

*Deep Listening*  
*A Composer's Sound Practice*



*Pauline Oliveros*

# Deep Listening Deep Listening

## A Composer's Sound Practice

*Pauline Oliveros*

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**Deep Listening**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to all my students over many years of classes, workshops and retreats for their part in the development of Deep Listening practices. Though I provide the guidelines, the practice is collective and enriched by the experiences shared by each individual.

I am grateful to Ione for her constant companionship and her dream wisdom, to Heloise Gold for inviting me to the Rose Mountain Retreat Center where I established the first Deep Listening Retreat in 1991. She has shared the teaching of the Retreats with me and with Ione since 1991. Heloise provides guidance in the wisdom of the body in her teaching. The result of our coordinated teaching is included in this book. Ione's work can be explored further in *This Is A Dream: A Handbook for Deep Dreamers* and *Listening In Dreams: A Compendium of Sound Dreams, Meditations and Rituals for Deep Dreamers*. Heloise's work with Yang style T'ai Chi is available on her video.

I thank the Pauline Oliveros Foundation for providing the platform for developing

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I thank Catarina De Re, Ramon Sender Barayon and Stuart Dempster for their editing, writing and support.

I thank Nico Bovoso for his cover art. Pauline Oliveros August 24, 2003

## FOREWORD

It was autumn 1988 when I invited Pauline Oliveros to stop by Seattle on her way to California for a concert. I was telling her about the now infamous cistern 70 miles northwest of Seattle at Fort Worden in Port Townsend, Washington. As an afterthought I organized a recording engineer to document what we, along with Panaiotis who was traveling with Oliveros for the California concert, were to do. When we realized we had a CD, a title was needed. With her typical brilliance, in winter of 1989 Oliveros

came up with “Deep Listening”<sup>1</sup> while working on the liner notes. The title was very special because it captured perfectly the two primary references of (1) the huge, underground cistern, and (2) the process by which the music was performed. The title “Deep Listening” succinctly recognizes a type of music making that Oliveros has been

practicing for many years. It also marked the founding of Deep Listening Band, but that is a story for another time. Oliveros’ timely visit to Seattle seemed to be just the catalyst for her to begin organizing in a more direct way what was to become Deep Listening Retreats and, of course, the various related, shorter workshops.

This *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice* handbook, for a handbook is indeed what it is, comprises a long overdue culmination, a gathering together, of Oliveros’ life work in Deep Listening. It is certainly high time the duality of this practical and scholarly information is, at long last, in one place. The reader can take heart knowing that by the time the “Preface” and “Introduction” have been digested, one will be armed with a basic glossary and clarification of meanings. There is also a specific “Glossary” toward the end that can provide the inevitable necessary quick assistance. One can also expect to be amazed at the well organized, detailed, and (if one will) programmed instruction made available. Experienced Deep Listeners, of whom there are many (several have completed the Three Year Certificate Program), will not be surprised at the information contained herein. Indeed, some have contributed appropriately related pieces in “Appendix” and “Commentaries”. What will be a surprise, as they read

through this handbook, is how they may only now realize the extent of Oliveros' Deep Listening practice. xii • Deep Listening

Throughout this handbook one will see references to healing, through music, meditation and soundings; as one progresses through the various sections there will be regular references to this. Many of the exercises, practices, and the many little pieces seen throughout, offer a healing component. One of the objectives of Deep Listening practice is to achieve and promote health not only for Deep Listeners but also for those with whom a Deep Listener may come in contact. Throughout the handbook there are suggested exercises and pieces for individuals as well as for groups. The therapeutic component is so strong in this practice that one can make a case for it being the primary purpose of this work. There are audio, dreaming, and movement exercises throughout containing either a direct or an indirect healing message or result. Music at the very least should be a restorative, and there are many cultures throughout the world where this component is understood to be synonymous with music making.

