

# The Uncovering of Ontology in Music: Speculative and Conceptual Feminist Music

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## *1. Music and Composition: Abstract and Intimate Relations*

I don't pray often Never to male or female  
sometimes to music or the flask of sunset  
quick winter evenings draining into the ground

our blood is mixed in, borderland magenta  
and vermilion, never to become one  
yet what we're singing for, dying in, that color

two-worlded, never one Where from bars  
lit by candle and earthquake your music finds me  
whom it didn't look for This is why I ask you,

when the singing escapes the listener and goes  
from the throat to where the mountains hang in chains  
as if they never listened why the song

wants so much to go where no song has ever gone  
– Adrienne Rich, "The Desert as Garden of Paradise"<sup>1</sup>

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1. Adrienne Rich, *Time's Power: Poems 1985-1988* (New York, 1989), 26.

Feminist studies of music have adopted various approaches, from the "discovery" of past women composers and performers, to nuanced readings of the gendered contexts of music.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, with the advent of critical theory and queer theory, politico-philosophic questions about music's social role in sustaining systems of gender, and the part that music plays in defining difference, sexuality, power, and identity, have begun to be addressed.<sup>3</sup> The innovative—indeed, revolutionary—impact of feminist scholarship in music is located in the fact that feminisms are inherently critical, questioning any and all assumptions, including, in this case, the cozy abstractions of art music and musicology.

I am concerned with rethinking, from feminist perspectives, the philosophy of music, and asking whether it is possible to have a feminist epistemology which is musical, or whether a musical apprehension of the world can also be a feminist one. To answer this, I will consider some aspects of music's relation to the physical realities of the world, examine how feminist authors have conceived of music, and compare this to the worldview suggested by the compositional work of Pauline Oliveros.

My research (as a scholar of religious studies) is centered on the sacrality of life as found outside of ritual, scriptural, and ecclesiastical contexts. I agree with Lynda Sexson's analysis that

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2. Some important representative studies include Judith Tick, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Composers?" *International Musician* 79 no. 1 (1975): 6, 22; Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, *Women Making Music: Studies in the Social History of Women Musicians and Composers* (Berkeley, 1982); Ellen Koskoff, ed., *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Urbana, 1989); and Diane Jezic, *Women Composers: the Lost Tradition Found* (New York, 1988).

3. Prominent works in this regard include Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, 1991); Ruth Solie, ed., *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship* (Berkeley, 1993); Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, eds., *Queering the Pitch: the New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York, 1994).

art and religion can be described as the notation of moments which discover or rediscover one's world-view, create or re-create one's philosophical depth. Art is the creation of an imaginative universe. Religion is the creation of an imaginative (or imaginal) universe—and the entering into the creation.<sup>4</sup>

These definitions are especially rich for the potential sacrality or ontological significance of music,<sup>5</sup> because music exists in time, in “moments,” and, as all performers and listeners know, music is an imaginal universe into which one enters.<sup>6</sup> Music is also crucial if one concurs with Sexson that there is a link between human religiosity and creativity, for if this is the case, the power of language (religious or aesthetic) to define, name, order, and label, is no longer absolute. This frees music to reveal those aspects of reality in which it is specifically located—namely time, space, motion, sound, and the dynamic relations produced by music.<sup>7</sup> Within a dynamic world-view, music is

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4. Lynda Sexson, *Ordinarily Sacred* (New York, 1982), 3.

5. Ontology is traditionally the branch of philosophy which examines theories of existence, reality, and being. From a feminist perspective, Mary Daly defines “ontological experience” as “an intuition of be-ing” which is a woman’s “own Wonder and gratitude that things *are*.” Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston, 1984), 29. The hyphenated “be-ing” is Daly’s characterization of the ontological level of “Ultimate/Intimate Reality, the constantly Unfolding Verb of Verbs which is intransitive, having no object that limits its dynamism.” Mary Daly in cahoots with Jane Caputi, *Webster’s First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston, 1987), 64.

6. Sexson defines “imaginal” as the metaphoric constructions and structures which give “depth and reality to our lives” (*Ordinarily Sacred*, 6). Thus, the imaginal is not solely the “imaginary,” nor is it delimited by the literal and empirical.

7. In devising these categories, I am following the thought of Victor Zuckerkandl, as presented in his book *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World*, trans. William R. Trask (Princeton, 1956). I have analyzed and adapted his thought more fully in my dissertation; see Jennifer Rycenga, *The Composer as a Religious Person in the Context of Pluralism* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Berkeley, California, Graduate Theological Union, 1992), especially 55-59.

privileged because of its direct involvement with time and motion, states which can effectively resist reification.

The scholar of music is faced with a welter of speculative and conflicting philosophies of the art. The nature of music is hotly debated, on both metaphysical and material grounds. It is unclear to what extent music is strictly emotional, physically pleasurable, or rational in content and effect; these effects are patently divergent from person to person and culture to culture. The importance of music in relation to other human enterprises likewise covers a vast range of opinion. When we try to speak of music, we find that music shares with mysticism a quality of ineffability: musical experience cannot be fully translated into language. There will always be an overflow of musical meanings and feelings which defy containment in any medium other than the music itself.

