

Uneasy Listening

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For four years of graduate school I have kept my car radio tuned to KKSF, 103.7 FM. I listen to it on my way to and from the Music Department, but the music it features is not often considered seriously there. I would call KKSF an ambient music station: background music, relaxation music, a kind of Easy Listening. Within the light-jazz idiom that characterizes most KKSF selections, with its connotations of “coolness” or mild disaffection, the station has its own carefully crafted sonic profile. This profile is largely timbral in nature. Every selection can be counted on to contain some or all of the following elements: a lot of repetition; a very gradual rate of change; a lot of synthesized or sampled, but never “artificial-sounding,” instrumental color; the establishment of a “spacious” sound environment (something which can be accomplished psychologically to a certain degree by the above features, but also, and importantly, by the use of reverberation); the use of a relatively high tessitura, and/or of sound sources with a lot of upper partials; and a general preference for composite textures, using percussive

and plucked instruments, which tend to interact most obviously with a reverberant environment. Continuity is also an important feature, not only of the selections, but of the format as a whole; one of KKSF's selling points is the relative scarcity of commercial breaks.

Steve Feinstein, a program director at KKSF, told me that he listens for an "appropriate" yet "distinctive" sound in making his selections; the music should have a "lyrical" quality, which he defined as continuous, smooth melody or rhythm that people would *remember*, but not *feel arrested by* (an interesting and fine distinction). As he put it, "nothing irritating or harsh, no blaring guitar or sax solos."

For me the net effect of listening to KKSF is a sense of comfort and safety. The music establishes an environment, and assures me that that environment will not be disrupted. (When I asked Feinstein if the music he chooses should create some sense of a comfortable place to be, he said, "You bet.") With the sense of safety can come pleasure, of the mild diffuse variety—intense pleasure being just as disruptive as fear—and relaxation of mental focus. The station's presentation of its music asks pretty explicitly that the music not be focused upon; focus is another form of arresting things. Actual physical relaxation can follow exposure—at least, willing exposure—to this kind of programming, too: I often feel my breathing slow in response to it.

So: a safe "place" to be; a "place" where one is pleasantly relieved of the necessity of having to focus, make connections, and interact—a place free of demands. Andreas Vollenweider, a harpist and New Age music superstar whose music turns up occasionally on KKSF, has said, "I'm presenting a different way of looking at things, a more relaxed way. I like to build a free space for the listener where he or she can be assured there is no enemy—that would disturb their creative process" (Schaeffer 1987, 37). Innocent enough; an innocence that, in its musical enactment, can share so much territory with blandness that even those few critics who do write seriously about this music make

remarks about its resemblance to oatmeal.¹ Yet blandness, neutrality, unmarked space, can be terrifically hard won. It is precisely such "places," whether physical, temporal, or metaphorical, that are lacking in most peoples' lives, and so spectacularly lacking in the lives of women. Space, and the simple occupying of it in the full serenity of entitlement, is a central feminist issue; music that seeks, by whatever means, to establish, affirm, or explore any sense of space, of spaciousness, I would claim as feminist music. So claimed by me, the listener: not necessarily by the composer or performer, and certainly not by the radio programmer! In that act of claiming or reclaiming, I perform an essential feminist act. I say in effect: I am here; this is mine.

Such a response to this music raises the question: is Easy Listening ever really easy? The dismissal of Easy Listening by most of the critical establishment in music has itself become altogether too easy. If we agree with Adorno that the universal quality of the work of art in the modern age is its difficulty, this would seem to be grounds for a ready dismissal of anything that goes so far as actually to bear the appellation "Easy," anything that admits of being constructed around avoidance of the problematic. But what a simplistic and ungenerous view of the listener this takes! Just what is this very restrictively located "difficulty"? What of the very great difficulties that arise prior to or as condition of the receptive experience of the work of art? If we have ever absorbed poison through our ears, been personally outraged, belittled, violated in any way by what we heard, suffered the kind of rape that comes from being told such experiences are necessary or that we deserved them—and who, particularly who that is female, can fairly say they have