As one reads this handbook it won't be long before it is discovered that humor plays a significant role in Deep Listening. There is considerable research demonstrating that humor is healing and otherwise good for health, and the reader can look forward to encountering humor throughout. There is special listening and sounding that take place from time to time in Deep Listening practice that is humorous. These moments are often unpredictable, but they are invariably welcomed and keep what might be temptations to be extremely serious about the practice from getting out of hand. It is important to keep in mind that humor and seriousness are not mutually exclusive. Humor needs to be kept in bounds, of course, but so should seriousness. Heloise Gold, one of the principle team teachers at the Deep Listening Retreats and

noted movement professional, includes T'ai Chi and Yoga practice in her teaching. She is also cited—and deservedly so—as one of the primary humor proponents.

Another principle teacher is Ione, acclaimed poet, therapist, writer, and repository of “dream wisdom” (as Pauline Oliveros puts it). She leads sessions in deep dreaming, with particular attention to sound dreaming or

sounds within dreams. Although Oliveros is the recognized leader in the Deep Listening arena, one needs to recognize the astounding contributions of her assisting principle teachers, Heloise Gold and Ione. The three of them form a troika of commitment, direction, guidance, organization, support, and teaching of Deep Listening that is at once active, ageless, beautiful, dreamy, energizing, fearless, funny, healing, meditative, moving, profound, quiet, serious, strong, and timely—timely in the sense of providing tools to cope with the increasingly challenging world that we live in. The practice of Deep Listening provides one with a psychological space where one may repair at anyplace

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and anytime. This handbook provides direct assistance, whether in the context of classes or on one's own, in releasing the creative energy so sorely needed today.

I am blessed to have known Pauline Oliveros for 50 years—five decades as of this year. We have shared much together, and are quietly celebrating this Sedimental Journey (we are always gathering sediment, it seems). Along the way I have had several occasions to observe her compose, devise, guide, invent, organize, perform, teach, and otherwise bring attention to Deep Listening and Deep Listening methodology and pedagogy. I am grateful to have had these opportunities. *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* barely hints at the breadth and scope of the topic. Yes, this book is a document of Oliveros' Sound Practice. But as well it becomes a fine tribute to her skills as a teacher of, guide to, and writer about Deep Listening practice. With this handbook Oliveros has written lovingly about The Work, and Process, that she has shown herself to be so dedicated.

Stuart Dempster

Seattle, 5 January 2005

## PREFACE

“The first concern of all music in one way or another is to shatter the indifference of hearing, the callousness of sensibility, to create that moment of solution we call poetry, our rigidity dissolved when we occur reborn—in a sense hearing for the first time.”

—Lucia Dlugoszewski<sup>2</sup>

Deep Listening is an evolving practice that comes from my experience as a composer, performer, improviser and audience member. My training in music was

generally centered on techniques for how to perform and appreciate music of the past. This type of education is generally true for most music students. Encouragement for composing or improvising and appreciation for new music was almost nonexistent in my earliest musical training. Most students do not realize that they have creative potential to make their own music as well as learning to perform traditional music.

I was always fascinated with listening to my environment. From early childhood I have been a listener. I grew up in a time when there existed a very rich and dense

**soundscape**<sup>3</sup> of insects, birds and animals in Houston Texas in the 1930s. This soundscape was filled with chirping, rasping crickets, frogs and melodic mocking birds. Sounds of the natural environment still engage my attention.

Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, that soundscape is considerably thinned out by asphalt, concrete pavements and building developments. Houston still has cicadas in stereophonic corridors as you walk or drive the streets but the frogs have mostly disappeared, leaving their sonic niches unfilled except for the sounds of combustion engines. A modern technological soundscape has emerged.

In high school I became acquainted with inner listening—an altered state of consciousness full of inner sounds that engaged my attention and eventually made me want to compose. At the age of sixteen I announced that I wanted to be a composer. I was in love with sounds and to be a composer was my passion. Never mind that I did not know how to go about transmitting my inner sounds to outer form, I knew that composing was my path.

