

Sacred Sound Through Meditation and Improvisation

The deeper knowledge, mysticism and science journey into sound the more it seems to be at the root of everything. In this paper I want to explore the states of consciousness in which we can access divine sound and the musical manifestation of this experience. During my immersion into the world of sound healing there have been two past teachings that keep coming obsessively to mind. The first was practicing *Vipassana* meditation, which focuses on the breath, observing the body and mind, without attaching oneself to the thoughts, emotions or sensations that come up. *Vipassana* meditation cultivates being present without judgement. The second experience was attending a workshop on Free Improvisation which focused on being intensely aware of sound and the connection with our instrument. Improvisation is “the process of combining the knowledge and skills we possess with the possibilities and materials available in the moment, and spontaneously creating something.”¹

The connection I personally feel between meditation and improvisation has intrigued me for years. In my experience both come from and return to the same sacred source. I believe, as Stephen Nachmanovitch writes in the book *Free Play*, that “the creative process is a spiritual path.”² There have been many modern composers concerned with the divine, for example the minimalists whose movement has deep roots in Eastern practices. There have also been great virtuosos and improvisors who do creative and transformative work. But I wanted to investigate if any XX and XXI century artists specifically connected meditation and improvisation with their musical and spiritual journey. My research has led me to discover the work of Giacinto Scelsi and Pauline Oliveros.

Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988) was an Italian composer and master improvisor. If his work is approached from a strictly musicological perspective he risks being overshadowed by names like Messiaen and Ligeti. But a closer examination reveals many elements of Scelsi’s work that set him apart from other composers. In an article renowned cellist Frances-Marie Uitti mentions Scelsi “believed that various meditation techniques, such as intoning the "OM", enabled him to enter into a different vibratory realm. For him, sound in its purest vibration was a potent force that has an extremely powerful influence on people. He was convinced that, through meditation and improvisation, he could become a channel for higher forces which would enable the creation of works that were otherwise impossible through ordinary composition.”³

Uitti worked closely with Scelsi interpreting his music and transcribing much of the improvised recorded material Scelsi left behind. Her article provides a rare personal insight into Scelsi’s work which is both sonically and conceptually enthralling. Terms such as microtonalism and dodecaphony are used to describe Scelsi’s style, but his art transcends musical analysis, it is visionary and profoundly transforming. For example in the symphony *Aion* (which signifies the personification of eternity in Greek mythology) he manages a “most effective portrayal of immense lapses of time”⁴, which is no simple feat for any musician. He details the significance of his music by adding subtitles like the following for the orchestral piece *Knox-Om-Pax: three aspects of Sound: as the first motion of the immovable, as creative force, as the sacred syllable 'Om.'* Structurally Scelsi constructs some of his pieces “based on the golden mean and not linear symmetry”⁵ as in *Anahit* and *Hymnos*. He combines philosophy and technique quite masterfully but the key that sets Scelsi apart from other composers who have worked with similar elements and ideas is that he created most of his music by recording himself when he improvised freely. He left the actual notating up to other musicians. “Thus” claims Uitti “he saved his creative energy for those spiritual Devas whom he believed assisted his musical output”.⁶

Pauline Oliveros (b. 1932) is an American composer, improviser and sound explorer. She has worked extensively with sound and consciousness and developed Deep Listening. She has also put together a series of Sonic Meditations for group work. "Through improvisation, electronic music, ritual, teaching and meditation she has created a body of work with such breadth of vision that it profoundly effects those who experience it and eludes many who try to write about it."⁷ In her Sonic Meditations she places special emphasis on the relationship between attention, awareness and sound. Oliveros writes that "while one's attention is focused to a point on something specific, it is possible to remain aware of one's surroundings, one's body, movement of all kinds and one's mental activity, or in other words remain aware of inner and outer reality simultaneously."⁸ She adds that her Meditations "are sonic in that sound and hearing, both active and receptive, are the foci of attention and stimuli of awareness"⁹.

