerpiece, the choral movement for early-music singers, achieved a texture I'd never heard before. The singers, each limited to only one or two pitches, passed Leopold Zappler's abstract text around with a jumpy, hocketlike effect. We've heard lots of vocal hockets from the 13th century on, but in this one each singer's rhythm implied a different tempo or repetition-length, so that the resultant sound mass made different patterns with every beat. (I asked Chatham why he used early-music singers, and he said, "They're better trained than opera singers. They can sight-read. The opera singers I've worked with learn their solos from records.") Guitars are still at the center of Chatham's output, for this vocal technique clearly stemmed from the melodic layers of *An Angel Moves*. But every time he steps away (his microtonal piano piece *Echo Solo* was the last), he lands on something utterly original.

What we heard December 1 that the first-night crowd didn't was, as an encore, Chatham's guitarists' reprise of his 1977 classic Guitar Trio. A slow, deafening exposition of overtones over a strummed E drone, this was sort of a guitar arrangement of La Monte Young's *Well-Tuned Piano*, transposed up a half-step. The rest of the audience seemed wild about its volume and Jonathan Kane's riotous beat, but I love how the piece preserves the connection between minimalism and artrock the way Young's early pieces preserve that between serialism and minimalism. Since I hadn't heard it live and the record has become scarce, I was thrilled. ■