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My instrumental training included accordion and French horn. On my accordion I

performed a diverse repertoire including classical, baroque, popular and ethnic music. I played the horn in bands and orchestras—even in a large dance band!

Composing continued, and at the age of nineteen my attempts were finally successful when I managed to write a piano piece in two parts. Listening and notating were intense and a struggle for me. I became more and more absorbed in composing.

Robert Erickson,<sup>4</sup> my composition mentor, encouraged me to improvise<sup>5</sup> my music. I began to improvise and to record the results if I was stuck in writing a piece. Eventually improvisation became a way to get my ideas flowing.

In 1960, nine years after I had composed my first piece, I won the Pacifica Foundation award for my *Variations for Sextet*.<sup>6</sup> Alfred Frankenstein, the music critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, championed my work and my career as a composer was launched.

Through the sixties I became absorbed in electronic music making. With this medium I began to find the sounds that interested me and were most similar to the

sounds in my inner listening. Two of my pieces from this period—*I of IV*<sup>7</sup> and *Bye*

*Bye Butterfly*<sup>8</sup> were released on recordings and have become classics of the period. *Bye Bye Butterfly* was named the best piece of the 1960s by John Rockwell of the

New York Times.<sup>9</sup>

Validation by peers and critics and the small cash prize from Pacifica Foundation

were encouraging and appreciated by me. I was no longer alone with my passion to compose, and I continued. That is why I feel it so important to educate, nourish and encourage young composers today. I also like to



encourage people without musical training to engage in improvisation to experience making their own music.

I began teaching electronic music at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) in 1967. I was one of the few who could teach electronic music—a field still relatively new to curriculum in American educational institutions. I established the electronic music program for graduate study at UCSD.

During my tenure at UCSD I taught *The Nature of Music*<sup>10</sup>—a large course for the

general student (a course originally devised by my colleague Wilbur Ogden.<sup>11</sup> This course was hands-on. Every student was expected to compose and improvise, even though most had no musical training. It was our conviction that appreciation would develop through participation in music making.

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I composed *Sonic Meditations*<sup>12</sup>—a body of work that could be done by persons without musical training. *Sonic Meditations* are based on patterns of attention. In other words these pieces are ways of listening and responding. *Sonic Meditations* is the basis of **Deep Listening**.

I noticed that many musicians were not listening to what they were performing! There was good hand-eye coordination in reading music, but listening was not necessarily a part of the performance. The musician was of course hearing but

listening all over or attention<sup>13</sup> to the space/time continuum (global) was not happening. There was disconnection from the environment that included the audience as the music was played. Observing these phenomena prompted me to investigate human attention processes and strategies.

I began with myself. I started to sing and play long tones, and to listen and observe how these tones affected me mentally and physically. I noticed that I could change my emotional state by concentrating my attention on a tone. I noticed that I could feel my body responding with relaxation or tension.

Prolonged practice brought about a heightened state of awareness that gave me a sense of well-being.

In 1967 I wrote an article for Source Magazine: Music of the Avant-garde<sup>14</sup> titled *Some Sound Observations*. The article described the journey of listening to what was happening around me and to memories and ideas that were triggered by this listening. Soon I was involving my students in exercises designed to bring their attention to

listening through observation and sounding. Some of these results may be found in

*Software for People: Collected Essays 1962-1980.*<sup>15</sup>

*"I sit quietly with my alarm clock, close my eyes and open my ears. At this point*

*the curtain rises and the performance begins. My very surroundings seem to come alive, each sound revealing the personality of its creator. There are several sounds, which become fixed in my ear like some "basso ostinato": the continuous whirrings of factory machinery in the distance and the hollow sound of plopping water in a nearby fountain. This background of sound is interrupted by the piercing motif of a bird. A sudden breath of air sweeps across the deck. The pages of my book respond with quick snapping sounds. The door at the entrance squeaks and moans on the same pitch like an old rocking chair then closes with a thud. I can hear the drapery from an opened window rustling against the coarse plastered walls, while the drawing cord syncopates against the window pane".*