Most forms of feminism have critiqued and/or rejected the assumption of dualism, particularly that which separates the mind from the body.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in considering the possibilities of a feminist musical philosophy, I would start with these positions: that a world-view that included *both* musical and feminist insights would be a) non-dualistic, b) non-hierarchical,<sup>9</sup> c) acknowledging (and even valorizing) the importance of material reality,<sup>10</sup> d) listening and giving attention to the voices of women (linguistic and musical voices), e) dialogic, and f) respectful of the agency of others, while also recognizing that

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8. For example, see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 36-38; Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (San Francisco, 1978); Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," in *Feminist Frameworks*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg, third edition (New York, 1993), 178-82.

9. In saying that feminisms are generally non-hierarchical, I am not claiming that all feminists have erased power distinctions from their lives, nor am I making light of the fact that some feminists consciously adopt tropes of domination/submission and authority in play or in representation. What I am saying is that the patriarchal axiom that all relationships are essentially hierarchic (e.g. Confucian "Five Relationships" or bureaucratic employee seniority systems) is contested by virtually all forms of feminism.

agency is always delimited by situation.<sup>11</sup> Clearly this list concerns meta-questions which are ontological in nature; this does not make them non-political. The cosmology of such a worldview would be immanentist—meaning that it would conceive of the sacred (that which has been credited with a greater than literal significance) as being indwelling, inward, and intimate.

Understanding the importance of immanence as a touchstone between feminism and music is crucial. Music partakes of both the abstract and of the physical, as does feminist theory. But the *practice* and *production* of music—both its abstract and physical properties—are located in embodied creatures, and are mediated by physicality. Likewise, the practice of feminism—as a politics, as a way of relating to others, as a reclaiming by women of their bodies and their minds—is similarly located in embodied creatures. At those points where music and feminism positively evaluate and embrace this physicality, they are establishing it as the locus of reality, acknowledging that the sacred is present in the flesh and in matter.<sup>12</sup>

When music is understood to be in an immanent relation to its materials (e.g., sound, form, time, motion, instruments,

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10. See also my articles “Lesbian Compositional Process: One Lover-Composer’s Perspective” in *Queering the Pitch*; and “Sisterhood: A Loving Lesbian Ear Listens to Progressive Heterosexual Women’s Rock Music,” in *State of the Art*, ed. Anahid Kassabian, David Schwartz, and Larry Siegel (University of Virginia Press, forthcoming). Both articles develop the ideas of panenphysicality, and the primacy of physicality, in musical, feminist and lesbian contexts.

11. The conception that agency is not equivalent to a totally autonomous and unlimited freedom, outside of history, relation, response-ability, and time, is developed by Sarah Lucia Hoagland in *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Values* (Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988), especially 9-12.

12. This does not mean that the sacred is *only* located in the material; most immanent cosmologies are also panenhenic, meaning that the sacred is in everything, but that the sacred’s unity goes beyond what any of us can know. This retains a tension between immanence and transcendence, rather than dualistically opposing them.

space, ensemble, voice, etc.), musical intentions can result in a realization, or expression, or representation of a particular and partial insight into the ontological structure of the universe which can only (or best) be expressed via the ensounding world of music. The expression, and the means of expression, are at one, since the music is itself part of the structure of a physical, temporal universe. In this I would follow Charles Seeger and Victor Zuckerkandl in maintaining that music (and/or a phenomenology of music) can certainly illumine areas which are specially the province of music; e.g., Seeger's notion that music directly represents those non-material musical things with which it is identified.<sup>13</sup>

This unity of subject and object calls forth a renaming of the philosophic enterprise. Instead of philosophies *of* objects, we should and can conduct philosophy *with* realities, in which certainty of existence—and the temporality that is a constituent part of existence—are the only certainties. Thus, I refer to what I do as a “philosophy *with* music,” not a “philosophy *of* music.” The change of preposition represents an effort to think *with* or *along with* music rather than to think *about* music at a distance.<sup>14</sup> For the sake of comparison, and a feminist comparison in particular, consider the lovers: we don't conduct our love affairs *upon some other object*, but *with a particular person*.<sup>15</sup> A philosophy with music will be more evocative than elegant, effecting no closure but only presenting more ques-

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13. Charles Seeger, “On the Formational Apparatus of the Music Compositional Process,” *Ethnomusicology* 13 no. 2 (1969): 230-47.

