



IN MEMORIAM

Pauline Oliveros
Former Professor of Music
UC San Diego
1932-2016

Composer and performer Pauline Oliveros, an early member of UC San Diego Department of Music's faculty, died November 24 at the age of 84. An accordionist, she gave her final concert in early November at the Jewish Museum in New York City.

"Pauline Oliveros brought great wisdom and creativity to her life-long project of teaching us how to create and listen to music in a deeper and more meaningful way," said Rand Steiger, chair of the music department. "Generations to come will continue to learn from her challenging words and inspired sounds, but she will be sorely missed by a musical community that needs her now more than ever."

Oliveros taught at UC San Diego from 1967 to 1981. She headed the university's Center for Music Experiment (CME) from 1976 to 1979 as it became widely known for innovative use of synthesizers, computers and other technologies. At the time of her death she served as Distinguished Research Professor of Music at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York, a post she had held since 2001.

But she is perhaps best known for a multi-sensory approach to music and sound that she called "deep listening." In her own bio, she described it "as a way of listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what you are doing. Such intense listening includes the sounds of daily life, of nature, of one's own thoughts as well as musical sounds."

Her system of musical notation was equally unconventional, often consisting of written instructions and diagrams. For “Sonic Meditation X,” which she composed at UC San Diego, she directed musicians to sit in a circle, close their eyes, form a mental image of one person in the circle and sing a tone to that person.

Oliveros was born May 30, 1932 in Houston, TX. She studied at the University of Houston (1949-1952) and San Francisco State University (1957). In San Francisco she was among a handful of experimental composers including Steve Reich and Terry Riley who were developing new music at the San Francisco Tape Music Center. It was there where she met composer Robert Erickson, who became one of the first music professors hired at UC San Diego and in turn recruited Oliveros. In the early 1960s, she was also instrumental in creating the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills College in Oakland, CA.

At Rensselaer, Oliveros founded the Deep Listening Institute, known today as the Center for Deep Listening. One recent project focused on the development of musical instruments for people with severe mobility restrictions. Oliveros also headed a research group called “Gender and Body – within Improvisation, Community and Social Practice.” In the 1960s and 1970s she was one of the few women in new and experimental music, and she was openly gay at a time when this was rare.

Oliveros earned international recognition. New York Times music critic John Rockwell described her 1965 composition “Bye Bye Butterfly” as “one of the most beautiful pieces of music to emerge from the 60s.” She represented the United States at Expo ’70, the world’s fair in Osaka, Japan. She was the subject of a 1985 career retrospective at the Kennedy Center, and was honored in 2010 with Columbia University’s William Schuman award for lifetime achievement. In 2012 she received the John Cage Award from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, as well as the Giga-Hertz Preis for Electronic Music from ZKM | Karlsruhe in Germany.

UC San Diego Distinguished Professor of Music Steven Schick had known Oliveros for more than 20 years. She wrote “Bass Drum Concerto” for Schick for his 60th birthday and it premiered at the Lincoln Center in 2013. In 2015, when Schick served as music director for the Ojai Music Festival, he included several works by Oliveros. He had hoped that she could appear as the featured composer at the 2017 Banff Centre Summer Music series, which he is co-directing with Claire Chase.

“Pauline’s music, like her spirit, was rich, generous and welcoming,” Schick said. “With every encounter she demonstrated that listening was the most respectful and rewarding way to meet the world. Oh, how we need that now!”

Oliveros is survived by her wife and collaborator Carole Ione Lewis, a writer and performance artist, as well as three stepchildren and eight grandchildren.

Rand Steiger
Professor and Chair
Department of Music