1. However, oatmeal is a relative thing. Steven Halpern is another New Age superstar, whose music is not, to my knowledge, played on KKSF. The liner notes to his recordings proudly proclaim their liberation from meter and melody (though not tonality or equal temperament). Vollenweider, whose music is toward the "spacey" end of KKSF's programming, sounds positively teleological in comparison to Halpern.

never experienced this?—then listening must be on some level a contested activity, a site of conflict. The ears cannot be shut, alas, only the mind. We are all damaged listeners to some degree: the space we can inhabit within a piece of music will be shaped, delimited, by the extent of that damage, or at best, discovered through the work of reclamation. A recourse to “easy” listening looks less like avoidance on the damaged listener’s part than like hard-won achievement.

There are two ways for the listener to address the experience of difficulty, or perhaps they are two ends of a continuum of ways. Firstly, we may engage with difficulty directly, wrestling the angel when it appears: we summon such experience, training and perspicacity as we have available to us (any damage we may have sustained we do not acknowledge as relevant; we will locate difficulty only within the work), and we listen with a view, so to speak, toward the kind of understanding that comes through pursuit, categorization, linear association. There is some polarity here, inevitable perhaps, between the inquiring subject-listener and the object-work, even though we will likely come to feel a much stronger identification with the work after engaging with it in this way.

Or, secondly, we may defer directness. As listeners we agree to locate the source of difficulty within ourselves as well as within the work. We will not pursue or wrestle the work so much as admit it, allow it, in the hopes that by so doing a space of relationship alternate to the damaged (and damaging) subject-object one can be found or cobbled together. This is the premise of ambient music. In welcoming it we make an assumption that damaged self and listening self are detachable, at least on a trial or temporary basis. Listening becomes a means of disengagement (the music is there *not to be paid attention to*), but disengagement is not merely the blank *refusal to think* that so offended Adorno. It can be a kind of alternate or diffused subjectivity, one less defined by polarization. The one who listens in disengagement exercises the option of encountering the musical work in a place of putative, experimental, fictional uni-

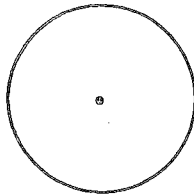
ty, one which neither denies the damaged *I* nor accepts it as a condition.

Possibly this kind of optionalization of subjectivity by means of a consensual blurring or refraction of attention is rather fraught morally; certainly the *refusal to think* is an ever present temptation. The question is, does abdication of attention always spell moral abdication? Must they be equated?

Pauline Oliveros is a composer who has devoted a major part of her creative energy to questions of consciousness in music and their attendant moral implications. She has approached the roles of listeners, and the moral or attentional possibilities open to them, with great seriousness and thoroughness. Oliveros's work does not simply equate the openness and receptivity of listening with passivity or a loss of control, but constitutes listening as active, in fact as the very source or kernel of agency.

Browsing in a psychology text, I came across the notion that music is a phallic phenomenon because it penetrates the ear! What a physiological displacement! Come now, Freudians, one can *receive* music but also actively penetrate it, not to mention all the other finer variations. Maybe we need banana-shaped ears... (Oliveros 1984, 113)

In her explorations of those finer variations, Oliveros often uses this symbol for a model of consciousness:



The dot may represent focal attention, which is an exclusive linear process. We use it to see detail in an object, to move toward a goal, to hear a melodic line in a Bach fugue either in the imagination, in memory, or in the external world... the circle may represent global attention, which

is an inclusive non-linear process. We use it to sense context, seeing many things at once such as the forest as a whole; to hear all the voices of a Bach fugue simultaneously, as well as what is sounding around us. It is an awareness of environment: imaginary, memorized, or external, without the focus of detail. (Oliveros 1984, 216)

These two modes, which Oliveros elsewhere calls *attention* and *awareness*, are not mutually exclusive by any means, but form the boundaries of a realm. Abdication of focal attention, in her thinking, is morally questionable only insofar as it might become a refusal to share, explore, and expand the whole attentional realm. While Oliveros's most prominent work has tended to center around undoing the heavy reliance on focused attention that characterizes classical, and particularly academic, approaches to music-making and -reception, she does not seek to replace this reliance with another one: *awareness*-listening is not a license to refuse to think. Part of the strength and challenge of Oliveros's music is its assumption that we, the listeners, will enthrone ourselves at neither attentional pole, but inhabit as much of the countryside of hearing and listening as possible.

