

In Search of a Praxeology of 'Improvised Art'. The Daoist Turn

Rafal Mazur

Institute of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University
Poland

Abstract: *The following essay is dedicated to free improvisation in music, and specifically to the search for tools to effectively carry out this activity. It concerns music, not in the sense of sound phenomena, but in the sense of creative practice, the method of its creation. That is why we can speak of a praxeology of free improvisation in music. In the case of 'improvised music/art', praxeology is unusually relevant due to the fact that the work/product of this art is not only an artifact coming into existence as the result of a creative process, but it itself is a process.*

The main thesis I would like to present can be formulated as follows: 'free improvisation in music (and in art generally) is an activity qualitatively different than the artistic practices previously used in Europe. Thus, it demands the finding/development/application of different tools/strategies of acting to generate musical pieces/works of art.'

I will try to defend a thesis showing the ontological difference between works of art created in the traditional way for European culture and those works of art which are improvisational. Then, I will show that this difference in ontological status entails the use of different strategies to carry out these works. In the next step, I will indicate the direction in which I intend to go, in search of the aforementioned strategies.

For clarity, I will now address a few terminological issues connected with the subject at hand. Henceforth, when I write about tools serving work with music, I have in mind any strategy of acting that can be of service to the playing of musical pieces, that is, in the case of European culture, the reading of sheet music, interpretation, preparation, and presentation. When I write about the 'Daoist Turn' I have in mind the possibility of adapting Daoist strategies of action to the act of free improvisation in music, strategies developed by Daoist philosophers concerning art and human activity in general. It is worth stressing that the specificity of Chinese culture makes a sharp division between different types of philosophies or methods of various schools. The Chinese see the world through a pair of complementary opposites, so the Daoist strategy of behavior was repeatedly adapted by Confucian circles, which resulted in the development of the so-called 'free expression' movement in art.

1. FREE IMPROVISATION IN MUSIC

In the first half of the seventies in Europe, and a few years earlier in the USA, a 'genre' of music appropriately defined as 'improvised music' and "free jazz" appeared. *Free jazz and improvised music did away with the strict forms of jazz, classical, rock, and pop, allowing any instrument to become an equal partner in improvisation with any other. In short, free jazz and improvised music abandoned virtually every prop or anchor for improvisation in order to spur musicians to play genuinely in the moment, relying solely on their ingenuity and their instantaneous responses to the contributions of fellow performers. This urge toward improvisatory exploration encouraged performers to go beyond the established practices of instrumental technique to develop 'extended' techniques.* (Cox & Warner, 2004, p. 251)

Since that time the idea of free improvisation has spread in the artistic world, pervading every type of creative activity. Currently in music, performers from every provenance are involved in it, not just those coming from jazz. 'Free improvisation' is the most radical method of creating in real-time; this is an unprecedented activity in the history of music because of its own informality and sonic indeterminateness and as such requires new strategies for doing it and distinct philosophical reflection.

According to British guitarist Derek Bailey – one of the pioneers of 'free improvised music' – a characteristic of 'improvised music' is its *the confused identity which its resistance to labeling indicates. It is a logical situation: freely improvised music is an activity which encompasses too many different kinds of players, too many attitudes to music, too many different concepts of what improvisation is, even, for it all to be subsumed under one name [...] The lack of precision over its naming is, if anything, increased when we come to the thing itself. Diversity is its most consistent characteristic. It has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it.* (Bailey, 1993, p. 83) In a different place he emphasizes that there does not exist any kind of common denominator for this type of musical activity. In other words, one can say that we do not recognize 'free improvisation' by its sound effects, but by the underlying method used by the musicians to create their music. When it comes down to the question of style and genre, improvisational music has the capacity to deliver to the listener every single type of sound phenomenon that we can imagine. The presence of such phenomena depends only on the skills and personality of the musicians collectively improvising, and on the quality of the performative relations between them at a concrete moment. Like Ben Watson says *free improvisation doesn't guarantee any particular sound or mood* (Cox&Warner, 2004, p. 249) and Eddie Prevost adds that *In improvised music there is a creative and inter-active dialogical relationship between performers.* (Cox&Warner, 2004, p. 249)

2. THE PROBLEM OF CLICHES

Intending to be an activity that is spontaneous, formally indeterminate, stylistically open, etc., 'free improvisation' encounters a few serious difficulties in its development, in my opinion resulting mainly from insufficient consideration and verbalization of its fundamentals; hence the underdevelopment of tools serving the conscious development of its practice.