14. Rycenga, “Lesbian Compositional Process,” 280.

15. This leads to a particular pet peeve of mine, which is the common usage in much of gender and sexuality studies, of the term “sexual object choice” as though this were somehow a “scientific” phrase! “Object choice” gives no sense of genuine relation, dialogue, or inter-connection, and when we passively allow such phrases to describe exactly those kinds of relations which almost all can agree have some ontological, ethical, and social significance and personal intimacy, it truly reinforces an objectifying world-view in all other matters, such as relation to people, to the environment, and to other so-called “objects” such as music, light, color, and so on.

tions, signs of wonder, seeking not a univocal gnosis but a polyphonic, heterophonic chorus of shared experiences/observations.<sup>16</sup> Musical dialogue can be the meeting place of universal and particular (not their battleground), where the abstract and the concrete can *both* be *both* intuited and discussed, where body and mind can be integrated without hierarchy. The ontological inexhaustibility of musical meaning is present in its very characteristics, and is dialogic by definition, not allowing us to rest with univocal or reductionist interpretive meanings.<sup>17</sup>

## *2. Imagining Music—A Speculative Feminist Methodology*

A problem shared by all philosophical speech with or about music is that such speech tends towards the abstract, and favors the universal over the particular. Radical feminism is intent on maintaining a tension between the one and the many, between unity and diversity. Mary Daly, who is most explicitly insistent

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16. Daly expresses this sense of what it means to live Philosophiacally (see note 36) when she says, "Happiness is a life of contemplation...friendship is the sharing of Happiness." *Pure Lust*, 384. Those who accuse her of Gnosticism are off-base; she is really a pagan panentheist, with a touch of Neo-Platonism via Transcendentalism!

17. Taking an excursion into the world of poetry, in his book on early Tamil (Sangam) literature, George Hart ably demonstrates a Tamilian/Draavidian penchant for suggestion, manifested in the "resonant effect" of "the interplay of symbols" (169) which is "like a bottomless river" (185). When he goes on to connect this South Indian style with a religious dynamism, related to the immanent a-mythological "forces that inhered in specific things" (192) in South India (191-96), we have a notable contrast to the "refined and concise" precision of Sanskrit (187). It also produces a "resonant effect" with this discussion! George Hart, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil: Their Milieu and their Sanskrit Counterparts* (Berkeley, 1975).

about this point, notes that the "telic principle of uniqueness/diversity by no means has the effect of undermining unity, manifested in community," a "connectedness that is rooted in Self-creation," a "bonding...[that] takes place in a world of vibrations, of resonances, of ribbons of rhythm weaving through rivers, sands, trees, winds, flames, seas."<sup>18</sup> That which gives unity is the situation of Life itSelf, while the diversity is found in our movement and growth through that situation.

There are many parallels between the analysis of music given above and radical feminism. Both are based on relational interplay, on de-reifying quality and experience, and on ethical attentiveness<sup>19</sup> to the ways of reality made manifest. Yet this still sounds very distant from actual music-making. How would a radical feminist intuition of musical sacrality be en-auditioned?

The methodology I adopt in this section consists of examining poetic evocations of music written by radical feminists. All of these come from larger literary works which are not thematically preoccupied with music as such. These literary examples suggest the points of analogy between music and language, which can illustrate the continuity across the various forms of expression of a philosophy based in creativity, and interactive relation, with life and materiality.

Musically, each of these writings reveals similar intuitions about music, which nonetheless result in imaginative compositions that as each reader can easily determine would sound quite distinct from one another; this illustrates the principle of diversity in unity. It is also striking to me that these poets and novelists create a picture of music that has very little in common with the "women's music" generally associated with the movement, and that, in fact, their ideas about music bear more relation to the avant-garde conceptual art of figures like Pauline

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18. Daly, *Pure Lust*, 353, emphasis mine.

19. See Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics*, 170.



Oliveros and Yoko Ono than to Cris Williamson's or Holly Near's music.

Feminism is not only a critical theory, it is also an ethical call. Thus, music can provide a strong metaphor for a politico-aesthetic approach.<sup>20</sup> Such a unity between aesthetic insight and analysis is evident in the first musical/poetic/political example, from the work of the late African-American poet and theorist, Audre Lorde. In poem IV of the "Dream/Songs from the Moon of Beulah Land," Lorde's anger at being objectified and appropriated as a woman of color is analogized to being a musical instrument. She protests loudly against the arrogance of the player who confuses the act of playing an instrument with the instrument's own voice:

If I were drum  
 you would beat me  
 listening for the echo  
 of your own touch

not seeking  
 the voice of the spirit  
 inside the drum  
 only the spreading out shape  
 of your own hand on my skin  
 cover.

If I ever really sounded  
 I would rupture  
 your eardrums  
 or your heart.<sup>21</sup>

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20. In this regard, it is not merely a happy accident that so many radical feminist theorists are also poets/artists: e.g. Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Cherríe Moraga, Monique Wittig, Mary Daly. This is reflective of an aesthetic, intuitive aspect of their thought which is itself inef-fable.

21. Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn* (New York, 1978), 78-79.

