

Subject, Object, Improv: John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, and Eastern (Western) Philosophy in Music

Tracy McMullen¹

Music poses a problem for a Western intellectual tradition that privileges reason and the mind over the body. In its connection with emotion, the body, and the feminine, music has been suspect since Plato, and champions of music as a “serious art” have often been at pains to associate it with the privileged “mind side” of the Western mind-body split.² For example, in the modern period, the increased emphasis on the textual analysis of the “work” establishes the composer’s score as the site of music, marginalizing music’s corporeal aspects, including its embodied and contingent performers (Taruskin; Goehr). And improvisation—which privileges the subjective, embodied performer and acts of performance over objective, reified scores—has been increasingly culled from the Western music tradition (Bailey; Nettle and Russell). This essay investigates John Cage and Pauline Oliveros within this context, demonstrating how these artists’ musical radicalism has been (mis)understood through Enlightenment conceptions of the individual and a subject/object split that cannot adequately account for the intersubjectivity of improvisation. In my view, the most radical elements of Cage’s and Oliveros’s work involve their questioning of the artistic self or “ego” and can be traced to the influence of non-Western philosophies such as Buddhism. I argue, however, that Cage undercuts his own radical refusal of self by conflating Zen ideas on the mind, body, and self with similar Protestant conceptions, and that this conflation is revealed, in part, in his distrust of “expressiveness,” which he linked to a suspect body and to jazz improvisation (among other things). Oliveros, on the other hand, embraces improvisation in her work and does not harbor the same suspicion of corporeality found in Cage. Significantly, Oliveros’s oeuvre has received far less attention than Cage’s.³ While there are a variety of reasons for this, which I will discuss below, part of her relative absence from the canon can be tied to her extensive use of improvisation. Improvisation underscores impermanence, intersubjectivity, and corporeality, and therefore is a radical departure from Enlightenment thought that favors permanence, the self-contained individual, and “objective truth.” In such a context, improvisers are marginalized in a history of Western music preoccupied with “the work” and the composer as solitary genius.

I consider Cage and Oliveros in relation to each other primarily because of deep similarities that actually serve to highlight certain stark differences. Both artists regard art as a catalyst for personal and social transformation and are known for their clearly articulated worldviews as much as for their individual works; both affirm the power of silence and encourage the art of listening as productive of new and better ways of being in the world; both are lauded for advocating musical composition as an egalitarian practice and for introducing a variety of sounds and experiences into the rarefied realm of Western art music; and both developed specific processes inspired by Buddhist philosophy to ground their musical production (“chance operations” for Cage; “Deep Listening” for Oliveros).⁴ The composers are different, however, in their understanding of Buddhist philosophy and in their perceptions of the self, the body, and music. These differences can be understood in regard to the subject/object split and are, I argue, manifest in their relationships to and understandings of improvisation. Cage had a well-known dislike for improvisation. While I believe his eventual distaste for improvisation had much to do with his desire to differentiate his practice of “indeterminacy” from the long tradition of jazz improvisation to which it was often compared,⁵ I argue that his desire had much to do with a fear of “losing one’s self,” despite his professed claim to remove himself from his works.

I begin by contextualizing Cage’s aesthetic practice in relation to his Protestant upbringing and his later encounters with Zen, connecting these experiences to his ideas of self and body. I then investigate Oliveros’s practice in relation to Buddhism and her understanding of the body.⁶ Via discussions of Cage’s reaction to the Joseph Jarman ensemble and of Oliveros’s musical combination of meditation and improvisation, I argue that improvisation is a responsive, corporeal practice that highlights intersubjectivity and calls into question the separation of self and other—a separation erroneously constituted through illusory mental formations, according to Buddhism. Because improvisation challenges Enlightenment concepts of the separate, free-standing individual (and the host of binaries that serve to establish, maintain, and rank such separation: mind/body, masculine/feminine, etc.), it poses a deep threat to this tradition. Thus improvisation is discursively placed on the devalued side of the Enlightenment dyad of mind-body, despite the fact that, like meditation, the “feminine,” and indeed music generally, improvisation challenges the axiom of a subject-object split.⁷ In this way, any threat to the split is contained. In sum, I hope to bring out how the composers’ different relationships to improvisation (as extensions of their understandings of mind, body, and self) have influenced the ways they have been received within Western musical history and the ways in which their radical critiques of not only music, but also the Western intellectual tradition, have failed to resonate and have instead been re-incorporated into subject-object binaries that privilege the individual, the separate, and the bound.

John Cage

In his *Philosophical Perspectives in Music*, Wayne Bowman ascribes to Cage a “sensuous ‘aesthetic’” and associates his work with the irrational. The textbook presents the following question for classroom discussion:

Plato demeans the sensuous and undisciplined in favor of the rational and the controlled. Compare this to the purely sensuous “aesthetic” espoused by John Cage and others. Is sensual music inferior to rational music? Is the composer’s job (in composed musics) the creation of perceptible order? (67)

Here, Bowman foregrounds the problem of where should music be situated: with the body or with the mind? “Rational” music is ordered, whereas “purely sensuous” is “undisciplined” and perhaps “irrational.” The idea of a type of music that is “purely” sensuous—related only to the senses and the pleasure of the body—assumes that there is a “rational” music specifically related to the mind. The view that Cage espouses a “sensuous” aesthetic is certainly arguable and would seem to stem from Cage’s injunction to “let sounds be themselves,” to allow sound and the senses to predominate over the mind and its choices. According to David Nicholls, “Cage’s ultimate, and unprecedented, goal [. . . was that of] ‘giving up control so that sounds can be sounds’” (20). Of course, Cage’s work has also been characterized as the opposite of sensuous—that is, ascetic—and the epitome of rationality and control. Cage himself recognized his ascetic qualities and maintained that his musical aesthetics were directed toward discipline and order. In fact, Cage was intent on differentiating his music from connections to the body, expressivity, and improvisation (which he connected together) and would not be pleased to have his music associated with sensuality or irrationality. One way to navigate this seeming paradox of Cage-the-sensualist versus Cage-the-ascetic is through understanding his Protestant background and the effect it had on his later development as an artist after his encounter with Eastern philosophy, particularly Zen.