It should be noticed that imitation of the sound effects of the pioneers' of 'free improvised music' by the younger improvisers became a dead end. As Anthony Davis had noticed, *'Free' or 'open' improvisation has become a cliché* (Cox&Warner, 2004, p. 250). Musicians playing 'like somebody started to appear, imitating the sound of their masters, and then the experts showed up – theoreticians able to claim whether music was improvised or not just by the given sound of the piece. In other words, the basic assumptions of the practice of free improvisation were lost, and 'improvised music' became the next 'music' in terms of idiomatic recognizability of genre and style, just like 'Baroque music', 'Indian music', etc. Many performers (as well as listeners) identify it with concrete, defined sound effects, concentrating in practice on their attainment. It seems the words of Bailey did not concern them when he wrote in the seventies that: *A lot of improvisers find improvisation worthwhile, I think, because of the possibilities* (Cox&Warner, 2004, p. 264). The essence of free improvisation is that the possibilities are formally indeterminate.

Interest in 'free improvisation' among classically trained musicians resulted in their beginning to practice this form of activity by means of a method well-known to them and reinforced by years of musical tradition – the imitation of sound effects. Even if in a certain moment they realized that this road is not the best one to become an improviser, the improvisers themselves did not know a better way. It seems as though they didn't even mark out the skills necessary to practice improvisation.

Music, like every art, is inseparably connected with doing, and its development is connected with the excellence of the craft. Pure theoretical reflection does not solve the problems of performing; what is equally needed is concrete tools, a strategy of activity, enabling doing and its progress. Such a radical idea of artistic creation in real-time is so new in our cultural circle that the artistic and aesthetic tradition does not possess the appropriate tools to enable its development, nor the source of experience, conceptualization of its fundamentals. Prevost's statement can be taken as a signalization of the incompatibility of 'free improvisation' with the musical tradition of Europe: *Western 'classical' music demands a solution to most of the technical problems of making music before the music can be performed. Whereas - although most improvised musics demand a high level of technical competence - the elaboration of a theme, on a chord sequence or the direct response of musical dialogue, demands the application of 'problem solving' techniques within the actual performance* (Cox&Warner, 2004, p. 249). In the last few years, attending various types of 'free improvisation' workshops and lessons at conservatories, I have observed the impotence of

traditional tools of educating musicians in the attempts of developing skills of free improvisational music. The necessity of producing sound clichés became an obvious truth as a result of this situation. It seems that this is the cause of improvisational music's confinement in the ghetto of idiomatic sound and of its fall into ritualized stagnation.

3. ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

I would now like to introduce a certain essential difference between the creation of music according to the traditional method and the creation of music through free improvisation. The difference is determined by the ontology of the musical piece, including how and where it exists. For the current solutions what is important is that different ontological statuses condition different strategies of creating/performing music, forcing different behaviors and concentration on the factors/parameters of work in a musical band.

During traditional musical creation, which consists in first composing music and then performing, we are dealing with an idealistic ontological situation. That is, the musical piece comes into existence in a non-sound form in the head/imagination of the composer. We can say that before its performance, the realization of its sound, it exists as an idea, a concrete idea of a musical piece. This idea is introduced to musicians with the help of a collection of signs, most often in graphic form – the sheet music. The musicians reading the sheet music treat the idea behind it. Thus, their activity consists in realizing an idea in the world of physical phenomena. The sound effects of this process we call music. Thus, we can say that creating/playing music consists in phenomenally actualizing ideal being – the composed piece that exists before its physical performance. And in this case it is completely irrelevant how concrete the given idea is, just as it is irrelevant how detailed the notes are which lead the musicians to their performance. The basic relation in such an arrangement is the musician-idea relation. Of course, within a group of musicians there must exist relations between the individual members; such relations are no less important than the relations between the performers and the idea, since in the idea such relations are contained. The musical piece already includes every kind of relation between its elements, voices, parameters, etc. The created relations between musicians in the physical world are only a reflection of their ideal form of existence. Thus, the task of musicians is to realize the idea in the physical world in the form of a collection of sounds. This situation is illustrated in figure 1.