The player perceives the instrument only as a means, and does not listen for the voice of its (her) spirit. The potential subjectivity or life-spirit of what is perceived as "object" is dismissed in favor of a narcissistic "listening" which *does* "not seek." But while the player has erased the possibility that the instrument has be-ing, the poet will not abide by this distanciation. Both the physical ("rupture your eardrums") and emotional ("or your heart") impact of her eventual reclamation of subjectivity are enormous, and will abolish the very possibility of reification. Thus, the hierarchic relationship of musician to instrument is analogized to the hierarchic relationships which distort relationships in the mirrors of power.

In *The Fall of the Imam*, a novel attacking just such abuses of state and religious power, Egyptian writer Nawal el-Saadawi presents Bint Allah, the heroine, isolated in her dance and voice:

She opens her arms to embrace the world and moves her legs over the earth, her feet treading to the rhythm of music. The melodies of the morning like the harmony of the night move through her body, for she has a mind that knows no rest and a body that never ceases dancing, and the air around is the music which she loves and the music in her breast is the air which fills her lungs. She flies through space like a spirit without a body, whirling round and round in a dance without the roundness of a thigh or the curve of a belly, and she raises her head to the sky and captures it but she herself is captive to no one....

Her voice when she sang was music, and her body slender as a deer was love. She did not care if the stab came from behind or in front for she continued to dance. She was not worried by the thought of death, and she was not a member of Hizb Allah or Hizb Al Shaitan<sup>22</sup> and she was not a man or a woman, and she was not a human being or a devil, but she was all these things at once and even if part of her happened to fall off, the whole was always there to continue the dance.<sup>23</sup>

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22. These are oppositional political parties: the party of God, and the party of Satan.

23. Nawal el Saadawi, *The Fall of the Imam*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London, 1988), 171, 173.

The intimate identity of body, earth, dance/motion, breath, music, intellect (“a mind that knows no rest”), and time (in the passage of day and night) in the first paragraph are not constructed as contrary to the freedom and transcendence at the end of the paragraph. Likewise, the concluding paragraph of this chapter is not only non-dualistic, but it is precisely pan-*en*-henic in its unity of the one and the many: “even if part of her happened to fall off, the whole was always there to continue the dance.”<sup>24</sup>

The remaining imaginative musical scenes all involve both individual voices and a community of music-makers. Music is not shown as a specialist’s task—all in the community are capable of thinking, acting, and creating musically.

In Sally Gearhart’s utopian novel *The Wanderground*, an all-female group improvisation precedes the singing of a ballad. The initiator of the musical event taps out rhythms on her body, others follow: “Slowly tapping, slowly rapping, accent where the bass notes sound. But any steady rhythm was broken, not allowed.”<sup>25</sup> As more percussion is added, the chaos increases: “Wild percussion yearned for center, reached for patterns to be shared,” until “suddenly each drummer seemed to hear the other, but heard as well a different thing. They knew in one instant where the center lay.”<sup>26</sup> Clearly this reveals the diversity in unity—each knows the center, what connects them, and knows she can deviate from it, in order to keep the music in its state of moving fluidity. When the initiator adds voices, they climb together: “the far stretching intervals, the many ancient melodies from a hundred secret homes....the chorus filled the air, one none had ever heard before or would

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24. Bint Allah is murdered many times in the book, by agents of the Imam, each time in a slightly different manner. This thematic element in el Saadawi’s style itself shows an overcoming of linear time and the dualism of life and death.

25. Sally Miller Gearhart, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (Boston: Alyson Press, 1979), 73.

26. *Ibid.*, 73.

ever hear again...”<sup>27</sup> While this example clearly shares well-developed musical principles with avant-garde group improvisation, it is distinctive in its insistence on individuality and group responsiveness—one has a response-ability, the ability to hear what is happening and to respond in a way that is both unique and constructive/creative.

Toni Morrison, in a stirring episode near the end of her novel *Beloved*, likewise senses the primal connectedness of group sound and its enveloping effect upon both listeners and participants. Sethe’s women neighbors, who have avoided her since the incident in which she killed her child, approach “124” (Sethe’s house) to “rescue” her,<sup>28</sup> but having “no idea what they would do once they got there.”<sup>29</sup> It happens that sound—the making of sound—is what they do:

They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like....

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash.<sup>30</sup>

Again, we see a working together, a searching together among the voices. There is a stress on the immediacy of the voice, where the voices are not intoning words; in fact, they are “breaking the backs of the words.” The sound is recognized as our true beginning—the cry of birth is not language but the immediate movement in life, the first dynamic “moment.” As

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27. *Ibid.*, 74.

28. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: New American Library, 1988), 256.

29. *Ibid.*, 257.

30. *Ibid.*, 259, 261.

the chorus builds this together again, they generate force. Furthermore, this is a spiritual force, compared explicitly to a ceremony of spiritual birth, baptism. And even though it is not the music that causes the dramatic denouement, it is the music that lures Beloved out of the house, and that catalyzes Sethe's memories of the Clearing, of Baby Suggs, and of her entire life in Ohio.

