

***Freedom to misunderstand.  
Free improvisation as collective divination and  
some imperfect parallels with ancient Eastern thought.***

"I don't know why people are so scared of new ideas. It's the old ones that frighten me." This statement by John Cage seems quite appropriate for a truly innovative composer whose greatest contribution to Western music is considered by many to be the personal reflections and philosophical underpinnings of his music, rather than the music itself. It might surprise us, then, that one of his most recurrent compositional strategies—part of his search for ways to compose music without being overly controlled by his own taste and memory—involved recourse to the coin oracle of the *I Ching*. Not only is the *I Ching* very old indeed, it is also one of the greatest repositories of *old* ideas. Please note that any desire on the part of the reader to conflate the adjective *old* with other less-flattering ones such as *outdated*, *obsolete*, or *irrelevant* is theirs alone.

Understanding Cage's recourse to the *I Ching*—at the very least, to its coin oracle—might be easier if we consider what aspects of his art are *not* new, and here we come upon one of the most Confucian elements of the venerable *Book of Changes*: its emphasis on the cultivation of character through the scrupulous and reverent observation of social rites. As scholar Ong Yi-Ping observes, "critics of Confucian thought deplore its overemphasis on duty and hierarchy... Rather than focusing on the human relations themselves, these critics argue, the elaborate system of practices established by Confucianism leads to rigidity and solidifies a social hierarchy."

Cage's goal of removing the composer's taste and memory from the compositional process, and the many ways in which he attempted to do so, actually reflect his unwillingness to abandon one of the oldest ideas of all: that of the individual artist. As we shall see, it is this fundamental position that renders impossible the most natural solution to his goal. To understand this, we must first examine, however briefly, one of the essential tenets of musical meaning.

One might think that musical meaning is conveyed by sound. Such is not the case. Unlike words, sounds themselves do not bear meaning; their significance only emerges from the relations they establish with each other. In other words, a musical sound finds its meaning exclusively in context. This is, of course, an entirely reciprocal process. If a given sound's meaning emerges from the context established by all of the other sounds occurring around it, that sound is equally part of the context that gives meaning to each of the others. This is so much the case that we can recognize a musical work from the relations it establishes, *even when all of the sounds themselves have been changed*. No one would mistake a piano for a violin, a flute or a bass drum, yet anyone conversant with Western classical music will recognize Liszt's transcription of Beethoven's third symphony, the *Eroica*, even though it is for piano. Beethoven's work is written for a symphony orchestra, which has no piano, yet Liszt's transcription is for a grand piano, which has none of the sounds associated with an orchestra. How, then, can we effortlessly recognize these two pieces as being one and the same composition? The answer is that both establish the same relations *among* sounds, even when the sounds themselves are different.

Traditionally, of course, we hear more than those relations, and that is where Cage enters the picture. When someone says something, we receive the meaning of their utterance *but we also* gauge the intentions with which it is said. What is normally unquestioned is the idea that what has been said reflects the speaker's *intentionality*. At risk of redundancy, we could assert that meaning what they said is what gives meaning to it. This, too, is what gives credibility to musical meaning, and both—meaning and credibility—go hand in hand in our experience of music as human utterance.

How, then, are we to understand music made by someone who openly proclaims his efforts to avoid his own taste and memory when composing? In speech, we understand intentionality in terms of what has been said, that is, in terms of meaning. So too, in music we understand intentionality in terms of meaning. If you design a system that allows you to compose without expressing your own taste and memory, where is the meaning that reifies intentionality? In Cage's conundrum, we discover a composer who wants to have his cake and eat it too. Despite his rejection of fundamental qualities identified with the figure of the composer (their taste and memory, among others), he adheres to Western classical music's traditional hierarchy, in which the composer is at the top of a pyramid that places his intentionality (as expressed in the musical score) above all others (those of the conductor, the performers and the audience). This would seem to be coherent with the Confucian defense of social rites and their observation as fundamental elements of character building, but it quickly runs aground on the shoals of *cheng-ming*, the "rectification of names." That is what Ong Yi-Ping defines as Confucius' emphasis on the importance of "knowing and fixing a reliable association between a name and the thing to which it properly refers," especially those names that "inform people of their place in the social hierarchy, and of the way in which they should behave. Thus, a king should be called a "king" only if he acts like one..." In other words, Cage happily accepts his role at the apex of the pyramidal hierarchy of Western classical music yet refuses to exercise the powers (or should we say, responsibilities?) intrinsic to that position. It is hardly surprising, then, that his position there has been the subject of dissension.

