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Preview

Mary Oliver and Han Bennink at Transformer Station January 22

By Mike Telin

How does an artist describe what audiences can expect to hear during a concert of free improvisations? “They will have a good time, I’m fairly confident about that,” Mary Oliver told us by telephone. On Wednesday, January 22 beginning at 7:30 pm CMA Concerts at Transformer Station presents two leading performers in the worlds of new music, free improvisation and avant-garde jazz: violinist/violist Mary Oliver and drummer/percussionist, Han Bennink.

Born in Zaandam, Netherlands in 1942, Han Bennink is a pioneer in the world of free jazz and free improvisation and is universally admired for his musical abilities that span the entire spectrum of jazz. In 1967 Bennink co-founded the Instant Composers Pool Orchestra (ICP) along with Dutch pianist Misha Mengelberg.

Born in La Jolla, California, Mary Oliver has received acclaim for her premieres of works by composers such as John Cage, Richard Barrett, Brian Ferneyhough, and Iannis Xenakis. A gifted improviser, Oliver has been described as “a rarity in the ranks of first-rate classical interpreters.”

“Han and I come from very different worlds. He never learned how to read music but he can swing like the best of jazz drummers. And I come from a tradition that is based on interpreting scores. So there will be a confluence of these different things. Sometimes they meet and sometimes they don’t, but that’s what’s exciting,” says Oliver. Wednesday’s concert will include familiar works by the likes of Herbie Nichols and Misha Mengelberg as well as ICP. “The concert will go between a lot of different worlds. As improvisers we bring in our past, and everything that has touched us in some way comes through in the performance.”

How did a violinist from La Jolla find her way to the world of avant-garde improvisation? “Wow, I certainly didn’t start out that way,” Oliver says, laughing, “I started as a classically trained violinist/violist.” But after being accepted into the masters program at Manhattan School of Music her musical life began to change.

“I was playing in a trio with a singer and guitarist performing some very old and very new music, as we were invited to perform at Mills College. I didn’t know anything about

the school so I popped over to the music department and saw Lou Harrison's gamelan, and all of the exciting things that were happening in the electronic music studio."

After reading more about the school she thought this would be the place for her. "So I decided to go there and that's really how it started. Besides Stéphane Grappelli, the first improvising violinist I heard was Malcolm Goldstein and I remember thinking, oh my gosh, is that allowed?" Although captivated by it, Oliver says she didn't pursue improvisation immediately. "I enjoyed doing it, but I was still entrenched in the composed music world."

While Oliver was at Mills, avant-garde composer Iannis Xenakis came for a residency and she was assigned to learn *Mikka* and *Mikka "S",* pieces she says at the time were beyond her scope. "I had played contemporary music but nothing that was that demanding, but he was wonderful to work with. As detailed as he was on paper, when he was working with you he was totally relaxed." Oliver also gave the North American premier of Xenakis' *Embellie* for solo viola.

After Mills, Oliver went on to study with violinist János Négyesy at the University of California San Diego where she joined KIVA, an improvising group that met every Saturday. "It was almost like a think tank for improvisation." While at UCSD, Oliver had the good fortune of working with composer George Lewis. "He really is amazing and was a great mentor. He really is the person who got me improvising. He even invited me to be part of a conference in Amsterdam, and that is where it started for me. I had improvised in small groups but this was an international stage and I got to meet all of these incredible performers like Mark Dresser and Han Bennink."

Although she returned to California to finish her degree, Oliver soon found herself frequently traveling to Amsterdam for projects. "I had one foot in the contemporary classical world and one in the improvising world." After moving to Amsterdam in 1995, Oliver began working with many ad hoc improvisation groups as well as playing with contemporary music ensembles there and in Germany. "So I was going between the written world and the improvised world, although after twenty years, I'm mainly in the improvising world."

Although she may be living in the twenty-first century improvising world, the music of J.S. Bach is still very much a part of her musical life. "I don't perform it, but part of my regimen is to practice a Bach sonata or partita every day. I'm also a fan of Anner Bylsma's book, *Bach the fencing master.* And although I've always played the music on modern instruments I do subscribe to Historical Performance Practice. I don't use a lot of vibrato and ornamentation is something that creeps into my improvisations."

For six years, Mary Oliver served as music director of Magpie Music Dance Company in Amsterdam, "It was terrific to think about phrasing in a non-musical way. You had to think like the dancers were thinking and it's a very different language." Oliver says she enjoys working with dancers and regularly collaborates with choreographer Michael Schumacker.

And while her performing career keeps her quite busy, Oliver also enjoys teaching a course in modal improvisation as well as coaching. "You've brought together so many

fascinating musical aspects to your career", I tell her. "Yeah," she says, "it's a very nice life."

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