Book Review

**Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality**

Martha Mockus  
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Reviewed by Tracy McMullen

An in-depth study of the life and work of composer/improvisor Pauline Oliveros is long overdue, and Martha Mockus has made an important contribution to this end with her insightful, well-researched and highly readable book, *Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality*. Mockus investigates and brings forward the significant influence lesbian community and second wave feminism has had on Oliveros’s work and the book’s unification of biography and analysis is both quirkily delightful and incisive. In centering Oliveros’s artistic development and output within this context, Mockus makes a powerful inroad against the “masculinist musicological narrative that would confine [Oliveros] to the margins of twentieth-century music” (3). While the book would be greatly enhanced if Mockus had investigated the ways Oliveros’s work and practices themselves often replayed the unequal power relations within the lesbian communities and second wave feminist movements of the 1970s—something Oliveros herself recognized in subsequent years—Mockus nevertheless provides key insights into the creative processes and meanings of Oliveros’s music from a feminist and lesbian perspective.

In her introductory chapter, “Intonation,” Mockus expresses her “commitment to place lesbianism—as sexuality, musicality, politics, history, worldview—at the center of [her] work on Oliveros” (3). Hearing Oliveros’s work “as lesbian musicality—a musical enactment of mid- and late-century lesbian subjectivity, critique, and transformation on several levels” (2), Mockus investigates Oliveros’s practices and works within the context of her personal and professional relationships with women, including the lesbian, feminist, and female-centered communities she has participated in throughout her career. Moving chronologically through Oliveros’s career, Chapters Two through Four each take a particular thread in the artist’s oeuvre, highlighting aspects related to lesbian musicality within each, including a commitment to “pleasure,” a recognition of “the body,” the importance of group interaction, and the relationship of romantic longing to music-making. Mockus closes her book with a chapter of transcribed material from two interviews conducted with Oliveros supplemented with letters from Oliveros’s personal correspondence from the time periods under discussion.

Chapter Two, “Amplification,” examines three of Oliveros’s electronic works: *Time Perspectives* (1960), *Bye Bye Butterfly* (1965), and *I of IV* (1966). Oliveros composed and recorded *Time Perspectives* in the San Francisco apartment she shared with her lover, Laurel Johnson, a visual artist and also a “sound source” for the piece (notably her laughter with Oliveros). Mockus argues that it was this “lesbian domestic space” that nourished Oliveros’s creativity, contrasting it with the repressive domestic space of a typical heterosexual married woman in 1960 and also with the “lesbian bar scene” that never much appealed to Oliveros (20). Mockus describes *Bye Bye Butterfly*, which includes source material from Puccini’s opera, as an “eerily and feminist critique of the opera” (24). She argues that by sonically interfering with Puccini’s music, *Bye Bye Butterfly* “calls attention to the opera’s distorted representations of gender and race” (26); however, she did not support this claim by connecting Oliveros’s sonic manipulations to any specific race or gender analysis. Mockus gives us a more intricate and creative analysis of *I of IV*, mapping Oliveros’s amplification of “combination tones” (tones made up of the frequency clash between two or more tones), which Oliveros described as making her feel like “a witch capturing sounds from a nether realm” (29), to a discussion of the “apparitional lesbian” in lesbian literature (via Linda Dusman and Terry Castle).

Chapter Three, “Meditation,” investigates Oliveros’s *Sonic Meditations* (1971), twenty-five guided improvisatory pieces that she created for the UCSD ’s Ensemble during her tenure there. The ’s Ensemble was a women-only space that allowed for creative and personal exploration within a context of group support. While looking at this situation, particularly in its relation to “the powerful nexus of feminist ideas and lesbian artistic communities that formed in the early 1970s wave of the women’s liberation movement” (37), Mockus also creatively links this all-women group practice to women’s softball, long...
considered a meeting ground for lesbians. Mockus uses softball-related headings (“queen of diamonds,” “advance the runner,” “drag bunt”) and riffs off of Oliveros’s past as a talented pitcher. Her theoretical and historical discussion links the Sonic Meditations to second wave feminism, demonstrating how the pieces “are a form of feminist sonic consciousness-raising, offering participants provocative opportunities to question dominant notions of music, talent, sound, ability, and musical authority” (50). Extending this connection, Mockus shows how the Sonic Meditations were performed for other women’s groups, including women’s prison populations, and how the piece influenced other lesbian composers, musicians, and artists. Mockus also highlights Oliveros’s larger commitment to feminism and lesbian identity exemplified through her public and private letters, and her commitment to come out at this time.