Since the mid 1960s, some of the West's most interesting creative musicians have found another way to minimize the presence of their own taste and memories, one that draws on both the *Tao Te Ching* and, in more recent years, the Japanese concept of *Ma*. That "way" is known as "free improvisation" and its fundamentals lie in the concepts of *collective* rather than individual creation, organic rather than predetermined form and, in keeping with its basis in dialogue, a flexible, accommodating and gentle openness to the moment. In chapter 76, the *Tao* tells us:

人之生也柔弱，其死也堅強。  
草木之生也柔脆，其死也枯槁。  
故堅強者死之徒，柔弱者生之徒。  
是以兵強則滅，木強則折，強大居下，柔弱居上。

*When people are born they are gentle and soft.  
At death, they are hard and stiff.  
When plants are alive they are soft and delicate.  
When they die, they wither and dry up.  
Therefore the hard and stiff are followers of death.  
The gentle and soft are the followers of life.*

*Thus, if you are aggressive and stiff, you can't win.  
When a tree is hard enough, it is cut, Therefore  
The hard and big are lesser  
The gentle and soft are greater.*

This approach is elemental for free improvisers, who create in and with the moment and must therefore be fully open to it. In contrast, performers who limit themselves to obeying as accurately as possible notes written in a score by someone who is not a part of this moment, who may already have been dead for several centuries, are part of a hierarchy that imposes the ineluctable stiffness of obedience. Their calling is not to live creatively in and with the moment, but to breath life into the dead. Theirs is the rigidity, and the fate, of the tree that does not bend with the wind.

If we consider free improvisation from a Cagean perspective, we will see that the collective nature of its fundamental poietic process immediately generates the results sought by Cage without need for elaborate chance operations. To understand this, let us first recall our earlier observation: in music, we understand intentionality in terms of musical meaning, and we understand the meaning of musical sounds in terms of the context provided them by all of the other sounds. This is a relatively straightforward process in traditional Western composition because *all of the sounds are determined by a single person*. They may be played by as many as 100 performers (in the case of a Romantic Era symphony orchestra) but they all belong to a single musical score conceived and written by a single human composer. In other words, every sound we hear and identify as part of the music (there may be other sounds in the concert hall, such as coughing, etc. but we do not traditionally identify them as musical) reflects the intentionality of the same person. In the traditional hierarchy of Western classical music, he is the king and he acts as such: *cheng-ming dixit*.

When, however, the creation is collective and dialogical, each musical creator is generating the context for the others. What each one plays owes its meaning to what each of the others plays. There are various aspects to be considered in this regard. First, it is impossible to attribute the meaning of a musical phrase to the person who plays it because, while they are responsible for that phrase, they are neither responsible for, nor able to control the context in which it is heard. Second, none of the musicians can hear *everything* the others are playing, let alone foresee what they are going to be playing when he or she actually plays that phrase. And third, the sum of what all are playing is not being controlled by any of them. In this last sense, we may recall what the three musicians who founded AMM (one of the most famous free improvisations trios of the 1960s) said: while only three were actually playing, they were listening to a quartet. Not only were they following what each of the musicians was playing, they were also listening to the music itself, and this was not so much the sum of what the three were creating as an independent and synergetic voice of its own. The music is the river or sea that runs beneath and receives the valley streams of each individual musician.

This, then, dissolves Cage's dilemma. Improvising with others, a musician may play something that stems directly from his own taste and memory, knowing that the context the others build around it will give it a meaning that could well have nothing to do with what his intentions were when he played it. Cage himself could have achieved this liberation had he been willing to abandon his hierarchical approach to musical creation in favor of a horizontal one built on dialogue with other creators. Of course, the hierarchical position that characterizes Western classical music endows the individual composer with the force to impose his will on everyone beneath him, but as Ong Yi-Ping extracts from her reading of the *Tao Te Ching*, "Force always has a brittle quality: it stands against something, and hence creates an opposition to itself. The character of force makes it susceptible and weaker than what is flexible, accommodating and gentle."

This flexible, accommodating and gentle approach to creative and musical dialogue with other musicians, with the music itself, and with the entire situation in which the music is taking place (the resonance of the venue, extraneous noises such as traffic, ventilation systems, people talking, how one's instrument is behaving, etc.) is, as I understand it, an intrinsic part of what the *Tao* calls *wu-wei*, although here it involves not so much *inaction* as non-opposition. In the case of free improvisation, it begins with an acceptance of the situation in order to make music together, where the aspects that define that situation, rather than constituting something to be overcome, actually act to partially define the music itself. The music is occurring *in that situation, not in spite of it, not independent of it and not in opposition to it*. This is also perfectly linked to the fundamental idea that collective free improvisation stems not from playing, not from *action*, but instead from *listening*, and from *how* we listen. For the free improviser, this listening is not about reacting to what one hears, but rather of flowing with it. This means listening from a place of balance and alignment. In chapter 8, the *Neiye*, or 內業, now considered a precursor to the *Tao Te Ching*, offers instructions for reaching this place in our bodies:

能正能靜、然後能定。  
定心在中、耳目聰明、  
四肢堅固、可以為精舍。  
精也者、氣之精也。  
氣導乃生。生乃思。思乃知。知乃止矣。  
凡心之形、過知失生。

*If you can be aligned and still,  
Only then can you become stable.  
With a stabilized heart-mind at the center,  
With the ears and eyes acute and bright,  
And with the four limbs firm and fixed,  
You can make a lodging place for vital essence.  
The vital essence is the essence of qi.  
When qi is guided, vital essence is generated.  
When it is generated, then there is thinking.  
When there is thinking, then there is knowing.  
When there is knowing, then you should cease.  
Considering the forms of the heart-mind,  
Excessive knowing dissipates vitality*

Here, we may propose that this way of making music as a dialogue *with* a situation, not in spite of it, not independent of it and not in opposition to it, is a way of *knowing* that situation. And if we are willing to accept that one does not make knowledge, but rather perceives it, we can understand how, as AMM first recognized in the mid 1960s, freely and collectively improvised music has a synergetic intentionality that is essentially independent of the musicians. This explains a phenomenon that often surprises beginning improvisers: the end of a piece of collectively improvised music arrives on its own. One simply hears it and stops. No one *makes* an ending; it simply happens because we all recognize that the piece is over. At some point we realize that, through the music we have reached a state of knowing with regard to the situation and it is therefore time to stop. If we continue, we will not learn anything valuable, we will only dissipate the vitality.

Part of this approach to improvising music collectively involves the idea of responsibility and its relation to freedom, and that part is articulated through an attitude to interaction not unlike certain aspects of the Japanese concept of *Ma*, 間. In our brief examination of *Ma*, we will also see that, while not a specifically taoist idea, it is partially encompassed by chapter 11 of that ancient book of wisdom.

三十輻共一轂，當其無，有車之用。  
埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。  
鑿戶牖以為室，當其無，有室之用。  
故有之以為利，無之以為用。

*Thirty spokes join together in the hub.  
It is because of what is not there that the cart is useful.  
Clay is formed into a vessel.  
It is because of its emptiness that the vessel is useful.  
Cut doors and windows to make a room.  
It is because of its emptiness that the room is useful.  
Therefore, what is present is used for profit.*

*But it is in absence that there is usefulness.*

Lao Tzu emphasizes the utility of empty space. A jug is interesting because we can fill the space within. Architecture is useful because we can inhabit the space it defines. Both may be aesthetically appealing, but both are useful for the *absence* they enclose, not for the presence that encloses it.

How does *Ma* enter into this idea, and how do free improvisers engage with it? To begin with, the door that is cut in Lao Tzu's text speaks directly to the kanji symbol for *Ma*, 間, which is a merging of 門, door and 日, Sun, visible within its frame. As Japanese writer Kiyoshi Matsumoto tells us, "*Ma* reminds us that what isn't there provides the ability for everyone's story to coexist. It is the boundaries of space that allow us, and all our ideas, to exist side by side." Therefore, the coexistence of "everyone's story" depends on the space they leave around it when they tell it, and on what they choose *not* to tell. That is how free improvisers make music together. It is also important to understand Matsumoto's use of the term "boundaries". It is easy to grasp the idea that space and absence are fundamental to the existence of ideas which can fill it the way oil fills a jug. It is less obvious, however, that the boundary is *not* what defines the space, it is not the jug or the spokes of the cartwheel. In *Ma*, space *itself* works as a sort of boundary: the space between two things that allows us to distinguish one from the other and thus appreciate each for itself. Free improvisers speak of "playing the silences" because they are just as important as the sounds. Silence is the space where those sounds can exist and it is also the space *around* them, which bounds them like a frame to distinguish and define them. It is this capacity to distinguish that makes it possible to create music collectively. As the *Neiye* says, "only after there is awareness is there form. Only after there is form is there language. Only after there is language is there usefulness."

Among the Navaho, it is considered enormously immature, when conversing, to respond to the other party as soon as they have finished speaking. It is a sign of respect to leave a space in case they have not actually finished and have more to say. Moreover, that pause indicates that one has actually taken the time to consider what has been said before answering. In Japan, this idea is taken one step further, as *Ma* contemplates the importance of grasping the *unsaid*, the meanings that can be transmitted better with silence, through a glance, a hesitation, a deliberate pause. For improvising musicians, much the same occurs. In the 1990s, the originators of a style of free improvisation that came to be known as "Berlin reductionism" began working with silence in a very specific way. Listening with gripping intensity, they would alternate single notes of differing durations with similar periods of silence. What each of them played could not be understood as a single self-sufficient phrase. Instead, their individual sounds and silences combined to create a composite phrase that did not reflect the intentionality of any one of them. Thus, while no single musician was responsible for an entire phrase, and each was playing with complete autonomy, *all of them* were necessary for its generation. Together, they made music as rich in silences as in sounds, music whose continuity was in the listening to all by all, not in the playing. Music whose coherence owes everything and nothing to individual intentionality and is refreshingly free of any sort of hierarchical coercion. This exploration of both *Ma* and *wu-wei* in European improvised music may well be the clearest example yet of a conceptual parallel between Western creation and Eastern thought. It is also a truly fecund example of musical creation as a metaphor for social relations based on listening and dialogue, something we dearly need all over the world.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have drawn a few imperfect parallels between certain aspects of the practice of free improvisation by modern-day European musicians and the values and concepts underlying self-cultivation as proposed in classic Eastern thought. If anything has become clear in this process, it is