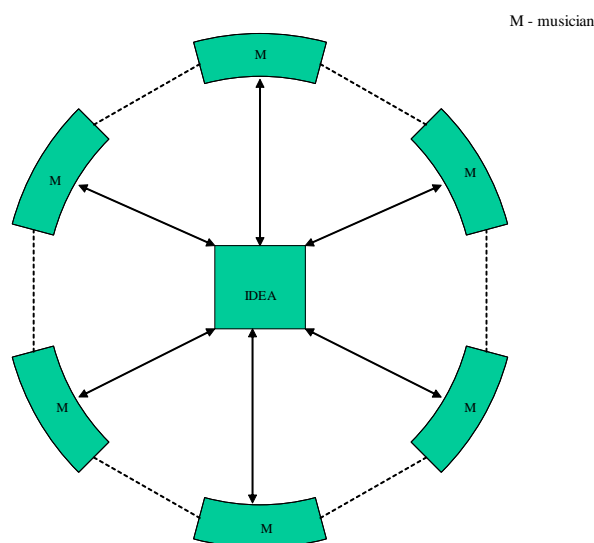


Figure 1

In the case of 'improvised music' we have a different ontological situation. The musical piece does not exist in any way before its performance. It doesn't exist as one whole idea, (in this case there is no counterpart composer, thus who would create it?), nor do there exist individual ideas of constitutive parts, such as the parts of the song performed by individual musicians. (I am turning your attention to this situation since there are pieces in the contemporary non-improvised music world in which individual members play their own parts without hearing the parts played by the other band members. By analogy, someone unfamiliar with practice of collective free improvisation could think that even if the improvising musicians do not share one common idea of the piece, each one of them has an idea of their own part and, playing these together, they play one song in this way. Thus, the situation would look like this, that instead of one idea, they would have a few. But, to sum up briefly, that's not how it is.) Improvising musicians do not know what they are going to play, since this is dependent on what the other band members are going to play. Any kind of attempt to predict how the situation/piece will develop will fail, since by concentrating on the predictable, the improviser lowers the level of his own concentration on the actual, current situation. In other words, while an improvisational group improvises, the music is created only in very strong, reciprocal relations between the band members. This situation is demonstrated in figure 2.

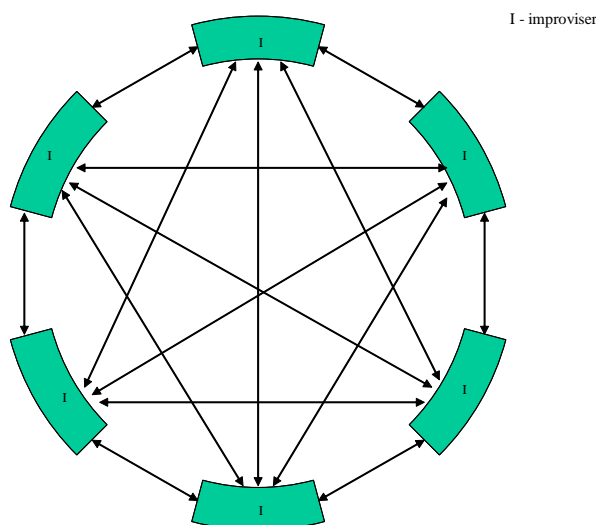


Figure 2

The dissimilarity of both ontological situations is visible at first sight. It must be equally clear that the realization of each conception should use different tools. Musicians playing a piece according to the classical model (composing, interpreting, preparing presentation, presenting) must possess tools to interpret the idea behind the sheet music. Carrying out this task depends on methodical, often arduous and time-consuming attempts to realize an idea and focus on its details, the interpretation/performance of which shows the musician the way to other ideas. He 'polishes' the execution of the idea by repeating it often, by repeating its parts until it is mastered, finding, little by little, the emergence of new meanings and symbols capable of helping him perfect its execution. Work with the given idea/piece is long-term, and because of this, the ideas/pieces are 'long-lived' and 'transitive', meaning that earlier other people have already performed them, and as a result, the contemporary performer often possesses the baggage of tradition in the form of specific musical solutions which he can (and most often does) copy, with more or less accuracy.

The improviser must have the tools for a completely different type of task. His piece does not exist before its performance, nor do the parts played by the other musicians. A necessary condition for the creation of the piece is the skill of each musician to enter into deep relations

between the band members at the same time. The improviser does not work teleologically; in no way can he determine how the played piece will finally look. He must be able to become part of the organism which a band of improvisers is, a part which stays in the equal relations with the others. He cannot (in contrast with the traditional way of playing) use pre-existing sound solutions while playing. One should play the sounds which result from the context, meaning from the current development of the situation. Just as a traditionally working musician concentrates hard on realizing the idea hidden behind the notes, so does an improviser concentrate hard on one specific moment – the 'here and now'. The development of music depends solely on the interaction between the players.