The Meditations are a series of profound exercises that begin with the observation of the breath cycle and then introduce the sonic element whether it be an instrument or preferably voice. They can be as direct as Meditation V titled Native which instructs: *take a walk at night. Walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears.* Or Meditation XII, One Word: *Choose one word. Dwell silently on this word. When you are ready, explore every sound in this word extremely slowly, repeatedly. Gradually, imperceptibly bring the word up to normal speed, then continue until you are repeating the word as fast as possible. Continue at top speed until "it stops".* But the Sonic Meditations can also take on a collaborative complexity as in Meditation III, Telepathic Improvisation, which instructs an audience to carefully observe a group of musicians and imagine the sound of his or her instrument. The audience should mentally send a sound to the musician until he or she is moved to play by receiving an impression of the sound in their minds. The meditation continues adding exercises to further explore the telepathic connection between observers, musicians, sonic influence and intention.

The purpose of Sonic Meditations is to open the doors of perception to "heightened states of awareness or expanded consciousness, changes in physiology and psychology from known and unknown tensions to relaxation which gradually becomes permanent. These changes may represent a tuning of mind and body."¹⁰ Oliveros deeply believes in the power of music and sound to transform, heal and unite.

There is a strong connection between Scelsi's and Oliveros' work. Both of them are supremely concerned with the power of a single note. Scelsi wrote entire pieces that revolve around one pitch and Oliveros considers the long and stretched notes of some of her pieces as a small meditation. "It signaled my growing interest in timbral shapes and changes, the complementary opposite or chordal or harmonic changes"¹¹ she says, and I believe that the same held true for Scelsi. Both artists experienced a sense of surrender to higher forces in their work. Oliveros describes this feeling while exploring tonal centers with an improvisation group: "after a long period of working together a profound change occurred: rather than manipulating one's voice or instrument in a goal oriented way in order to produce certain effects, we began to allow changes to occur involuntarily, or without conscious effort, while sustaining a note voluntarily...We could no longer call our activity improvisation"¹². Scelsi took his experience even further. Uitti mentions "he often claimed that he wasn't a composer ("one who puts things together") but rather one who received music."¹³

This experience of channeling sound from a sacred source is not an uncommon one though most improvisors would not necessarily associate it with a spiritual experience. Nachmanovitch says "as an improvising musician, I am not in the music business, I am not in the creativity business; I am in the surrender business. Improvisation is acceptance, in a single breath, of both transience and eternity."¹⁴ It seems the same words could be used to describe *Vipassana* meditation, buddhist philosophy, healing experiences, etc. The space we move into when in a state of deep meditation and

awareness is the same place we must access when we surrender to the now, to the sacred, to the creative force, to sound. Improvisation emanates from this space. When the connection is made the results are profound and the healing potentials are infinite.

Bibliography and citations

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² Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1990. p13. Print.

³ Uitti, Frances-Marie. "Preserving the Scelsi Improvisations". *Tempo* October 1995. Web. <<http://www.uitti.org/pub1.html>> 12 March 2010.

⁴ McComb, Todd Michael. "Giacinto Scelsi: Aion 1961". 1992. Web. <<http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/works/scelsi/aion.php>> 13 March 2010.

⁵ McComb, Todd Michael. "Giacinto Scelsi: Anahit 1965". 1992. Web. <<http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/works/scelsi/anahit.php>> 13 March 2010.

⁶ <<http://www.uitti.org/pub1.html>>

⁷ "Pauline Oliveros Biography". Web. 2009. <<http://paulineoliveros.us/site/node/1>> 11 March 2010.

⁸ Oliveros, Pauline. "On Sonic Meditations". <<http://vaubu.blogspot.com/2009/12/pauline-oliveros-sonic-meditation.html>> 13 March 2010.

⁹ <<http://vaubu.blogspot.com/2009/12/pauline-oliveros-sonic-meditation.html>>

¹⁰ Oliveros, Pauline. *Sonic Meditations*. Smith Publications 1974. Web. <<http://vaubu.blogspot.com/2009/12/pauline-oliveros-sonic-meditation.html>> 13 March 2010.

¹¹ <<http://vaubu.blogspot.com/2009/12/pauline-oliveros-sonic-meditation.html>>

¹² <<http://vaubu.blogspot.com/2009/12/pauline-oliveros-sonic-meditation.html>>

¹³ <<http://www.uitti.org/pub1.html>>

¹⁴ Nachmanovitch, p. 21.