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While still at UCSD I initiated research at the Project for Music Experiment.<sup>16</sup>

Meditation Project<sup>17</sup> met five days a week for nine weeks for four hours a day in the winter of 1972 with twenty participants. We studied mind, body and dream practices from a variety of guests and performed pieces from *Sonic Meditations* daily. This research project seeded Deep Listening practice.

I left UCSD in 1981 and moved to Upstate New York. I was attracted by the rich variety of musical activity in the Hudson Valley and the diversity of traditional meditation practices available. I studied Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Yoga and Taoist

forms from accomplished teachers.<sup>18</sup> These studies deepened my understanding and appreciation for meditation and confirmed my own practice as a composer and improviser.

I led my first Deep Listening Retreat in 1991 at the Rose Mountain Retreat

Center<sup>19</sup> in Las Vegas, New Mexico, at the invitation of Andy and Heloise Gold. This retreat took place in a lovely mountain area at eight thousand feet above sea level. The Center is in a relatively unspoiled location with very little technological sound intrusion except for occasional jet airliners. There is no local traffic. The location was inspiring for listening.

I committed myself to ten years of retreats at Rose Mountain and developed the forms of practice that are described in this book. Each Retreat lasts for one week and proposes listening twenty-four hours a day. This includes listening through dreaming as well as waking. A period of silence or non-verbal time is included each day. Teaching with me at Rose Mountain were Heloise Gold (training creative movement,

T'ai Chi,<sup>20</sup> and Chi Kung<sup>21</sup>), and Ione (Listening Through Dreaming<sup>22</sup>). Deep Listening Retreats were also held for five years in Switzerland,<sup>23</sup> one in

Canada<sup>24</sup> and one in Washington State.<sup>25</sup> As the number of participants returning each year increased, I answered a request for an advanced level by creating a Three Year

Certificate program<sup>26</sup> in 1995. The first Certificates were awarded to six people<sup>27</sup> in 1998. The certificate qualifies the holder to teach a Deep Listening Workshop.

Deep Listening Workshops are held all over the world. Workshops introduce some of the material of the one week Deep Listening Retreat but are more

limited in duration and scope. Workshops can be from one hour to a couple of days. Summer Deep Listening Retreats are scheduled in various locations.

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My performances as an improvising composer are especially informed by my Deep Listening practice. I do practice what I preach. When I arrive on stage, I am listening and expanding to the whole of the space/time continuum of perceptible sound. I have no preconceived ideas. What I perceive as the continuum of sound and energy takes my attention and informs what I play. What I play is recognized consciously by

me slightly (milliseconds) after I have played any sound.<sup>28</sup> This altered state of consciousness in performance is exhilarating and inspiring. The music comes through as if I have nothing to do with it but allow it to emerge through my instrument and voice. It is even more exciting to practice, whether I am performing or just living out my daily life.

I am pleased to be teaching Deep Listening at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute<sup>29</sup>

in Troy New York at beginning and advanced levels, and also at Mills College<sup>30</sup>

in Oakland California via virtual presence on-line with video chat and occasional personal visits.

I am also pleased to include essays and quotes in this book by students concerning their practice of Deep Listening.

Pauline Oliveros June 25, 2003

## INTRODUCTION

Anyone can practice Deep Listening. The form given in this book has evolved from many years of this practice in workshops, retreats and classes.

### **What is Deep Listening?**

This question is answered in the process of practicing listening with the understanding that the complex wave forms continuously transmitted to the auditory cortex from the outside world by the ear require active engagement with attention. Prompted by experience and learning, listening takes place

voluntarily. Listening is not the same as hearing and hearing is not the same as listening. The ear is constantly gathering and transmitting information—however attention to the auditory cortex can

be tuned out. Very little of the information transmitted to the brain by the sense organs

is perceived at a conscious level.<sup>31</sup> Reactions can take place without consciousness.