The ferocious quality, the uncontrollable quality of women who are groping together for sound is also found in Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*. This work, which challenges notions of literary form and genre, has been interpreted as a piece of speculative fiction about a group of women warriors who defeat the dominant order of patriarchy. Among the strategies they employ is an acceptance of chaos, and of individual agency within group situations; thus they do not organize themselves into "divisions corps regiments sections companies."<sup>31</sup> Likewise, in their motions and music, spontaneity, motion, expressivity, and intensity of purpose are present:

At these words the women begin to dance, stamping the ground with their feet. They begin a round dance, clapping their hands, giving voice to a song from which no coherent phrase emerges.<sup>32</sup>

Once again clarity is not the goal in these musical imaginings. The goal is to know the moment, to "give voice." This is not "expression" as a distanced, disconnected, constructed act. It is heard as expression be-ing the living reality of the moment. And, as in the two previous examples, but more bluntly, Wittig lets us know that this way of experiencing musically is not unrelated to anger:

They say that they sing with such utter fury that the movement that carries them forward is irresistible. They say that oppression engenders hate. They are heard on all sides crying hate hate.<sup>33</sup>

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31. Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. David LeVay (Boston, 1971), 94.

32. *Ibid.*, 53.

The act of singing is not apolitical because it is movement, and thus related to the political changes that the women are in the process of accomplishing. It sounds of what the women need to feel—freedom, cycles of time,<sup>34</sup> the tactile quality of space, and the truth of the ontological situation that is oppression.

Joanna Russ's novel *The Female Man* is likewise a work of speculative fiction. In a section dedicated to examining the culture of an all-female society known as the Whileawayans, the following musical event occurs. Though it is long, I quote it in full for the philosophic details it reveals:

A quiet country night. The hills East of Green Bay, the wet heat of August during the day. One woman reads; another sews; another smokes. Somebody takes from the wall a kind of whistle and plays on it the four notes of the major chord. This is repeated over and over again. We hold on to these four notes as long as possible; then we transform them by one note; again we repeat these four notes. Slowly something tears itself away from the not-melody. Distances between the harmonics stretch wider and wider. No one is dancing tonight. How the lines open up! Three notes now. The playfulness and terror of the music written right on the air. Although the player is employing nearly the same dynamics throughout, the sounds have become painfully loud; the little instrument's guts are coming out. Too much to listen to, with its lips right against my ear. I believe that by dawn it will stop, by dawn we will have gone through six or seven changes of notes, maybe two in an hour.

By dawn we'll know a little something about the major triad. We'll have celebrated a little something.<sup>35</sup>

Music making is not an intentionally planned activity here—it is something that happens when one woman begins to play an instrument. But the group (or some part of the group) takes the opportunity to give itself over to these four notes. In sparse

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33. *Ibid.*, 116.

34. Note that musical time is never simply linear; even in narrative forms such as the Classical sonata, repetition and return are the basic building blocks of the musical architecture.

35. Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (New York, 1975), 101.

strokes, Russ gives us an idea of the intensity of this involvement and relation. As the music-making goes on, the actual acoustical situation changes, and despite the lack of increase in volume, the pitches seem louder. This is because the physical sounds have enveloped the singers/players to such an extent that there is no space outside of the music. This active contemplation of the actual materials of music is stressed by the huge temporal expanses that the women work with—changing one note per hour. But the reasons for this are made explicit, and are philosophiac in nature—knowledge and a passion for the interaction: “By dawn we’ll *know* a *little* something about the major triad. We’ll have *celebrated* a little something (emphasis mine).” Note that even this extreme concentration on a small number of musical materials is characterized off-handedly by Russ as “a little something”; the inexhaustibility of meaning is joyously, and with good humor, assumed.

### *3. Pauline Oliveros and the Actualization of a Feminist Philosophia with Music*<sup>36</sup>

Do these imagined moments of music bring us any closer to what music can *be*? These four literary examples all stress that music is not an artificial construct, but an embodied response, an audible sound, a creative action. They illustrate an attempt to formulate a philosophia with music, a music that can be born from women’s experience as women. And it is significant that their accounts bear a similarity to the music of Pauline Oliveros, a prominent woman composer who has undertaken

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36. The word “philosophia,” meaning “a love of wisdom, especially a love of the wisdom of women” has been developed by Emily Erwin Culpepper in “Philosophia: Feminist Methodology for Constructing a Female Train of Thought,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3 no. 2 (1987): 6.

these kinds of actualized musical experiments, both with groups and as a solo performer.