In a comment about visual artist Robert Rauschenberg, Cage called his thinking “a little Roman Catholic from my point of view. [. . . H]e makes a mystery out of being an artist” (qtd. in Katz 53). Less inclined to describe Zen as mysterious, Cage’s reference to Rauschenberg’s Catholicism was a product of his deeply Protestant upbringing. His paternal lineage included many Methodist preachers, and his maternal grandmother was described as equally full of “religious zeal” (Nicholls 9). Indeed, in his young adulthood Cage planned to be a Methodist minister like his strict and pious grandfather.

The strain of Protestantism that informed Cage’s upbringing began in the 18th century and continues to pervade American culture. In 18th century Boston, the elite commerce class of Unitarians, precursors to the Transcendentalists, was arguing for a rational approach to life and spirituality, as opposed to the unbridled passions of the predominantly rural revivals that were occurring during the first Great Awakening. Charles Chauncy, minister of Boston’s First Church, set the tone of this new Protestantism when he wrote in 1743 that “an *enlightened Mind*, and not *raised Affections*, ought always to be the guide of those who call themselves Men; and this, in the Affairs of Religion, as well as other Things” (qtd. in Rose 4).⁸ This promotion of reason, discipline, orderliness, and industry over the emotionalism of the revivals came to characterize mainstream American Protestant views. Great American Protestant inventors, such as Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, were considered to have arisen from these values. Cage aligned himself with this sensibility: he was proud to have come from a family of inventors—his minister grandfather had a patented invention and his father was an inventor by profession—and repeated with relish Arnold Schoenberg’s alleged description of him as an “inventor of genius.”⁹ In this strain of Protestantism defined by rationalism and the advocacy of reason, those activities and people associated with “raised affections” were marginalized. For instance, in industrialist Henry Ford’s newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, in addition to the infamous anti-Semitic articles, Ford also attacked the new jazz music of the 1920s on the grounds that over-riding emotionalism and laxity were a threat to society.¹⁰ Cage’s late view of jazz improvisation reflects shades of this sensibility.

After his famous turn to “non-intention” in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Cage’s comments on expressivity, the body, and music became more redolent of the particular Protestant perspective described above.¹¹ Although Cage worked with dancers and often performed himself, by the late 1940s, he did so by removing what he deemed “expressiveness,” understood in part as responsiveness between the music and the dancers, from the performance. He often described this “expressiveness” in stark terms: “I think that when dancing is not good, that it can be very disgusting. And I think that comes from the fact that the body is the material of the art. So that when the body is expressing its likes and dislikes in the dance I think it is very clearly disgusting” (qtd. in Dercon). This view would seem to be at odds with Cage’s fifty-plus year collaboration with his artistic and personal partner, the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. For Cage, however, Cunningham’s work was not “disgusting” because dance was not used to “express [Cunningham’s] likes and dislikes” (qtd. in Dercon). In order to avoid “expression,” Cage

and Cunningham developed a formal time structure to overlay music and dance.¹² In this way, each artist could create his part separately with minimal need to rehearse together. The music and dance would occur simultaneously, but not respond or react to the other. This separation was part of Cage's effort to remove "likes" and "dislikes." Cage clearly does maintain, however, a certain "dislike": that of the body reacting to, or being moved by, the music. Indeed, a distrust of the body in general seemed to be taking hold of him during this time.

In equally strong terms, Cage stated that he "began to be disgusted" with the ideas of abstract expressionist painters who endeavored, through "gesture and art," to express "[their] own image" (Kostelanetz 228). Caroline Jones suggests that in response to the dominating, masculine heteronormativity and the insistence on physicality and corporeality represented by such artists as Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, Cage offered a "bodiless philosophy," focused on nothingness and asceticism (643).¹³ Similarly, Marjorie Perloff notes that Cage could "never really assimilate [Duchamp's] preoccupation with eroticism, with sexual punning and double entendre, with the display of men and women as perverse machines or machine parts, bumping and grinding against one another" (101). Despite a deep admiration for Marcel Duchamp, Cage would never incorporate sexuality into his own work. This "disgust" with the body as the material of the art, the use of such a strong term to describe artists who were often explicitly sexual in their demeanor (if not their art), and Cage's aversion to the sexuality in Duchamp's work certainly hint at a possible disgust not only with the body and expressivity, but with, in some sense, sexuality itself.

