

# Notes on Freedom, Performance, and Composition, with a Nod to Pauline Oliveros

## I.

Questions of artistry and the origin of an impulse that makes us emotional in our individual music-making become threatened, perhaps of extinction, without provocation. Knowing that both impulses of performing music as well as composing, under normal conditions, are experiences much like our regular life experiences in that they involve feeling happy, sad, vulnerable, angry, elated, and so on, I contend that an approach to performance, or composition, or both, is an odyssey of mystery and challenge that reminds us of the wonders of music.

## II.

It is possible to believe that music as a process of transformation could evolve someday to carry you to heaven, as La Monte Young once reminded us.<sup>1</sup> As a composer, I remind myself that it's necessary to make provisions not only for the noteheads, the staff paper, the barlines, the signatures of meters, and all other kinds of diverse minutia, but for musicians, too. Musicians who, under realistic conditions, do translate composed works, from paper to air through body and time, creating a poetry of their own. The dint of their inner knowledge that allows such a translation to begin has the same effect on their heart and soul, and continues the same idea, even when we imagine that it never ends.

Charles Ives, perhaps the greatest musician who knew well our essentially American tradition of breaking rules, knew even more referencing Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, the Alcotts when he wrote his well known and rightly cherished "Concord Sonata". Music's family of famous and not-so-famous names now offers the opportunity to bring people together, as Ives brought us together, peopling his music with so many others.

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<sup>1</sup> [1] Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theater of Mixed Means*, p. 218

### III.

One such composer whose success in this effort reminds me of the bringing together in music was Pauline Oliveros. While I was preparing to perform in Lunar Opera: Deep Listening for Tunes in New York City in the summer of 2000, Pauline Oliveros, the composer of the piece, was coaching during a rehearsal; she offered a philosophy of performing that struck me as well grounded in precisely the kind of issues that are now at stake. She told us to listen freely, to listen to each other, and to listen deeply. This was a philosophy of acceptance, but not one of convention, and Pauline's suggestions and statements brought the act of listening, which is her intention, to everyone involved. It is a ritual of listening rooted deeply within and expressing an interior sense to the exterior world.

### IV.

But what is the question here? My sense is that when a composer, or performer, is compelled and sees within herself a new limit of artistic freedom, she must effectively smash the limit, if only to convey their breakthrough. And when that happens, when the composer or performer stakes this claim to liberty, the aesthetics of composition and performance will have advanced just that much further towards our ever expanding, imperfect, and brilliant music-making horizon.

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