Pauline Oliveros was associated with the avant-garde musical movements of California in the 1960s and 1970s. She received her education in the Bay Area, and helped to establish the San Francisco Tape Music Center (now located at Mills College). In the late sixties she accepted a teaching position at the University of California at San Diego, where she stayed for a little over a decade. It was during her time in San Diego that she worked with a group of women (called "The ♀ Ensemble"), with the express goal of doing improvisatory work around

unchanging tonal centers with emphasis on changing partials. After a long period of working together a profound change occurred: rather than manipulating our voices or instruments in a goal-oriented way in order to produce certain effects, we began to allow changes to occur involuntarily, or without conscious effort, while sustaining a sound voluntarily. It is an entirely different mode. It requires the elimination of opinions, desires and speculations.<sup>37</sup>

As these moments and other involuntary movements were noticed, the improvisations became structured, until Oliveros found that she was articulating instructions (perhaps like the initiator in the Gearhart episode), and so "composed" the pieces known as *Sonic Meditations*. She describes them as being

'sonic' in the sense that sound and hearing, both active and receptive, are the foci of attention and stimuli of awareness. The enhancement and development of aural sensation is one of their goals....The ear is the primary receptor or instrument; sound, both inner and outer, real and imaginary, is the stimulus of *Sonic Meditations*.<sup>38</sup>

Oliveros commenced study of various techniques of meditation and theories of consciousness simultaneously with her

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37. Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People: Collected Writings 1963-1980* (Baltimore, 1984), 148-9.

38. *Ibid.*, 141.



work in The ♀ Ensemble.<sup>39</sup> She saw experiments in contemplation as having profound possibilities, including “heightened states of awareness or expanded consciousness, changes in physiology and psychology,...a tuning of mind and body.”<sup>40</sup> The key was in how she kept the focus on sound, not on the external construction of music. She even has a concept of music as an emanational creation of meditation, saying that “music is a welcome by-product of this activity.”

The first pieces that grew from the experience with The ♀ Ensemble were the *Sonic Meditations*. Below is the text for the first piece, “Teach Yourself to Fly,” dedicated to Amelia Earhart:

Any number of persons sit in a circle facing the center. Illuminate the space with dim blue light. Begin by simply observing your own breathing. Always be an observer. Gradually allow your breathing to become audible. Then gradually introduce your voice. Allow your vocal cords to vibrate in any mode which occurs naturally. Allow the intensity of the vibrations to increase very slowly. Continue as long as possible, naturally, and until all others are quiet, always observing your own breath cycle. Variation: translate voice to an instrument.<sup>41</sup>

Oliveros has outlined the philosophical intent of these various instructions in her essay “On Sonic Meditation.”<sup>42</sup> I will follow some of these points, to see how she gets at the materiality and ontology of music.

One of her central illustrations is of a circle with a dot at the center. She describes this circle, and the circle-form adopted by the performers of the *Sonic Meditations*, as a “living symbol of unity as well as a unified reality,” in which “all are relating to the same center.”<sup>43</sup> The comparison to the Gearhart

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39. Heidi von Gunden, *The Music of Pauline Oliveros* (Metuchen NJ, 1983), 87f, 104-05.

40. Oliveros, *Software for People*, 1.

41. *Ibid.*, 149. *Sonic Meditations* copyright 1974 by Smith Publications, 2617 Gwynndale Ave., Baltimore, MD 21207 USA. Used by permission.

42. Oliveros, *Software for People*, 149-156.

43. *Ibid.*, 149-50.

episode is obvious; it is especially worth noting that this unity is not enforced from above—it is organic to the form.

“Observation” is the “key principle in this meditation.”<sup>44</sup> The way in which Oliveros describes observation evokes a feminist ethics of attention:

Observation meaning to remain attentive and aware without consciously manipulating or interfering with the observed. Observation requires a receptive mode of consciousness...an empty cup.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, she recognizes that observation cannot be “objective,” and she cites Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle to the effect that “there is no such thing as mere observing...every observation we make is bound to act on the object we observe...there is always a mutual interaction between the observer and the object,” and so concludes that “perhaps participation in ‘Teach Yourself to Fly’ is to experience Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty.”<sup>46</sup>

The stress on observation continues and helps to illuminate types of power, agency, and control. The instruction to “always be an observer” is explained as follows: “Restrain any desire to manipulate, although a voluntary action is introduced.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the idea of gradually allowing the breathing cycle to be heard plays with this tension between consciousness and control:

while attention remains focused on the breath cycle and its involuntary changes, one must synchronize the voluntary increase in air pressure without consciously manipulating the cycle. Thus, the choice of the word “allow” for transmitting this instruction.<sup>48</sup>

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44. *Ibid.*, 150.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, 150.

47. *Ibid.*, 151.

48. *Ibid.*

To “allow” is to participate in an activity without molding it; as Oliveros says, it may represent “an element of synchronization between attention and awareness.”<sup>49</sup> She asserts that since “imposing a conscious direction...causes a lapse in attention,”<sup>50</sup> goal-orientation interferes with attention.<sup>51</sup> When we are more concerned about ourselves and our wishes than about the sounds themselves, we cease to give our attention to the sounds.