The *Sonic Meditations*, first published in 1971, are among her works specifically formulated toward developing the skills with which to do this; for doing it well and fully is by no means a simple thing. The scope, intensity, and interconnectedness of attentional modes evoked and refined in these exercises is impressive.

Sonic Meditation XXII

Think of some familiar sound. Listen to it mentally. Try to find a metaphor for this sound. What are the real and imaginary possible contexts for this sound? How many ways does or could this sound affect you? Or how do you feel about it? What is its effect upon you? How can this sound be described?

As a group meditation, sit in a circle. Find a sound common to all, then ask the above questions one by one. Allow plenty of time between each

question. When all of the questions have been asked, the group shares their answers.

Variation: Try the same meditation with

1. an imaginary sound
2. a live sound
3. a remembered sound

XVI

Begin simultaneously with the others. Sing any pitch. The maximum length of the pitch is determined by the breath. Listen to the group. Locate the center of the group sound spectrum. Sing your pitch again and make a tiny adjustment upward or downward, but tuning toward the center of the sound spectrum. Continue to tune slowly, in tiny increments toward the center of the spectrum. Each time sing a long tone with a complete breath until the whole group is singing the same pitch. Continue to drone on that central pitch for about the same length of time it took to reach the unison. Then begin adjusting or tuning away from the center pitch as the original beginning pitch was.

Variation: Follow the same instructions but return to the original beginning pitch. (Oliveros 1973)²

In the context of any discussion of listening and feminism, Oliveros's work assumes special importance, for it both poses and offers answers to the questions: once a safe space has been established, *what are we to do there?* What kind of agents does listening enable us to be? What Oliveros does, which has been done at all by precious few, and with such care by no one else, is to accept and affirm safe space, and yet to regard it not only as a haven—from which, after all, the only exit is back out the way you came in—but as a kind of staging area, a place from which to *continue* after regrouping.

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Oliveros's recent recorded music is highly consonant. It affirms a sense of safety by eschewing abrupt change or stark contrast; it relies heavily on drones or recurring pitch centers; and it plays very inventively with ideas and possible constructions of space. *The Roots of the Moment*, recorded in 1987-88, is her longest and most complex recorded work to date. This nearly hour-long piece is an improvised "interactive duet" between Oliveros, playing her expanded justly-tuned accordion, which sends its sounds through two digital delay processors, and Peter Ward, a sound engineer, who is using two digital effects processors on what Oliveros produces in order to "simulate a variety of spaces which Oliveros can 'visit' with her music" (Oliveros 1988) Oliveros reacts in real time to Ward's manipulations of her original improvisations, so that we hear a multiple layering of improvisation and reaction. A work like *Roots of the Moment* can be *continued into* at some length; whatever type or extent, diffusion or intensity of consciousness addresses it, it affords considerable rewards.

The chart appended to this article is a visual record of some of the rewards I found over the course of four listenings to *Roots of the Moment*. It is also, and inevitably, a paradox, for any kind of chart or ex-post-facto "score" so heavily privileges the linear-analytic, focused-attention mode of understanding that it will work against, as well as for, an attempt to illustrate alternatives. From such conflict perhaps a larger understanding may begin to take shape.