that it raises more questions than it answers. Let us begin by asking if there can be any possible relevance to such an undertaking, and if so, what it might be.

It is my firm belief that what artists make is themselves. The artwork, per se, is practically a by-product of a lifelong process of cultivation based partially on the acquisition of knowledge and more so on the refinement of perceptual capacities. Part of this process has to do with the development of one's craft, which may or may not occur through actually making art. Another part has to do with answering questions. That is what artworks do. And part of what makes them magic is that, like dreams, they answer questions we generally do not know we have asked and probably could not express in words. And like dreams, artworks may well provide us with the answer without ever bringing us any closer to knowing what, in fact, the question was. The numinous nature of art is firmly rooted in the disproportionately large part of it that never emerges from the unconscious.

Learning to make art is a lifelong process of honing one's perceptual capacities—not just a musician's capacity to hear, a painter's to see, a sculptor's to touch, but also that *other* listening that channels the workings of the unconscious into the graspable, though often inscrutable realm of the conscious. Western art's uneasy coexistence with the everyday, especially since the mid twentieth century, is largely due to a gradual acceptance, not of how much art is actually everyday but rather of just how deeply everyday experience is rooted in what it is simply beyond our capacity to grasp. As Einstein put it: "the Universe isn't stranger than we imagine; it's stranger than we are even able to imagine."

The late Spanish art historian Carmen Bernárdez once told me that her greatest surprise when she began teaching Art History to students in the School of Fine Arts was that for them, unlike those actually majoring in Art History, all art was contemporary. Some years later, I wandered into her son Jan's studio and found his table stacked with catalogues of paintings by contemporary artist Jenny Saville and Baroque master Rembrandt van Rijn. Jan was refining his capacity to render lifelike skin tones in oils and his chosen models were Saville and Rembrandt, artists separated by over three-and-a-half centuries. The social, economic and aesthetic contexts in which these two painters worked were vastly different, but their capacity to capture and depict the beauty or vicissitudes of human flesh were both equally relevant to Jan. For his purposes at that moment, it was not necessary to understand their art in its historical context; what he needed was to decipher the mysteries of their technique, how they saw skin as light and light as paint. Equally important is the fact that, for his purposes, there was no real difference between understanding and misunderstanding. Neither Saville nor Rembrandt may have agreed with his conclusions about how they painted; if they served his needs, that would be sufficient. To paraphrase twentieth-century French composer Pierre Boulez: "young composers learn their craft by analyzing the work of earlier composers. It matters not at all whether their analyses are correct, as long as they result in interesting music."

So, too, twenty-first century European free improvisers, including the present author, will almost certainly misunderstand the teachings of the *I Ching*, the *Tao Te Ching* or the shorter *Neiye*. In fact, they may actually *need to misunderstand* them in order to gain the insights that make them relevant to our time, our needs as artists and our reasons for reading them. There are aspects of human existence, thought, emotion and perception that have barely changed over the twenty-three centuries since they were written. Still, the social context for which they were intended is, in some ways, in open conflict with the ideals cherished by European free improvisers. The terms, examples and metaphors employed by the *I Ching* and the *Tao Te Ching* clearly depict the social context in which their readers seek to survive and prosper. The former evokes social roles such as "the eldest son", "the youngest daughter" and the "concubine", as well as "the army"; the *latter* speaks of "ruling", of "the people," "government," "the ruler of a large state" and "dominating the people by military force." Are we to assume that today's European society is somehow less hierarchical,

bellicose or confusing to the individual? Not at all. We *can* say, however, that when a free improviser seeks insights in the East's ancient books of wisdom, he hopes to employ them in his efforts to make art in an egalitarian way, as a dialogue among equals and with a minimum of hierarchy and, ideally, a freedom from imposed social roles. Like a handyman who uses a screwdriver to open a can of house paint, he will take phrases intended for one use in one context, grasp them differently, and turn them to his own needs. Such is the relevance of a tradition: it lives as long as it is of use, changing as it must to remain so.

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