Chapter Four, “Respiration,” listens to Oliveros’s accordion pieces. Discussing five works from the 1970s and 80s, Mockus describes them as “musical valentines” and weaves intimate details from Oliveros’s personal life (including seductions, heartbreaks, and broken friendships) into her musical analyses. Mockus recounts the painful break up of Oliveros’s relationship with UCSD graduate student, Lin Barron, and her subsequent meeting and relationship with the then-married performance artist Linda Montano. Mockus writes, “With Rose Mountain Slow Runner [convincingly shown by Mockus to be written about Oliveros’s relationship with Montano] Oliveros was ready to strap on the accordion, take center stage, and perform lesbian desire and seduction” (97). Mockus does a close reading of the “interview,” “Unnatural Acts Between Consenting Adults” (1976) on Robert Ashley’s video Music with Roots in the Aether, which included a performance by Montano and Oliveros’s on-screen transformation into a dolled-up “femme” at the hands of lesbian actress, Carol Vencius. In 1982 Oliveros became infatuated with the dancer Deborah Hay and the relationship with Montano ended. Mockus examines four pieces, The Wanderer (1982), The Gentle, Receptive, and A Love Song (all recorded in 1985), that she describes as musical valentines to Hay, a somewhat unrequited relationship that was very painful for Oliveros.

Mockus’s writing style is a pleasure to read and her knack for finding the quirky or provocative angle of each topic is one of the strengths of the book. Her decision to include a fascinating interview section with Oliveros about the composer’s awakening sexuality in Houston, and early experiences in San Francisco, at the very start of the book is a brilliant way to frame the theoretical approach to lesbian musicality and certainly kept this reader turning pages at a fast clip. Another pleasure is her discussion of the accordion’s hallowed place in the annals of cheesiness via such luminaries as Lawrence Welk and Weird Al Yankovic, followed by the deadpanned line: “needless to say, Oliveros is one of the few women working with the accordion in new music” (89). Mockus is excellent at capturing nuanced and insightful details that sustain interest, like the sweet, yet revealing Oliveros quote: “’[the accordion] is huggable, you can hug it . . . But it’s also kind of a protection, a little bit of armor that’s protecting your heart’ (Feldman 1996, 4)” (90).

The interview section is occasionally illuminating in the ways it further contextualizes the earlier chapters and interweaves relevant personal letters to supplement Oliveros’s narratives; however, I would have preferred instead another prose chapter and a conclusion, which Mockus does not provide. There is substantial repetition of (often long) quotes that Mockus has cited in earlier chapters. And some material seems patently unnecessary: Oliveros’s long recitation on how her book, in the annals of cheesiness via such luminaries as Lawrence Welk and Weird Al Yankovic, followed by the deadpanned line: “needless to say, Oliveros is one of the few women working with the accordion in new music” (89). Mockus is excellent at capturing nuanced and insightful details that sustain interest, like the sweet, yet revealing Oliveros quote: “’[the accordion] is huggable, you can hug it . . . But it’s also kind of a protection, a little bit of armor that’s protecting your heart’ (Feldman 1996, 4)” (90).

I believe the book would be better served by dealing with the failures of Oliveros’s deep listening at various junctures in her career. Her four-year romantic relationship as a professor with a graduate student in the 1970s is never examined for the unequal power relationship it was, even though Oliveros herself says as much in her interview. Oliveros states, “She was a graduate student at UCSD, and I feel that was an error on my part . . . one that many professors make, because it’s a very symbiotic relationship . . . in retrospect I see it as very unfortunate” (143). Similarly, Oliveros brings up issues of race in the interview that are not tackled in the book—a significant oversight in any contemporary discussion of second wave feminism. In describing an early white activist lesbian mentor from the 1950s, Oliveros says, “[Suzon Small] was the gate, the doorway to NAACP. . . . I had already been very disturbed by racism, and it was very disturbing because my father was a racist, and my grandmother also. My father couldn’t have a conversation for more than 5 minutes without bringing it up. . . . I became involved in the NAACP by the time I was 17” (125-126). Oliveros describes her consciousness “being raised” to racism at a very early age. Yet, Oliveros has been criticized for her appropriative use of American Indian ritual and for other oversights typical of white feminists and white artists of the era (Browner). Mockus claims at the beginning of her book that a close investigation of Oliveros’s work could “[deepen] our knowledge of the second wave of the feminist movement, especially its internal discontinuities” (3), however, I find the book did not undertake the close investigation necessary
to unearth these discontinuities. Such an examination would enrich and complicate the discussion of deep listening: it is not so difficult to listen deeply to those within our selected group of the moment; it is something altogether different to practice deep listening to the ways we ourselves exnominate and consciously or unconsciously wield power over others.

Nonetheless, despite some flaws, *Sounding Out* provides an important and necessary examination of Oliveros’s work in the light of its “lesbian musicality” and its female and feminist lineage. Informative, insightful, and engaging, it is a welcome addition to Oliveros scholarship and one that should stimulate further exploration and inquiry into the works and processes of this important American artist.

**Works Cited**