Jonathon Katz addresses Cage's aversion to expressions of sexuality, proposing that as Cage came to understand himself as a gay man, he accepted "a new creed as well: an injunction against self-expression," one that Katz believes was employed to navigate a homophobic society (48). Indeed, the timeline supports this: Cage met Merce Cunningham in 1938, divorced his wife Xenia Kashevaroff in 1945, and by the late 1940s was living with Cunningham and also beginning his turn toward non-intention and, consequently, non-expression. There is no doubt that being homosexual in a homophobic society (and growing up in a Christian tradition where homosexuality was considered a sin) would bring the body and sexuality into Cage's life in a way that could further push his aesthetics toward asceticism—but not all gay artists, of course, responded in this way. In John Gill's book on gays and lesbians in music, Cage stands out as an artist who did *not* speak about his sexuality.¹⁴ Gill ascribes this to Cage's personality: "it is possible that the asceticism of Cage's lifestyle precluded any discussion of his sexuality" (34-35). Indeed, Cage's concerns about the body and his desire for a more bodiless philosophy can be traced back years before his turn to non-intention. I believe that Cage's homosexuality was not the sole or even the root cause of his eventual injunction against self-expression, but merely a further reason to take "expressivity" out of the equation. His repudiation of the body helped him to enact a type of "aesthetic closeting" through which he could reconcile with the sexual repression of his era.¹⁵

I am not the first to notice Cage's preference for the mind and the sublime over the body and to connect it to his Protestant-informed religiosity. Richard Taruskin has written that "never was a musician more cerebral or less sensuous, and, for all his lifelong involvement with dancers, never one less attuned to physical impulse" (26). According to Taruskin, the characterization of Cage as irrational, undisciplined, or lacking in appropriate seriousness was not a reasoned argument, but one based in jealousy, "a defensive myth created and circulated by academic modernists in order to marginalize the one who always managed to seem so effortlessly further out than thou" (26-27). Taruskin argues that the work of mid-century avant-garde composers Arnold Schoenberg, Pierre Boulez, Milton Babbitt, and John Cage vastly magnified and purified the Romantic notion of aesthetic autonomy, and that it was Cage in his compositions of the early 1950s, particularly *4'33"*, who "reached the most astounding, self-subverting purism of all" (32).¹⁶ In describing Cage as the "scariest guy" (via Lenny Bruce), and his composition *Atlas Eclipticalis* as sixty minutes of virtual sensory deprivation and an outright "act of puritanical aggression," Taruskin cheekily alludes to, but does not detail, Cage's Protestantism (26). Instead, he demonstrates how Cage took the Zen exhortation of selflessness and placed it in a Kantian, modernist context—one that was eminently authoritarian, "bent on stamping out the artist's puny person so that something 'realer,' less vulnerable, might emerge" (27). Taruskin also analyzes the infamous reaction of the New York Philharmonic musicians, who began stomping their feet on their contact microphones in rebellion to Cage's *Atlas Eclipticalis*, as an example of musicians mutinying against a composer who has become even more authoritarian and condescending to musicians than most, "present[ing] musicians with a set of especially arbitrary, hence especially demeaning, commands" in works based on the principle of non-intention (33). In this, Cage is not a composer who has removed himself from the music, but has become "more than ever the peremptory genius, the players more than ever the slaves" (33). This privileging of the composer or the "idea"—over the contingent, embodied, and reactive performer—is an essentially theistic approach that I will further unpack below.

Commentary by and about Cage has been replete with religious allusions and metaphors. In interviews, Cage frequently referenced the stories he learned in his Protestant upbringing:

Had I been drafted, I would have accepted and gone into it; I would not have refused [. . .] I believe in the principle of Daniel in the lion's den, so I would not want to keep myself out of it, if I were obliged to go into it. On the other hand, I am glad not to have gone into it, as I have never in my life shot a gun. As a child I was very much impressed by the notion of turning the other cheek. You know, if someone struck me on one cheek, I actually *did* turn the other cheek. I took that seriously." (qtd. in Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* 11)

Further, in comparing his works to those of other composers, Cage commented that in compositions where chance operations are only intermittently employed for aesthetic purposes, "one wouldn't have to change one's mind. Whereas, I think we are in a more urgent situation, where it is absolutely essential for us to change our minds fundamentally. And in this sense, I could be likened to a fundamentalist Protestant preacher" (qtd. in Kostelanetz 236). He also described himself and his work as a "minister traveling from one town to another preaching the gospel," and despite his proclamations to have "no purpose," his credo for what music "ought to do: to make people stronger, and to change them" had a distinctly evangelical quality (qtd. in Kostelanetz 24, 249). Thus, while Cage didn't like when music attempted to change his mind via emotional appeal, he believed that music could make you stronger if it didn't appeal to base emotions, but spoke to something "higher," more noble, and presumably more rational.¹⁷ Ultimately, it is no surprise that the composer is so often described in religious terms: Calvin Tomkins describes Cage as a "missionary" (qtd. in Miller); Leo Castelli called him "a guru" (qtd. in Dercon); Mina Ledermin writes, "he is a true American evangelist, indeed an old-timey gospel preacher [. . .] driven by messianic zeal" (qtd. in Hines 69); Marjorie Perloff characterizes Cage as an "evangelical Protestant-cum-Zen Buddhist" (101); Thomas Hines describes a "Christian commitment" as influencing Cage's life-long pacifist leanings (69); and an online poster describes attending a Cage performance as going to "hear Cage preach" (qtd. in Goldsmith).

Although I have traced possible origins of Cage's aversion for bodily expression in music, dance, and painting, I am less interested in the "why" of this aversion—whether based on his doctrinaire Protestant upbringing, his response to homophobic society, or other causes—than I am in highlighting how this aversion has been almost unanimously accepted as synonymous with Cage's "renunciation of the ego." This error equates "removal of the ego" with a Protestant-informed idea of corporeal restraint, discipline, and self-punishment (as per Taruskin's description of "self-subversion" above). A typical equation of the ego with the body can be found in Marjorie Perloff's description of Cage's relationship to the work of Duchamp: "In keeping with his own commitment to the renunciation of the ego in art, [Cage] shifted the parameters of the discourse so that the making of 'a duchamp unto my self' [sic] [. . .] involved the transformation of the erotic into the ideational, the sexual into the textual" (103). She equates the erotic and the sexual with "ego" and the ideational and the textual with its renunciation, an interpretation likely and logically coming from an acceptance of Cage's equation of the "ego" with likes and dislikes, which Cage equates not with a real acceptance of whatever arises, but with bodily "expressiveness." Perloff, like so many others, accepts and re-inscribes Cage's equation of the removal of expressiveness (linked to the body: erotic, sexual) with the removal of the ego.