So, one can ask the question: what kind of skill should improvisers perfect? Or, to put it another way: what should young students of 'free improvisation' learn from their teachers, since it is not about imitating sounds? The answer is: joint improvisation, meaning the skills of entering into the aforementioned relations between band members which guarantees joint creation. Without this skill, there is no joint, collective improvisation. In other words, what one should imitate from the masters is not an external form of sound, but the skill of their creation based, in my opinion, on their inner state – their state of mind – which allows for deep, instantaneous interaction with other musicians. Since the work of art in the case of 'free improvisation' is both the product of this artistic practice – the physical artifact itself, as well as the process of its creation – the practice of free improvisation itself, we can say that improvisation is both the practice of art as well as the art of practicing.

4. THE DAOIST TURN

Why should we search for the tools for free improvisation in music in Eastern philosophy? To start, one should realize that spontaneous action, instantaneous creation has a long and rich tradition in Chinese artistic culture. Anna Wójcik describes this question with reference to the art of calligraphy: *All activity connected with painting must be rhythmic, correlated with the tempo of the breath, and the next phases are so short that here there is no time for choice, or for a conscious, controlled movement of the hand. In principle, everything takes place instantaneously, as if on its own, meaning 'naturally and spontaneously' and outside any detailed, intentional, directed act, meaning just as it happens: 'a painting or calligraphy must be finished in the time of one breath, ultimately in the time of one act of concentration'*. (Wójcik, 2010, p. 144) In another place we read: *Chinese calligraphy...tells the story of an event which occurred in the life of a specific person – its execution reflects just how he was in a certain moment of his life. Calligraphy is a record of this real event which occurred, and the traces remain after him on the calligraphy paper or silk. We can say that Chinese calligraphy is the art of the document*. (Wójcik, 2010, p. 138) About the art of free improvisation in music we can say the same thing.

Daoism, often known as 'the philosophy of artists', places emphasis on intuitional learning and on spontaneous action. The expressions of Daoism are found in different kinds of art, from calligraphy, painting, garden design, and martial arts. Essentially, in every form of human action one can practice the Daoist strategy of acting. Lack of space does not allow for an exact analysis of the relations between Daoism, its strategy of behavior, and free improvisation. Even though these connections have still not been thoroughly examined – this is merely a project based on the intuitions concerning my artistic activity. But to thoroughly examine the possibilities of adapting the Daoist strategy of action to the act of free improvisation in music, two issues must be explored, which I will discuss below.

During the Tang epoch, in the circles of Confucian scholars – *wenren*, a creative method applied to calligraphy and ink painting developed known as 'free/spontaneous expression'. For years Chinese intellectuals devoted themselves to this practice, creating unusual works of art and treating it as a road to achieving excellence. So wrote the eminent painter Shitao: *Men are tied to artificial rules, which become obstructions and limitations. True method is born in the act of creating and contains no obstruction or limitations*. (Chang, 1970, p. 203)

Let one of the tales about Wu Daozi, legendary master of the paintbrush, be an illustration of the method of 'spontaneous expression': *Emperor Zuanzong commissioned two court painters, Li Sixun and Wu Daozi, to decorate the walls of the Detong palace with paintings depicting mountain landscapes. The task took Li Sixun many months of arduous work. Steered by*

spontaneity and bare inspiration, Wu Daozi approached the wall and began to cover it with brushstrokes, creating in a period of only a few hours a completed, unusually beautiful work. The emperor compared both works and said: 'A multiple month effort by Li Sixun and one day of brushwork by Wu Daozi, each fully achieves his excellence.' (Zemanek, 2007, p. 222)

About 'spontaneous expression' Fu Zai wrote: *Master Zhang...suddenly appeared at the party and in a course voice asked for a piece of raw, white silk, since he desired to show his own eminent skills. The host rose [...] loudly expressing his own approbation. [...] The master sat on the ground with his feet stretched out in front of him, he took a deep breath and began to create in inspiration. The people gathered around him were scared, as if thunder or an air trumpet broke out in the sky. [The hand of the Master] moved briskly, bolting, then again jerking, piercing the air with devastating strength. Ink flying from the brush sprayed everywhere. From the maze of separations and connections emerged a strange shape. When he finished, [what was visible was] a pine tree with cracked bark like fish scales, dangerously steep rocks, craggy cliffs, crystal clear water and clouds. [...] When we look carefully at the work of Master Zhang, we no longer see a painting but a real Tao in and of itself. Whenever he created, it was clear that he rejected all usual painting techniques, because he reached [...] to the deepest mysteries of things. And things exist, not before the eyes or ears, but in the mind.* (Zemanek, 2007, p. 170)

The Daoist roots of 'spontaneous expression' are indisputable. It was born in the circle of Confucian scholars – *wenren*, after acquiring and interpreting the Daoist texts. The final result of this fusion of philosophical schools is known by the name of Neo-Daoism.