The making of this chart served the function of clarifying to my conscious mind what less conscious parts of me had been responding to in finding the work so particularly satisfying: its multiple and layered points of return and self-reference. The section from about 10.30 to about 20.30, comprised of myriad overlapping brief drones, woven in and out of each other, finds a fuller-fleshed echo in the section from 32.25 to 45.30, where a similar treatment is accorded to clusters rather than single tones. The gently talking "voices" of the opening section return, somewhat more energetically, after 27.57, and again, in an

increasingly excited and finally ecstatic vein, from 52.00 to the end. These textural self-references give some sense of a large-scale progress or transformation over the course of the piece: things get, on the whole, more complex, more agitated, and fuller. There are also returns and self-references in terms of the psycho-acoustical "spaces" Ward creates. The opening and 52.00 are the same "place," I think, as are 5.00 and 32.25, and possibly 7.30 and 27.57 (my unsureness about this comes from my lack of experience in hearing spatial elements as structural ones, a revealing deficiency in itself). The spatial returns can either reinforce textural and tonal associations, or re-contextualize them. We have only to follow a single element, say the device of crescendo, through the piece (or the chart) to appreciate how many faces the performers are able to give it—and all this in real time, too.

Very well. The chart is of some use. It helps consolidate perceptions and confirm intuitions. It enables me to validate the work on a certain familiar level, as complex, interesting, "serious," damn good for an improvisation. But perhaps it is of as much or more use through what it fails to do, its obtusenesses and opacities. This is most evident to me in the chart's attempts to convey the piece's timbral subtleties, and the degrees to which these include and help define its spatial ones. Short of using mountains of impressionist prose, or somehow incorporating oscilloscope readings, I was reduced to words like "shimmers," "edgy," "near," and "far" to represent my perceptions of these elements. ("Sounds a lot like a vacuum cleaner" is more to the point, perhaps.) There is a semiotic deficiency operating here: the musical culture in which I was trained has no very efficient way of indicating timbral or spatial quality; and, related to and perhaps deriving from this first deficiency, there is a perceptual/habitual one as well. Looking over the chart, analyzing the analysis, I realize how often, even through four intense listenings, I simply didn't *hear* the timbres enough to even try to notate them.

One of the things we will bring to our listening is our memories. It is from memory, or its suppression, that the damage to our listening ability springs; but much of the richness we can hear in a work like *Roots of the Moment* arises from the same faculty. In a recent discussion Jann Pasler characterizes Oliveros's heavy use of association and referentiality as a kind of structuring, even a newly articulated aesthetic, based upon the listener's willingness to make, from the references and suggestions offered by the performance of the music, a "memory palace."

A memory palace will not resemble a category or an analysis, nor will its construction employ the trained or directed memory used for narrative. Pasler refers to "other kinds of memory which the composer may call on and the listener may bring to a work...the perceiver...recall[s] experiences, and not only those of an aesthetic nature" (Pasler 1993, 17). The experiences "tend to be common ones filled with signifying potential instead of idealized ones pointing to abstractions" (Pasler 1993, 18). Pasler describes Oliveros's 1990 work *DreamHorseSpiel*, full of carefully layered and connected sonic and textual references to horses, as an incitement to the use of this kind of associative, non-linear, left-handed memory. The resulting experience of the work is a kind of patchwork, "unusual juxtapositions of tone, spirit, and meaning" (Pasler 1993, 21). *Roots of the Moment*, created without such an obvious associative focus, produces memories that are more fleeting, more personalized, and possibly even more "unusual" in their juxtapositions. (In order to avoid a confusion with directed or narrative memory I prefer to call this "resonance.") In both works the resonances are largely evoked through the enormous potential of timbre and spatiality to speak in these terms.

What the listener then does with the material evoked—what sort of palace s/he builds with it—is a complex matter. The composition/performance of the work may be no more than a kindly or playful invitation to the listeners to explore their own capacities for association and inventive reaction, but

the explicit admission of non-aesthetic or "common" resonances (horses and vacuum cleaners), and the explicit abandonment of abstraction, ensure that the door (the ear) will be left open to resonances that may be disquieting or downright painful. Timbral values and what they evoke resist not only verbal translation but subjection to the will; there is always some possibility of an undesired experience of memory-resonance, of stumbling on the threshold between *remembering* and being *arrested by memory*. Even with all the willingness in the world, memory will not always be palatial, but often humble, and sometimes excruciating; there will be elements of both hovel and House of Pain to any sincere admission of it.³

