

MUSIC REVIEW

Unmediated Sensation Instead of Learned Art

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

About midway through the 80-minute performance by the Deep Listening Band at the Kitchen on Wednesday night, I found myself wishing that I had been present at the first performance of this group in 1988, when it recorded a CD inside a two-million-gallon cistern not far from Seattle. Or at one of its other original performances, in an old limestone quarry with its "lovely dripping water sounds and Valhalla-like mists" or at a lava cave in the Canary Islands. Because this New Age-ish Minimalist performance group is actually part of the aging countercultural avant-garde, in which the point is to displace the world of artifice and return the listener to a state of nature in which sound is unmediated sensation rather than learned art.

That was why Pauline Oliveros was playing a just-tuned accordion and David Gamper a just-tuned piano: so that overtones of each note would coincide precisely with the pitches of other notes being played, creating uncanny resonances like those created in cisterns and caves. That was why conch shells were used as horns: to invoke the ritualistic, preindustrial musical universe. And that was why Stuart Dempster walked onto the darkened performance space trumpeting a didgeridu, a long tubular Australian folk instrument that created waves of upper register overtones over a bass drone: to invoke non-Western instrumentation and exotic, unfamiliar customs of listening.

Unfortunately, here deep listening led only to shallow sensation. This was fog horn music, with gentle, mutating sounds of chirps and chirrups; occasionally fillips of folk rhythms glinted through the improvised mist. Mr. Gamper played about with exposed piano strings;



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Pauline Oliveros rehearsing with Deep Listening Band.

Mr. Dempster took out his trombone but also blew into a garden hose leading to the piano's sounding board. Ms. Oliveros languorously sounded an instrument that in other folk contexts might have been used to play a polka.

Exotic settings would certainly have helped these meditative labors. But in the most recent evolutionary step of the aging avant-garde scene, the world of the natural was here being imitated by the highest technological artifice; pedals controlled reverberation and delays once provided by echoing quarries.

The program notes said the performers used the Expanded Instrument System, which it describes as an "ever-expanding electronic sound processing environment" using "delay and ambiance processors, microphones, signal routing and mixing and a computer which translates and displays control information." Improvisations will be offered again tomorrow, while on Sunday at 4 P.M. this electronic system will be used to harness musicians in other locations in a "Global Sonic Meditation."

These efforts might have been transporting, creating and evoking the primeval world of overtones and spatial haze, as in the achievements of such artists as La Monte Young. Instead, the players ended up seeming belated imitators of the avant-garde past, veteran innocents who thought they were abroad but were actually in their own garage, recycling ideas and sounds full of countercultural cliché. Bring back the cistern.