The next example of Daoist strategies of action being applied which it is worth focusing on in the context of the subject under discussion is the martial art Tai JiQuan. It is also an expression of Daoism. What is unusually interesting about Tai JiQuan is its method of spontaneous interaction in a group. Tai Ji generally applies principles that allow for efficient movement in unarranged situations with the participation of other individuals. Its effectiveness is based on entering deeply into the relations of the actions of the participants. This situation is illustrated by the classic sentence from the texts of Tai Chi's patriarchs: *When the opponent does not move, I do not move either. When he makes a move in some direction – I am already there.* (Śniegowski, online) In other words, the practitioner of Tai Ji does not know how he will act in any concrete situation until the situation arises, and his decision regarding certain moves are made on the spot, with regard to the development of the situation. Thus, one can say that the Tai Ji's strategy of action lies in the pupil's preparation to solve unpredictable problems. Taking an even closer look, I would risk stating that the posture assumed by a pupil of Tai Ji in a concrete moment of practice/fighting is the archetypal attitude of the improviser. He stands before the unknown and the unpredictable, and his success in action is contingent upon the quality of the relations he enters into with the co-participants. And thus, the tools allowing the student to effectively practice Tai JiQuan can turn out to be useful in the practice of 'free improvisation'.

What is significant is that in both Chinese practices, the key role, methodologically speaking, is played by the state of mind of the practitioner. So says one of the Daoist tomes: *He who is open accepts everything, sees everything. When he is open he is able to accept people. When he is calm he is able to manage the situations.* (Winn, 2006, p. 31) Derek Bailey mentions the telepathic properties of 'free improvisation', whereas the Daoists claim that this is not telepathy (the reading of others' thoughts), but just a specific skill of the mind to achieve a certain state, after which one is able to clearly perceive reality and appropriately react to its development. The masters of Tai Ji say that the mind must perceive everything while concentrating on nothing. The following quote from one of the classic Daoist writings attests to the unusual importance of the state of the mind during creative activity in the Chinese culture: *The ruler Yuan of Song wishing to have a map drawn, the masters of the pencil all came (to undertake the task). Having received his instructions and made their bows, they stood, licking their pencils and preparing their ink. Half their number, however, remained outside. There was one who came late, with an air of indifference, and did not hurry forward. When he had received his instructions and made his bow, he did not keep standing, but proceeded to his shed. The duke sent a man to see him, and there he was, with his upper garment off, sitting cross-legged, and nearly naked. The ruler said, 'He is the man; he is a true draughtsman.'* (Zhuangzi, XXI: 7)

To conclude I want to stress that this paper is only the beginning of a certain path. Free improvisation in music and European art is searching for its own tools, but since many 'improvisers' only concern themselves with copying clichéd sounds, this is happening slowly and often ineffectively. My intuition concerning 'the Daoist turn' is not a solitary voice. Raising the subject at concerts with eminent musicians doing 'improvisation', I have discovered that many of them have for a long time been interested in this subject and some have even taken up the practice of some Daoist arts. Thus, we can say that the European improvisational environment is slowly going down the 'Chinese' path, and that the 'Daoist turn' has already begun.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Rafal Mazur – philosopher, musician

Master of Philosophy, doctoral student in the Faculty of Philosophy of Culture at Jagiellonian University. His research field concerns the reconstruction of the Daoist strategical basis used in the art practices of Wenren, a circle of Confucian philosopher-officials. In addition he is a musician focused on free improvisation in contemporary music. He's main field of interest and activity is collective and solo free/spontaneous improvisation. In his practice as an improvising musician and on his way to mastery/artistry he studies Chinese philosophy (Jagiellonian University). He regards Taoism as a strong base for the enrichment of the improviser's attitude, and to this end he practices the Daoist's martial art TaiJi Quan Chen. For Mazur, following the masters of Chinese philosophy and martial arts is crucial in the development of a state of mind prepared for the unexpected situations an improviser encounters in the act of collective free improvisation.