### **So what is consciousness?**

Consciousness was considered an epiphenomenon by the scientific community and

not seriously studied until more recently.<sup>32</sup> Consciousness had no location.

Furthermore, evoked potentials in the brain appear up to a half-second<sup>33</sup> before the individual is aware of a stimulus. The brain then remembers the stimulus as happening in the present moment or the immediate instant in one's sense of time. So perception in time is an illusion.

### **So what is consciousness?**

Consciousness is awareness of stimuli and reactions in the moment. Consciousness is acting with awareness, presence and memory. What is learned is retained and retrievable. Information, knowledge of events, feelings and experiences can be brought forward from the past to the present. In this way one has self-recognition.

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### **The ear makes it possible to hear and to listen.**

To **hear** physically means that vibrations or waveforms that are within the range of human hearing (in frequency typically 16hz to 20,000hz and amplitude 0.05dB to 130dB) can be transmitted to the auditory cortex by the ear and perceived as sounds. However, the word *hear* has many more dynamics and meanings within a cultural history that is continually changing.

To hear according to the Miriam Webster Dictionary can mean “to listen attentively, or that information has been received especially by ear, or to hear somebody or some thing, or to consider something officially as a judge, commissioner, or member of a jury, or to fully understand something, or to attend Mass or hear confession in a Roman Catholic Church”.

**Listening** has very little definition compared to hearing. Though the two words are often used interchangeably, their meanings are different. To listen according to the Miriam Webster Dictionary means “to give attention to sound or sounds or to perceive with the ear, to hear with thoughtful attention, to consider seriously.

To hear and to listen have a symbiotic relationship with somewhat interchangeable common usage.

I differentiate ‘to hear’ and ‘to listen’. To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically.

“Hearing turns a certain range of vibrations into perceptible sounds.”<sup>34</sup>

Listening takes place in the auditory cortex<sup>35</sup> and is based on the experience of the waveforms transmitted by the ear to the brain. We learn to associate and categorize

sounds such as mama, papa, meow, running water, whistles, pops, clicks and myriads more sounds through experience. Many waveforms after first experience are discarded unnoticed without conscious interpretation.

Understanding and interpreting what the ear transmits to the brain is a process developing from instantaneous survival reactions to ideas that drive consciousness. The listening process continues throughout one’s lifetime.

Physical descriptions of sound properties and listening do not explicate the phenomenal world of perception that takes place in the auditory cortex.

According *Pauline Oliveros* • xxiii

to Stephen Handel in *Listening: An Introduction to the Perception of Auditory*

*Events*,<sup>36</sup> “There is no sound pressure variation that will always lead to one and only one perception”. Similarly, there is no perception that always comes from one and only one pressure variation.

Physicists then continue to study the nature of physical descriptions of sound and psychologists the perception of sound. Physicists can measure acoustics and pressure waves. Psychologists must measure the experience of the listeners. Thus neither discipline can solve auditory perception. Sound pressure patterns assist hearing but cultural history and experience influences listening.

**So what is Deep Listening?** “Acoustic space is where time and space merge as they

are articulated by sound.”<sup>37</sup>

*Deep* has to do with complexity and boundaries, or edges beyond ordinary or

habitual understandings—i.e. “the subject is too deep for me” or “she is a deep one”. A subject that is “too deep” surpasses one’s present understanding or has too many unknown parts to grasp easily. A “deep one” defies stereotypical knowing and may take either a long time, or never to understand or get to know.