One of the more intriguing glosses occurs in conjunction with the first appearance of the voice in the instructions:

*“Then gradually introduce your voice.”* What is the sound of my own voice? What would it sound like if I had not adopted the way it sounds now? What models am I using? What is the sound of my original voice?<sup>52</sup>

Her questions here lead participants into the nature of a primary sound—the sound of our own voices. This is a sound which is primal not only in the sense of being among the first sounds we hear, but also because our voice is in a unique acoustical relation to our bodies—we hear our own voice with a kind of resonance that cannot be duplicated with any other instrument. Therefore, to get past the intentional manipulations and changes that we have wrought, in conformance to societal or musical norms, and arrive at this sound, is to examine a basic sonic component of our human situation. It is for this reason—to encourage reflection on the *most* directly “embodied” sound we can know—that Oliveros presents us with a series of questions rather than an exegesis at this point. I think it is also important to compare this approach to the incident from the end of *Beloved*, where the women remember that “in the begin-

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49. *Ibid.*, 152.

50. *Ibid.*, 154.

51. This idea that goal-orientation disrupts the mind’s attention is clearly related to Buddhist meditational practices.

52. Oliveros, *Software for People*, 154.

ning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like."<sup>53</sup> Given the freedom to "sound" without the limitations of social constraints, the voices of these women surprise even themselves with their range and expressiveness.

I have found that participating in the re-creation of one of Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations* does provoke reflections on the materially ontological effects of music, regardless of the "musical training" or background of the participants. I offer as proof the reflections of students from a class where a *Sonic Meditation* was undertaken:

It was one of the first times I actually felt as if I was *tangibly creating something*....Such sheer concentration heightened my senses and opened my self up to a new experience...at times, I saw the sound waves of our voices intertwine and weave this trellis of different voices, colors, feelings...to do that with a *tool so unfamiliar to myself (my voice)* is incredible! (Katie Ruiz-Healy, emphasis mine)

It felt to me as though we had moved out of the confines of the room, not to anywhere in particular, just out—free.... With each breath, I felt myself opening a little. (Danica Fierman)

In class today I got an auditory glimpse of...transcendent perfection...based not on planned form but on the order that can emerge from chaos...the perfection we caught sight of was a perfection of unity amid great diversity. (Alli Weisz)

At one point, I was so engrossed in the voices surrounding me that I *forgot* my worries, where I was, who I was with, and *who I was*. I was no longer self conscious of my voice, and *it seemed that I wasn't even singing*. (Anne Laderman, emphasis mine)

When the Sound [*sic*] started it broke my trance, it was annoying at first but as it built and crashed and fell, built and crashed and fell, I found myself drawn more and more into it, feeling my head, body, chair, room vibrate as the Sound grew, I was pulled in, absorbed into the group. For just a bit we ceased to be individuals out to prove our points on this idea or that concept. (Sarah Avon Russell)

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53. Morrison, *Beloved*, 259.

These responses, from students who had limited formal experience of organized music and virtually no experience with freely improvised music, speak volumes for the focusing impact of Oliveros's approach to sound.<sup>54</sup> Though they show different degrees of commitment to Oliveros's stated concepts, each of them reports an experience of sound, and of relation to self and community. Even though the vocabulary is not the same as that of Zuckerkandl, the experiences of time, motion, and space are also conveyed in these comments. Additionally, the different nature of the musical experience in comparison to linguistic experience is also stressed. As a musician and a feminist, it is painful to me that people are becoming more and more distant from physical experiences of music-making, and that a simple exercise such as this can become the locus for an *initial* revelation about the nature of music and sound. It seems as if transcendent philosophies, and mind-body dualisms, have created a false distance between the physicality of music and its equally crucial cognitive components, to the point that sound itself is not only reified, but distanced from the body. Students reported fearing beforehand that such an exercise would be embarrassing, "hokey," a vocal contest, and so on, but after the actual undertaking, these feelings not only dissipated, but were replaced by an enthusiasm for sound as a vehicle. As one

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54. These student responses were taken from a class I taught at Pomona College in the fall of 1991, under the title "Women, Religion, and the Arts." One student in the class, who had been a technically-oriented western art music student (as a flutist, an instrument which I feel is taught in a particularly detached technical manner), expressed sadness after we had undertaken one of the Oliveros pieces, at the opportunities that she and her sister students had been deprived of in the past: "I have been classically trained as a flutist...but never once did I feel comfortable or that I could let down and perhaps sing out of perfect pitch. The pressure to achieve perfection sadly forced me out of the music world....It saddens me to think of what could have been accomplished between my classmates in high school if we had only been allowed to let our defenses down" (Alpha Selene Anderson). I have asked for and received permission from the students to reproduce their comments here.

student asked, "why aren't we all out there 'singing' each other more often?" (Matthew Sloan)