Pasler's article does not address the fact that our memory-edifices may be, because of their inclusion of the "common," not only fraught but contested space: that, just as the personal becomes political, the aesthetic becomes ethical. It is precisely the creation of a feminist and liberational space through memory, whether or not it is evoked through art, that has produced some of our culture's stiffest resistance. We have only to recall Freud's queasy-minded abandonment of the seduction theory; and we have alive, well, and very active among us today the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, an organization that seeks to free our society from the destructive influence of people who claim to have been abused as children.⁴

Oliveros's tactics for dealing with the labile and not always kindly qualities of memory are simple, if not easy: listen.

3. The capacity of music to *evoke* over and above the will is certainly not confined to recent explorations; the famous passage in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) that condemns music along with perfume (neither's influence can be controlled) is surely a description of this. *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

4. The letters column of *Ms. Magazine* is a good place to see these people in action; they are swift to protest any credence given to accounts of abuse.

Pasler: ...you're going to be confronted in the future, with the past, with what you did. It's your input, but it comes back...how do you deal with the material that comes back?

Oliveros: Just...listen.

Pasler: You just use it like one of the performers.

Oliveros: Yes. Exactly. You don't know what that performer's going to do. And you don't know necessarily what this [your memory] is going to do. So you just simply have to be ready! (Pasler 1991, 13)

Do not deny what you hear; do not focus on it to the exclusion of your self, either. *Just listen*; and implied in "just listen" is a firm linkage of reception to response, action, agency—creation, in fact, in all its "finer variations."⁵

In the Lacanian model, Self is constituted by an encounter with a mirror; the concept of *I* is becomable as a concept when split off, observable.⁶ But for a listening self, one constituted by the ear and not the eye, the mirror is apparently internal, an internal echoplex. What a child hears, s/he will utter. Babies of a certain age do nothing so earnestly as practicing sound, echoing anything and everything they hear. *Bihhbihmm b-p-p-p-p, mathom bathom, gluglugluglu*: they sift gaily through the refuse heaps of sound in search of treasure—generally held to be signification. But sound can also fail to signify and yet remain treasure.

We must beware the ready conflation of sounding voice with signification, and signification with narrativity or linear-

5. A more succinct answer to any would-be denial of abuse, as well as the current flurry of protest over "victim feminism"—the contention that too much emphasis on abuse constructs women as victims and actually deprives them of power—is scarcely imaginable. By listening we are moved to action. By listening to evidence of atrocity, we can be galvanized. The disingenuity of the movement against "victim feminism" lies in its tacit acceptance of the very passivity it claims to protest, in its construction of listening as nothing but victimization, and its consequent adoption of deafenedness as a "solution."

ity. In distinguishing what is said from what is heard, and what is heard from what is meant, we open up a gulf, the gulf around which Adorno locates "difficulty."

Because a language without signification is a language without speech, it has such a great affinity with muteness...perhaps every expression is somehow a falling silent, just as in modern music expression is nowhere as strong as at the moment of its fading... (Adorno 1972, 117)

The muteness is only the muteness of the discursive; this sad, twilight modernism bends and gives way before the jubilation of sheer *sounding*, voice as it exists apart from controllable signification. Oliveros's centering of so much of her art in the timbral and spatial is an affirmative harkening back to these *sounding* elements in music, which have been traditionally discounted or minimized or equated with muteness because their ability to signify is hard or impossible to determine.

It is no accident that KKSF's distinctive sonic profile makes a similarly heavy use of these elements, but it is important to note here that Oliveros herself makes a very emphatic distinction between her art and anything popular or New Age. She ex-

6. For instance:

...its repetition has often made me reflect upon the startling spectacle of the infant in front of the mirror. Unable as yet to walk...-fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, he brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image... This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. (Lacan 1949, quoted in Easthope/Macgowan 1983, 72)

(The squeamishness about dependence and the erasure of the mother in this passage are extraordinary.)

cludes music like KKSF's from her artistic world just as thoroughly as KKSF excludes her from its own.