*Deep* coupled with *Listening* or *Deep Listening* for me is learning to expand the perception of sounds to include the whole space/time continuum of sound— encountering the vastness and complexities as much as possible. Simultaneously one ought to be able to target a sound or sequence of sounds as a focus within the space/time continuum and to perceive the detail or trajectory of the sound or sequence of sounds. Such focus should always return to, or be within the whole of the space/time continuum (context).

Such expansion means that one is connected to the whole of the environment and beyond.

**What’s the difference between Deep Listening and meditation?**

**Deep Listening** is a practice that is intended to heighten and expand consciousness of sound in as many dimensions of awareness and attentional dynamics as humanly possible.

The source for Deep Listening as a practice comes from my background and

experience as a composer of concert music, as a performer and improviser.

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Deep Listening comes from noticing my listening or listening to my listening and

discerning the effects on my bodymind<sup>38</sup> continuum, from listening to others, to art and to life.

Deep Listening is a practice and term that does not come from any religious context, even though religious practitioners sometimes use the words. Thich Nhat

Hanh is a Zen Buddhist monk whose usage of the term “deep listening”<sup>39</sup> has a specific context as one of the “Five Mindfulness Trainings” that he proposes. This is a compassion-centered listening to restore communication in order to relieve suffering and bring happiness to all beings. Listening (as a practice in this sense) would be training to respond with calmness and clarity of mind. It is a determination and commitment to reconcile and resolve conflicts.

**Meditation** in all the meanings of the word is found and defined in diverse religions and spiritual practices. Meditation is used in all its rich variety of meanings to calm the mind and to promote receptivity or concentration.

In religious settings, attention is directed to moral and ethical issues, values, beliefs and tenets of the particular faith and to connection with the divine, or a divine being, or beings.

Whether one is dwelling on something carefully and continually, or engaging in a serious study of a particular topic, planning or considering an action, meditation both religious and secular is attention engaged in particular ways. There is emptying, expansion and contraction of the mind; there is relaxation or “letting go” and focus (attention to a point). Meditation implies discipline and control. There is something to practice!

**Deep Listening is a form of meditation** . Attention is directed to the interplay of sounds and silences or the sound/silence continuum. Sound is not



limited to musical or speaking sounds, but is inclusive of all perceptible vibrations (sonic formations). The relationship of all perceptible sounds is important.

The practice is intended to **expand consciousness** to the whole space/time continuum of sound/silences. Deep Listening is a process that extends the listener to this continuum as well as to focus instantaneously on a single sound (engagement to targeted detail) or sequences of sound/silence.

In order to acquire the discipline and control that meditation develops, relaxation as well as concentration is essential. The practice of Deep Listening is intended to

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facilitate creativity in art and life through this form of meditation. Creativity means the formation of new patterns, exceeding the limitations and boundaries of old patterns, or using old patterns in new ways.

Animals are Deep Listeners. When you enter an environment where there are birds, insects or animals, they are listening to you completely. You are received. Your presence may be the difference between life and death for the creatures of the environment. Listening is **survival!**

Humans have **ideas**. Ideas drive consciousness forward to new perceptions and perspectives.

Sounds carry **intelligence**. Ideas, feelings and memories are triggered by sounds. If you are too narrow in your awareness of sounds, you are likely to be disconnected from your environment. More often than not, urban living causes narrow focus and disconnection. Too much information is coming into the auditory cortex, or habit has narrowed listening to only what seems of value and concern to the listener. All else is tuned out or discarded as garbage.

**Compassion** (spiritual development) and **understanding** comes from listening impartially to the whole space/time continuum of sound, not just what one is presently concerned about. In this way, discovery and exploration can take place. New fields of thought can be opened and the individual may

be expanded and find opportunity to connect in new ways to communities of interest. Practice enhances openness.

The level of awareness of soundscape brought about by Deep Listening can lead to the possibility of shaping the sound of technology and of urban environments. Deep Listening designers, engineers and city planners could enhance the quality of life as well as sound artists, composers and musicians.  
Pauline Oliveros June 24, 2003