At issue here is a misunderstanding of Zen, principally by Cage himself. Most scholars and commentators ascribe Cage's "removal" of himself from his works to his Zen influence. Peter Dickinson writes, "the Zen connection, which led to him taking himself out of his music, has sometimes created problems with an audience if they don't understand Oriental philosophy" (172). Unfortunately, the vast majority of Cage's listeners, including scholars and interviewers, do not understand "Oriental philosophy." To lump together a diverse array of philosophies as "Oriental," as Dickinson does, is already to demonstrate the limited understanding he suggests. Buddhist philosophy represents a highly sophisticated form of analysis—one difficult to grasp, as understanding depends upon experience. Much like mastering an instrument or a sport, Buddhism cannot really be understood conceptually. It is a more akin to an embodied skill developed over time. Cage did not undertake the embodied discipline of Zen meditation, while nonetheless using Zen concepts to inform his work. This process resulted in both a misunderstanding of the philosophy as an embodied practice and the erroneous conflation of Zen with a deeply rooted Protestantism that informed his anti-sensualist aesthetics.

Cage's engagement with Zen was long lasting: after his initial encounter around 1950, he referenced the philosophy in his writings and interviews through the remainder of his life. His understanding of Zen, however, was tenuous. Although Cage prided himself on going to the "president of the company" when finding his teacher, D.T. Suzuki was not a Zen master. He was a translator, an academic, and certainly the "big name" in Zen for Americans—he is credited with basically single-handedly bringing Zen to the general population in the United States through his books and popular talks—but he was never considered to be a highly realized Zen master. From Suzuki's lectures, Cage heard of "small mind," our everyday mind preoccupied with gaining and losing, and "big mind" or "Mind," the mind that by its nature remains spacious and open, unaffected by thought or emotion. It was Mind Cage claimed to seek. His efforts to engender the unaffected Mind, however, more often succeeded in privileging a model of mind-over-body that is typical of Western thought. Mind as an entity privileged over body is emphatically not part of the Zen view. In

the classic Zen text *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Zen master Shunryu Suzuki (no relation to D.T.) writes that “The most important point is to own your own physical body. [. . .] We must exist right here, right now! This is the key point. You must have your own body and mind. [. . . The Buddha] was not interested in some metaphysical existence, but in his own body and mind, here and now” (27-28). Meditation is by far the most important tool in Zen to help bring the mind and the body together.

Meditation is a technique to calm the mind so that awareness can arise. What awareness will ultimately reveal in this practice is the non-separation of subject and object, including mind and body, self and other: “We Buddhists do not have any idea of material only, or mind only, or the products of our mind, or mind as an attribute of being. What we are always talking about is that mind and body, mind and material are always one. But if you listen carelessly it sounds as if we are talking about some attribute of being, or about ‘material’ or ‘spiritual’” (Suzuki 135). It is impossible, in this view, to describe non-duality with or in language. The oneness of mind and material is the realization that there is no separation into subject and object. Nonetheless, it is the practitioner who must sit down and do the practice. In this sense, one takes deep responsibility for one’s own practice of embodied, non-dualist realization.

Significantly, Cage forewent the embodied practice of meditation in favor of his own system: “chance operations.” During the same period when Cage encountered Zen, he began to use various chance methods (pre-dominantly the *Ching*, a Chinese oracular tool) to determine compositional elements such as pitch, duration, and dynamic level. For Cage, this system took the place of meditation in working with the ego:

Chance operations [. . .] are a means of locating a single one among a multiplicity of answers, and, at the same time, of freeing the ego from its taste and memory, its concern for profit and power, of silencing the ego so that the rest of the world has a chance to enter into the ego’s own experience whether that be inside or outside. (qtd. in Revill 152)

Elsewhere, he states that, “by flipping coins to determine facets of my music, I chain my ego so it cannot possibly affect it” (qtd. In Revill 152). While meditation is an embodied practice that dissolves boundaries of self and other through insight and clear-seeing in order to “eliminate the self” (to put it in Cage’s terms), Cage’s response to the practice is belittling: “I have never practiced sitting cross-legged, not do I meditate [. . .] because I did enough sitting and I’m still sitting now” (qtd. In Revill 152). Instead, Cage applied an approach that “chained” his ego (in order to “free” it) by imposing upon it an external process, an “other” to keep it in check. “Chance operations” is an essentially theistic approach, a way to overcome the ego by giving authority to an “other” (in this case “chance”), an extension, to follow Žižek, of the Western tradition of the “Big Other” (law, God) where self and other are firmly maintained. This strategy expresses a basic distrust of the “self” and the need for some other dominant force to keep it in line, just as Reason governs body and God governs “Man.” It also reveals a distrust or lack of appreciation for insight that comes from focusing on the body. In Carl Jung’s *The Integration of the Personality*, an important book for Cage in the 1940s, the psychologist expresses admiration for Hindu philosophical principles, but associates the actual physical disciplines with a primitive mentality not assimilable into Western “civilized” culture: “this is all very well, but scarcely to be recommended anywhere north of the Tropic of Cancer” (qtd. in Kahn 566). Jung’s and Cage’s comments suggest they considered the corporeal practices that accompanied philosophical inquiry in many Eastern traditions too unsophisticated of an approach for “advanced” European civilizations.