Most New Age music distinguishes itself by a remarkable lack of content. It presents only a washed-out background that distracts attention. It has a neutralizing effect. My music is too thorny for the New Age; too much happens in it. (Pannke 1992, 28)

Encountering Oliveros's occasionally fierce disdain for the "easy" after exposure to her very un-fierce music can be rather a surprising experience. Here we are back at the issue of content (or lack thereof), which sounds a lot like another word for signification; here too is a construction of the listener as one who can so easily be distracted, one who, it seems, will *always* prefer to avoid the serious, the painful, the difficult. (Adorno is lurking just around the corner here.) Without in any way denying the space for irresponsibility and escapism that popular ambient music undoubtedly allows, I submit that rejecting it entirely for that reason is an ungenerous and possibly an unwise response. The space is also available, as Vollenweider acknowledges, for "creative process"; that washed-out background may be all that the listener needs at the time. Music like Oliveros's will be there when it is time to pack up and move on.

Sounding, which is sometimes speech, which is audible agency: voicedness, which is constitution as a subject, is, then, the direct result of listening. The ear's I *becomes* not through its separability but through its participation, appropriation, imitation, performance: its immersion. The self so created is a magpie self, decorating its nest-palaces with the bright shards and strains of others' speech and music, a borrowed and borrowing bird. It is this contingent and relational creature that the music I have talked about here addresses, with varying degrees of directness and urgency. In turn, this creature will and must take it upon herself to address the music so as to make it her own.

S/he is a creature for whom listening is the one precondition, foundation of the self. In the Beginning was the Ear.

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P. Oliveros - The Roots of the Moment

Minutes/seconds

0 1:48 1:58 2:30 3:00 5:00

1

SOFT - these pitches "talk" back & forth over space, near/far

NEAR LOUD

NEAR

more resonant, LOUD

cresc. peaks

NEAR SOFT

these three begin to inhabit a space of their own, moderately distant... ..and to form an irregular "stinato"

activity diminishes

5:40 5:52 6:50 9:30 9:45 10:30

2

making voices quiet

intermittent high bent clusters DISTANT

stops bending, silvery overlay

Very delicate beeping, NEAR/FAR, hide-and-seek, self-interruption

Some beeps "stick", becoming brief drones

lower tessitura added gradually

move to high tessitura, upper partials

gradual loss of E drone

loss of tonal center

11:25 12:00 15:00 18:36 19:10 21:00 22:16

3

silvery overlay...

drone dovetail interweave

brief dynamic fluctuations

Beats (interference) as NEAR-FAR oscillations

entire "chord" bends

VARIOUS DEGREES OF MIDDLE DISTANCE

clusters

cresc. imperceptible beginning

LOUD reverberant

LOUD

LOUD

fleeting nearby voices speak

highly reverberant CATHEDRAL space...

4

23.36 24.30 25.23 26.33 27.57 30.00 31.30 34.19 33.19

LOUD, HUGE SPACE

(many upper particles)

NEAR, out in the open - little reverb

low E out

NEAR, medium loud

quite rhythmic (p=144) irregular ostinato fragments

beeping, fluctuating chattering, all very NEAR

SOFT NEAR

5

34.00 35.00 36.00 36.45 38.00 40.00 41.30 45.30 48.30

HIGH; TESSITURA

clusters: tones added/subtracted imperceptibly. Loss of tonal center. "Shimmers" (beats) VERY CLOSE UP - takes up all available space - yet moves

out

BIG

certain pitches "clarify out"

distant isolated voices (reverb)

THIS CLUSTER gets loud/soft & NEAR/FAR but is static in pitch.

MB-DISTANCE

NEARING!

6

51.44 52.00 53.34 55.30 57.00 58.17

SPACE open and up

WIDE OPEN, UNCROWDED

very spacious, happy, bright

some feeling of pulse due to repetitions

more/less reverb... grows...

LOUD & builds

very spacious, happy, bright

(ostinato)

strange urgent artificial NEARNESS

NEAR LOUD

end

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