

Deep Listening is a lifelong practice. The more I listen the more I learn to listen.  
–Pauline Oliveros, *Quantum Listening*

Pauline Oliveros' *The Witness* (1989) is a compositional exploration of what she calls Deep Listening, a practice aimed at learning to listen "in as many ways as possible to everything that can possibly be heard all of the time." Through Deep Listening, she writes, "we open to listen to the world as a field of possibilities and we listen with narrowed attention for specific things of vital interest to us in the world." This practice "takes us below the surface of our consciousness, and helps...dissolve limiting boundaries," so that we can listen to others, including other than human beings, and to the larger whole of which, collectively, we are a part.<sup>1</sup> For the Amazonian leader Manari Ushigua, who tonight shares the stage with the performers as a witness, the word for this larger whole, this fragile web of living selves that collectively sustains us, is "forest" (*naku* in Sapara). Learning to listen to the forest is today, in Oliveros' words, of "vital interest." *The Witness* is one vehicle for doing so.

As with many of Oliveros' seminal works, the score of *The Witness* is written in words, not musical notation. It can be performed by musicians, movement and theater artists and the general public alike. The traffic between word and sound is important; Deep Listening is as much an embodied experience as it is a conceptual challenge. Tonight's sonic version of *The Witness* is not a one-off improvisation. The musicians and attendant deep listeners have been preparing for it for over two years.

The score consists of three strategies for becoming a "witness." Strategy One, *Attention to oneself*, is geared toward focusing attention "exclusively to one's own performance, no matter what" the others perform.<sup>2</sup> For musicians this is difficult, and at first glance seems the opposite of Deep Listening. And it gets harder: each sound produced is to be maximally different from any other. Each should be, "unique in every respect, as if sculpted anew out of totally different material." Strategy One is a practice for interrupting settled habits, psychic loops, and serves as preparation for Strategy Two: *Attention to other*. Here we are on more familiar improvisational ground: the performer is to "listen for a sound" and to "react spontaneously." But what Oliveros means by listening immediately complicates this: the performer is to respond not only to what is heard but to "the past or future of a partner's playing." It is the partner's sonic history that discloses a possible future, an ongoing story.

The stakes of these exchanges are personal and collective, existential and political. Performers are asked to "gain leadership of the interaction through anticipating or intuiting what may be performed next." That speculative leap of the listening performer-as-leader prefigures the final strategy: *Attention all over*. Here the goal is to "expand" one's "field of attention as far as possible," not just to the performers but to the world beyond, in this way "to feel the past, present and future of the performance as unity," and thus bear "witness to the totality of all the performance interactions as if the whole group and the environment was perceived as only one performer." Once the performers have journeyed through the three strategies, they may move freely between strategies until an ending is felt.

*The Witness* is of a piece with Amazonian practices using dreams and visions to reveal a larger collective mind, a unity Ushigua calls *nukaki* (oneness in Sapara). Strategy One involves a kind of death of the self, to allow other unexpected selves, human or nonhuman, to emerge. Strategy Two

encourages the performer to be a vessel, to grasp the whole of which each musical or energetic offering is a part, and to lead fellow listeners toward that unifying vision; Strategy Three completes the movement by guiding the manifestation of this collective mind. If this performance is mind-manifesting, it is because so too is the “forest,” whose guiding song we here strive to hear.

We invite you to witness *The Witness*, to hear its song, and to find your place in the living story that emerges.

—Eduardo Kohn

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<sup>1</sup> The above quotes are from, Oliveros, Pauline. *Quantum Listening: From Practice To Theory (To Practice Practice)*. SoundArtArchive, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> This and what follows is quoted from, Oliveros, Pauline. *The Witness*. Deep Listening Publications, 1989.