Instead, Cage related likes and dislikes to the body in a more Protestant-inflected view that suspected the body and its desires and used reason to master the body.¹⁸ Much like the aversion to “raised affections” described in the opening of this essay, Cage’s work and writing reveal a substantial fear of being overtaken and overwhelmed—of losing oneself. Because Cage is distrustful of practices like meditation that may “dissolve” the ego and take down boundaries between a self and other (which, I argue, Cage would relate to the Great Awakening revivals mentioned above or losing oneself in emotion, dance, music, or sex), he attempted to remove the “self” by other means, by the imposition of an external process—chance operations.

Arguments can certainly be made for Cage’s embodiedness, earthiness, and sensuousness. As I suggest at the beginning of this section, many scholars and other Cage aficionados consider his work “sensuous,” and inasmuch as aleatoric strategies challenge our habitual reactions and force us to encounter stimuli in new, unaccustomed, and even uncomfortable ways, I, like many others, find them useful for interrogating “likes and dislikes” and enhancing awareness. What I hope to bring out in this essay are the ways in which the ideas that Cage maintained about the body and mind reinforced a subject/object, self/other split that deeply diminished his stated objectives of removing himself from his works, of “non-intention,” and of letting “sounds be sounds.” If Cage removed anything, it was the body (the sexual, erotic, moved-by-music body), leaving only the “mind” (in the form of “externalized law”) and the

“self” (in the form of “the disembodied genius”).¹⁹ In this sense, Cage’s practices were anything but radical and simply served to perpetuate the Western primacy of self and mind over other and body.

Interestingly, in the latter part of his career Cage began to shift his thinking on the place of the body in his work and life. In 1977, he described the pitfalls of his own abstracted approach and described his partner, Merce Cunningham, as more embodied and thus perhaps less enslaved by the ego:

It seems to me that, in an art like the dance, the discipline is not what mine is, of sitting still and putting ink on paper, but is a daily discipline connected with the body. It closely resembles the disciplines of going in (and sitting, breathing, etc.). And though Merce Cunningham also uses, not always and not as I do, but in his own way, chance operations, it seems to me that the dance frees the body from the closing-in-on-itself aspect of the ego: what happens is that a concept disappears and simply a movement is made. (qtd. in Kostelanetz 55)

Here, Cage acknowledges that the practice of “removing the ego” involves bringing the mind and body together.²⁰ By “going in”—that is, focusing on one’s breathing or simple movements—the “concept disappears” and “a movement is made” without the constricting aspect of the ego, the “mental formations” described in Buddhism. Cage’s late insight about the importance of embodied concentration brings us to the work of Pauline Oliveros, a composer who has privileged this very approach in her work. Despite her similarities to Cage in philosophy and aesthetics, Oliveros has created remarkably different compositions from those of Cage. I locate this difference in her relationship to corporeality, which affects many aspects of her creativity, including her interpretation of Eastern philosophy and the important role that improvisation plays in her work.

Pauline Oliveros

From descriptions of her youth, it would seem that Oliveros was quite comfortable in her own skin. She was highly skilled in both music and athletics. She played many sports, but particularly excelled at softball, becoming a champion pitcher lauded in local newspapers (Mockus 37). She had an early love for ambient sound, including the pops and hisses on records and the static of radios between stations, but she also loved playing instruments: she played piano and French horn and later settled on the accordion as her primary instrument. She was also relatively comfortable with her sexuality, given the repressive era in which she grew up (Houston, Texas in the 1940s and early 1950s). She describes knowing she was lesbian from a very early age, “[grade school] at least,” and began to meet other lesbian girls in junior high via the softball team (Mockus 3-4). At seventeen, her mother confronted her about her sexual orientation, and the constraints Oliveros felt at home—regarding her sexuality, but also her development as an artist—led her to move to San Francisco at the age of nineteen. She needed to escape the “Mother-daughter-stay-at-home-and-take-care” pattern and to find the freedom to express her life artistically and sexually (5-6). Her relationship with her mother was generally a good one, but Oliveros never shied away from expressing her creativity and sexuality, despite the initial discomfort it may have caused her mother. Eventually, Oliveros’s mother came to accept her daughter’s sexuality (6).

Oliveros established herself as a composer of electronic music in the 1950s and 1960s by becoming a founding member of the San Francisco Tape Music Center. In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, her work took a significant turn that emphasized performance. Citing the need for “calming” practices in a turbulent time, Oliveros became more performer-centered, meditative, and concerned with embodiment. Influenced and encouraged by the rise of the women’s movement, and interested in the values of “traditional” cultures that had been refracted through the writings of Karl Jung and Joseph Campbell, she began consciously addressing issues such as the mind/body split, sexism, and other hierarchies in her work and life.²¹ She was also ready to proclaim publicly her lesbianism as integral to her life and work. In her irreverent “bio” in the 1971 issue of *Source: Music of the Avant Garde*, she wrote,

Pauline Oliveros is a two-legged human being, a female, lesbian, musician, composer among other things which contribute to her identity. She is herself and lives with her partner Lin Barron in Leucadia, California along with assorted poultry, dogs, cats, rabbits and tropical hermit crabs. (qtd. in Mockus 76)

In this biographical statement, Oliveros constitutes her identity around her embodiment, stating she is human, female, and lesbian before describing herself as a musician and composer “among other things.” It was in this period that Oliveros also wrote and performed the *Sonic Meditations* (compositions in which performer attention and responsiveness are paramount and the “ear” is listed as the performer’s primary “instrument”) and established the groundwork for what would later become her philosophy and practice of “deep listening.”