The difference between Oliveros's compositions and the imagined musical moments of the feminist authors is one of focus and emergence—the sonic event *produces experience* in Oliveros's world, while situation as constructed by the author produces music in the literary texts cited earlier. But in some cases, even this distinction may not be necessary. The manner in which the Whileawayans generate expanses of time in which to contemplate and celebrate some of the fundamental components of music, is echoed directly in Oliveros's solo work. In recent years, she has performed as a soloist, simultaneously playing accordion and singing. Both of these instruments function via wind/air, and thus there are connections to her meditative themes from past work. The piece entitled "Horse Sings from Cloud" gives us a clue to the nature of Oliveros's relation to musical materials. The piece's instructions are "to sustain a tone or sound until there is no longer any desire to change it. When all desire to change the tone or sound has subsided, then select a new tone or sound."<sup>55</sup> The composer knows that she is not entertaining her audience:

In this country, music is generally thought of as entertainment, not as a vehicle for social change or for the expansion of one's consciousness. Music is a very powerful medium, and it's mostly used manipulatively... to sell things and be sold itself... I feel it is very important for people to make their own music.<sup>56</sup>

The resultant music in "Horse Sings from Cloud" creates a wall of sound in which the cycles of breathing and the vibrational

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55. Pauline Oliveros, liner notes to *Accordion & Voice* (Lovely Music VR 1901, c. 1982).

56. Pauline Oliveros, from an interview with John Rockwell, quoted in the liner notes to *Accordion & Voice*. It is revealing to compare this with what Daly refers to as 'a-musement': when "alienating amusements" are pushed on to women in an attempt "to divert the attention of: deceive, delude, bemuse." *Pure Lust*, 302; *Wickedary*, 184.

cycles of different pitches and pitch combinations rivet our attention onto the detailed, gradual changes in the music. The piece, then, bears an obvious resemblance to the Whileawayan episode from Joanna Russ's novel, and gives intensity to Zuckerkandl's claim that music gives an "internal transcendence; *it does not lead away from the phenomenon but into it, to its core*" (emphasis mine).<sup>57</sup>

This type of music-making defines the ontological, material approach to music: the materials of music are dynamic in and of themselves *and* in relation to human interaction with them. Furthermore, these materials are both physical and cognitive, with these modes of perception conceived of non-dualistically.<sup>58</sup> The experience of music creation—composition, improvisation, performance, participation, being attentive to sound itself—can be defined as a sacred activity within a panenhenic, immanent world-view.

How is this feminist? While the literary and musical examples I have given herein are all by women who identify with some brand of feminism, that, in and of itself, is not enough to establish an inherent connection. Factors mentioned earlier which feminism and music could share were

- a) non-dualism
- b) non-hierarchic structure
- c) acknowledging the importance of material reality

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57. Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol*, 147.

58. John Cage, who was a major influence on Pauline Oliveros (and also on Trinh T. Minh-ha; see her *Framer Framed* (New York, 1992), 121, 234-9), is also well-known for incorporating Buddhist practices into his compositional work. In a familiar Cagian quote, he says: "Years ago I asked myself 'Why do I write music?' An Indian musician told me the traditional answer in India was 'To sober the mind and thus make it susceptible to divine influences.' Same answer is given by some old English composer. *Consider this non-dualistically.*" John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge, 1961), 158. I interpret this call to non-dualism to refer to the seeming separation of "the mind" and "divine influences," in which case Cage too is working in an immanent panenhenic world. See the chapter on Cage in my dissertation, *The Composer as a Religious Person in the Context of Pluralism*, 205-11.

d) listening and giving attention to the voices of women

e) dialogic nature

f) respectful of agency and limitations of others

In the *Sonic Meditations*, Oliveros observes all of these by rethinking the function, purposes, power, and physical realities of music. She does this in the context of an all-female ensemble, and she

associated her *Sonic Meditations* with feminism. It is in the *Source* publication of the first twelve meditations that she publicly stated that she was a lesbian, but she soon abandoned the position of working solely for women and interpreted the term feminism in its broadest sense.<sup>59</sup>

What von Gunden or Oliveros mean by the "broadest sense" of feminism I do not know. Perhaps, as a musician, like myself, Oliveros is frustrated by the linguistic boundaries and definitions of much of feminist politics and theories. But the lesbian-feminist circumstances of the composition of *Sonic Meditations* reveal a relationship to the body and a material relation to the world. Oliveros's own approach to feminism also illustrates the dynamic and open-ended nature of such positions: her "loyalty" to feminism is not (and should not be) the primary question. Rather, the immediate and underlying connections to the factors outlined above continue to provide an overlap between feminism and music in her works, with or without linguistic confirmation of this connection.

Music may offer models of human cooperation to feminism; it may give women an opportunity to explore our bodies, our physicalities, our temporalities. The fact that feminist writers were almost simultaneously imagining the same revelatory role for music that Oliveros was concretely working out is a remarkable coincidence. The promise of a feminist epistemology

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59. von Gunden, *The Music of Pauline Oliveros*, 105. This means that Oliveros came out in 1971; see Pauline Oliveros, "Sonic Meditations," *Source* 5 no. 2 (1971): 103-07.



*with* music could well be a transformative key that will “sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees.”<sup>60</sup>

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60. Morrison, *Beloved*, 261.