Like Cage, Oliveros was also inspired by Eastern philosophy.²² Significantly, and in contrast to Cage, she decided to make the practice of meditation central to her processes. As early as the late 1950s, she had incorporated meditative practices into her work: her 1959-60 work, *Variations for Sextet*, included a long note held by the cello for approximately half a minute, which she described as a “very brief meditation” (Schloss 111-112). It was in the late 1960s, however, that she incorporated longer tones into her performances, a practice influenced by her work with the T'ai Chi practitioner Al Chung Liang Huang. In describing Oliveros's work with the ♀'s Ensemble and the *Sonic Meditations* in the early 1970s, Myrna Schloss writes that “[T'ai Chi] involves the rhythm of one's breath being synchronized with slow circular motions of the torso, arms, and legs. [Oliveros] explains that as she connected the rhythms of the T'ai Chi breathing and motion to the improvisations, she felt beneficial changes to herself and [. . .] the music” (112). Oliveros continued this practice in her work with the improvisation-based Deep Listening Band in the 1990s. Band member Stuart Dempster (trombone and tuba) notes that the work of the Deep Listening Band is “certainly a logical outgrowth of the early *Sonic Meditation* pieces [. . .] I think that it's a given [that] what we do with our deep listening is meditate at the same time [as we are performing]. We are really attentive, which is what meditation is. We're very attentive and aware” (qtd. in Schloss 151). This difference between attentive awareness and objective practices imposed from the outside exemplifies the difference between Oliveros's and Cage's approach to their otherwise shared goals of encouraging, of listening. Like Cage, Oliveros's approach attenuated the primacy of the ego in order to expand awareness; however, whereas Cage imposed an external system that proscribed reaction to the environment, Oliveros encouraged a type of meditative attention and awareness that would foster creative and nuanced responsiveness in an improvisatory setting.

Many scholars have situated Oliveros's emphasis on awareness and healing the mind-body split within a feminist perspective. Composer Jennifer Rycenga writes that “most forms of feminism have critiqued and/or rejected the assumption of dualism, particularly that which separates the mind from the body” (25). Rycenga also articulates a common feminist concern with Western classical music: “people are becoming more and more distant from physical experiences of music-making [. . .] 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” (42). For Rycenga, Oliveros's work represents a practice for addressing this “false distance.”²³ Timothy D. Taylor goes so far as to assert that Oliveros took a turn toward an “essential feminine”: “Oliveros has employed cultural feminism to resist being marginalized by patriarchal ideologies” (393). In describing Oliveros's move to the “feminine” side of the mind/body dyad as a space of resistance, Taylor also characterizes meditation as a “more ‘feminine’ act” (393). Here, Taylor employs a Western cultural coding that equates meditation with passivity and femininity. While Taylor may in fact be lauding this feminized position, the equation of meditation with the feminine/body/irrational/sensual/primitive side of the mind/body binary certainly contextualizes Cage's and Jung's aversion to meditation, and their preference for more “rational” methods of spiritual and psychological inquiry more appropriate to this side of the Tropic of Cancer. Because it is a practice that threatens the binary itself, meditation is discursively placed in the negative “body, feminine, other” side of the dualism.

As Oliveros values a type of listening that is directly linked to eliciting better, more informed, responses, she has made meditation and improvisation the cornerstone of much of her work since the 1970s. Cage famously rejected both. Improvisation, inasmuch as it is a responsive dialogue that demands change and interaction on the spot, is threatening to a view constructed around the maintenance of self-other distinctions. While Cage claimed to remove himself from his works, he did so by further instantiating a subject-object split. Oliveros's practice of improvisation, on the other hand, is part of a larger aesthetic practice that works to dissolve mind-body dualisms, integrating meditative practices with musical and sonic ones. In the final section of this essay, I examine how these composers' relationships to the mind-body hierarchy and their related views of what constitutes the “self” affected their attitudes toward improvisation as a musical strategy.

Subject, Object, Improv

Cage's discussions of improvisation were most often in response to an interviewer who excitedly compared the composer's practice of indeterminacy to that other experimental music—jazz.²⁴ Over the course of decades, Cage would have to continually correct what he viewed as a highly erroneous comparison by detailing how and why his practice of indeterminacy was decidedly *not* improvisation. In one such interview, Cage attempted to delineate the difference between his work, which attempted to liberate the musician, and jazz improvisation, which according to him diverged from liberation: “Everyone tells me that jazz is free today [. . .] in most compositions I hear an improvisation that resembles a conversation. One musician answers another. So, rather than each one doing what he wants, he listens with all his might to what the other one is doing, just to answer him better” (qtd. in Kim 298). Cage continues by describing his experience performing with the Joseph Jarman group, an ensemble he neglects to mention by name²⁵:

They asked me to listen to them, and then to tell them what I thought they should do to move in a direction which would suit me. They grouped themselves on the stage and acted as I just described to you. They began to listen to and answer each other [. . .] I advised them not to listen to each other, and asked each one to play as a soloist, as if he were the only one in the world [. . .] I repeated to them that they should be independent, no matter what happened. Well, at the rehearsal, everything went along quite well. It was what you might call successful free jazz! [. . . During the actual performance, however, they went back to their] old habits of conversing and answering again. It is very difficult to liberate yourself so quickly! (qtd. in Kim 298)

In this condescending account of a musical experience in which Cage had been Jarman's invited guest, the composer describes his efforts to teach the musicians how to liberate themselves. Cage makes clear that liberation is tantamount to separation and independence, something he felt his practice of indeterminacy encouraged. True to the American tradition of the rugged individualist, Cage envisions a person who is free from the influence of others and able to have the strength to do what he wants independent of listening to others. For Cage, the expressivity, communication, interdependence, and interaction of "improvisation" were a hindrance to "liberation."

While Cage exhorted the practice of listening throughout his career (stating that we will be able to really listen if we can get our "likes and dislikes" out of the way), in his directions to the Jarman ensemble, Cage specifically directs the musicians "not to listen." This interview illustrates that while Cage advocated listening generally, he was deeply suspicious of "responding" as a function of listening. In another context, Cage stated that "there is a possibility when people are crowded together that they will act like sheep rather than nobly" (qtd. in Kim 293). This suspicion of interaction is again redolent of a distrust of "raised affections" overtaking reason. For Cage, the strong, reasoned individual must withstand the sway of the group, of the herd moved by their unrestrained impulses.

In this context, then, Cage's practice of indeterminacy is one in which freedom is equated with atomized individuals who maintain their coherency. To return to Cage's collaborations with Cunningham, the artists described their system as one of "unimpededness and interpenetration" (Kim 304). Each individual is free, unimpeded, not bound to respond to the other (though bound to follow the external dictates created by "chance operations"), and these individuals remain free because they do not interact (thereby threatening their coherent, bounded, individuality), but interpenetrate. They remain two defended wholes unchanged by any interaction with the other. Cage here participates in a persistent fear of the Western Enlightenment tradition that the self, the mind, and reason will be overrun by the other, the body, the feminine, and the irrational—a fear of the blurring of individual boundaries and of the confusion of self with other.

According to Buddhism, the wish for a freestanding, independent individual is an impossible one. Cage acknowledged as much in a 1981 discussion about performing with Cunningham: "Have you seen our *Dialogues* that Merce and I do together? Sometimes I move in that, from one part of the stage to the other. I just walk. I don't dance. But I do feel I'm aware that I'm on the stage with a dancer, so that because I move, that has to be thought of in relation to dancing. One couldn't avoid it. I don't alter it. I'm just aware that I'm moving where angels fear to tread" (qtd. in Kim 314). Cage says he doesn't alter his walk and yet it is altered, if only by its simultaneous occurrence next to a dancer, which frames his walk as a type of dance. In the Buddhist Madyamika teachings, a synonym for emptiness is interdependence. Everything is empty of inherent, separate existence because everything is interdependent upon everything else. Therefore, the self is empty because it can never be located as a separate, permanent phenomenon: in close examination, its boundaries from other beings and phenomena can never be found. (Cage's famous philosophical exhortations on "nothingness" were derived in part from his erroneous understanding of the concept of emptiness.) Cage's desire to be free of "cause and effect," of interaction and intersubjectivity, is considered an absolute impossibility in the Buddhist tradition, until one attains complete Enlightenment—and despite what Cage may have wanted some to believe, he was not enlightened.

Oliveros, by contrast, harbors none of these fears of the body, interaction, or improvisation. In an interview, Peter Dickinson asks her, "You remember that John [Cage] said he found the sounds of the environment more useful aesthetically than music. Do you subscribe to that?" Oliveros answers,

It depends on how one would interpret that statement. When you say the sounds of the environment are more useful than music—what is the music we are talking about, and how does it function in our lives? What are the sounds of the environment useful for? In my own perspective, I would say listening is useful. It's absolutely necessary for one's survival! [laughs] Listening critically and crucially can change one's consciousness instantly. That can be very useful!" (174)

Oliveros does not criticize Cage's approach; indeed, her interview is full of praise for the composer. Nonetheless, her approach is a direct counter to the "objective" stance implicit in the question (reminiscent of Cage's generally very definitive comments on what is and isn't "good" and "useful"). In her answer to whether environmental sounds are aesthetically useful, Oliveros responds in a way characteristic of improvisers: "it depends." She asks, "What are the sounds of the environment useful for?", and then responds by not talking about the "sounds"—what is "out there"—but instead advocates "listening," an embodied practice that we activate. By encouraging listening deeply to the sounds around us, Oliveros suggests that we can come to understand the source and ramifications of the sound within our own embodied practice of improvisation. Rather than the imposition of an external law, Oliveros's deep listening practice stresses subjective discretion: deep listening grounds response to each given instance, providing improvisers with information to help make better informed decisions.²⁶

Improvisation privileges listening and responding and therefore highlights intersubjectivity—the ways our actions and sense of self are constantly constructed through interaction with our environment. Improvisation is a practice where actions and responses are not enforced, but also do not arise completely independently. Much like daily life, musical improvisation is a complex system of interaction, negotiation, and co-arising. Cage was uncomfortable with how members of the Joseph Jarman group changed and responded to each other, how one musician's behavior could shape another's. Despite his desire to remove himself and his likes and dislikes, Cage believed in an older concept of the unified individual exercising free will: in order to achieve freedom, an individual should remain autonomous by resisting the power of others through the help of one external Big Other.

Thus, in comparison to improvisation, Cage's chance operations were actually *self*-focused. The self posed such a problem and was considered so powerful that an Other was enlisted to watch over it. Rather than putting our attention directly onto another, Cage felt that this attention must be mediated and sanctioned by a Big Other that will make decisions for us. This other is an abstract entity—chance—not other human beings with whom we interact by paying attention to their words and sounds. Therefore, the preoccupation is actually with the self, which comes further into shape when it is defined as something that must be chained through the use of chance operations. Deep listening in improvisation could be understood as a practice of dissolving the self by putting deep focus on the other-in-front-of-us and coming to understand the interrelatedness and co-arising of supposed "other" and "self."

Both Cage and Oliveros developed aesthetic practices that called into question the "self." The radical critique of Western Enlightenment thought at the heart of both of these composers' work has not, however, had far-reaching repercussions. While claiming to subvert the self, Cage, through a fear of "losing himself" in the other, actually solidified the self in ways that reinforce a subject/object split. This paved the way for his deification as a great artist and has served to place the emphasis directly on him and not on his sounds. As mentioned above, Oliveros's work has often been overlooked by music historians, most pointedly after her turn to the body and improvisation. Her focus on embodiment, improvisation, and the dismantling of the mind/body dualism troubles the primacy of the individual and the universal over the contingent. As such, her work has been marginalized in discourses with a stake in maintaining a Western enlightenment view that demands a split between self and other, a split that improvisation calls into question.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous readers for their important feedback on an earlier draft of this essay. Daniel Fischlin has been a fantastic editor and I appreciated his speedy and insightful feedback throughout the polishing stages. Finally, thanks to Myrna Schloss for finding last-minute references from her dissertation, which saved me a trip to the dusty microfilm basement.

² For scholars who have addressed music's relationship to the body, the feminine, and the mind/body split, see Abbate, Cusick, Jankélévitch, Leppert, and McClary.

³ Oliveros is either left out of twentieth-century music histories and anthologies, barely mentioned, or when a word is said about her it connects her either very briefly with tape music of the 1960s or with new-age spiritualism, sexuality, and/or feminism—to the exclusion of any other perspective. She is not even mentioned in Arnold Whittall's *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music* or his *Music since the First World War*, or in Robert Morgan's *Anthology of Twentieth-Century Music*. In the *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music* and in Eric Salzman's *Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction*, she receives passing mention, as if we all know of her, but presumably from another source. In *The Future of Modern Music*, she has a short paragraph with other "additional composers," which tells us (without reference) that she "once had the distinction of being the most radical woman composer" (McHard 334). It is unclear

what is meant by this, because her work is not described here: her claim to fame seems to be that she performed a piece at the ONCE festival, and only her tape music work from the sixties is mentioned. Paul Griffiths's *Modern Music and After: Directions since 1945* discusses Oliveros under the heading "Sex and Sexuality."

⁴ These views have been expressed in the composers' own writings. See especially Cage's *Silence* and Oliveros's *The Roots of the Moment*.

⁵ See Rebecca Kim's dissertation, especially the chapter "Beyond Imaginative Landscapes: Strategies of Negation and the Indeterminacy-Improvisation Polemic" for an excellent discussion of John Cage's efforts to distinguish his practice of indeterminacy from improvisation. Kim traces how Cage's opinions changed from an early admiration for jazz to a later dislike of the musical form after his own turn to "non-intention."

⁶ Pauline Oliveros has predominantly practiced Tibetan Buddhism. When I discuss Oliveros, I use the overarching term Buddhism. Because Cage was specifically influenced by D.T. Suzuki and Zen, I refer to Zen specifically when discussing Cage. While many Western scholars unfamiliar with Buddhism express concern about the conflation of different "styles" of Buddhism, Buddhist masters of all traditions almost unanimously describe the differences of style in Buddhism to be of little importance, especially when comparing Buddhist thought to Western styles of philosophy.

⁷ See especially Abbate for a discussion of how music can be understood as non-locatable and non-symbolizable.

⁸ For other scholarship on Cage's Protestantism, see Hines and Perloff.

⁹ This alleged statement by Schoenberg was repeated often by Cage and is generally reported as truth in commentary and scholarship on Cage. As Michael Hicks has shown, however, the source of this comment was a purported statement Schoenberg made to his friend and patron Peter Yates in a personal conversation, which Yates later shared with Cage.

¹⁰ For interesting historical documentation on Ford, the *Dearborn Independent*, and jazz, see Carter.

¹¹ For more on this turn to non-intention, see Kim.

¹² For more on Cage and Cunningham's methods, see Kim.

¹³ Jones describes Cage's "Lecture on Nothing," presented to a group of abstract expressionists in 1949, as an example of his "bodiless philosophy" (643). For a discussion of Abstract Expressionism's "machismo," see Meecham (163).

¹⁴ A rare and important exception to his general silence on the subject of his sexuality is his interview with Thomas Hines.

¹⁵ Thanks to Daniel Fischlin for this insight.

¹⁶ "Self-subverting" in a Christian, not a Buddhist, sense.

¹⁷ Cage evinced discomfort when "music attempts to control me" (Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* 249).

¹⁸ This is quite a different view from Buddhist philosophy. In fact, it is "reason" that would be more accurately associated with ego and desire in Buddhism, not the body. Paying close attention to the body is part of the practice of meditation, which allows the thinking process (the maintainer of ego) to calm down.

¹⁹ As an example, in a 2006 show at the UCSD University Art Museum, a scrap of paper with Cage's handwritten *I Ching* numbers, used to determine chance operations, were framed and presented as a "work of art."

²⁰ For even at that point, Cage certainly knew that Zen calligraphy was considered an embodied practice that involved “sitting still and putting ink on paper.” Later in life, he himself painted calligraphy, which I believe was a further turn toward incorporating an embodied practice of “mindfulness” into his work and life.

²¹ Oliveros, like Cage, has been criticized for picking and choosing from a smorgasbord of non-Western religions and philosophies while considering herself the arbiter of all. On Cage, see Taylor; on Oliveros, see Browner.

²² Oliveros has generally practiced Tibetan Buddhism, not Zen. See note 5.

²³ Similarly, Elisabeth LeGuin has described Oliveros’s work as the creation of a safe, feminist, liberatory space (392).

²⁴ For a discussion of jazz, western art music, and experimentalism in the 1940s and 1950s, see Lewis.

²⁵ Rebecca Kim’s dissertation clarifies that Cage is talking about a 1965 performance with the Joseph Jarman group (285).

²⁶ For example, in her proposal for a “Deep Listening Palace—Potsdam,” Oliveros suggests “building a community of listeners. Its purpose is to foster and encourage listening as a practice transculturally. [. . .] To heal misunderstanding” (114-115). For more on improvisation, law, and discretion within the context of Western modernity, see Manderson.

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