

The Dao of Improvisation.

How classical daoist texts could be helpful in the aesthetics of avant-garde art: a reflection on contemporary spontaneous improvised music.

1. Classical Daoist writings and contemporary freely improvised music are distant both in time and space aspect. At first sight they don't seem to have much in common. However, considering extraordinary 'liveliness' of the Daoism classics, its timeliness and openness for innovations characterizing freely improvised actions in music, one can start to notice a space for meeting.

2. The classical Daoist writings include an action strategy; it is a strategy of spontaneous action, based on an intuitive insight into Nature and enabling perception of constant movement, of continual transformation. It does not offer ready-made structures of behaviour that can be used in different sorts of activities, but a certain way of perceiving the world, a way which lets us notice its constantly changing, hence unique form and create appropriate structures of behaviour to particular situations. There is a belief referring to this strategy also in Europe – it's Bergson's conviction of intuitive cognition, as cognition showing the way to the essence of reality, which in our intellectual cognition is perceived with static images. Free/intuitive improvisation, which appeared in Europe in the 60's of the 20th century as a method of artistic creation, freed from the corset of stylistic rules and principles, demands this kind of action strategy.

3. The term 'improvisation' does not have particularly positive connotations in European culture, associating not only with an unprepared action, but also or even more with a chaotic, perfunctory action, resulting in unsatisfactory, superficial effects. In our lives we often encounter such situations as those when someone surprised by the turn of events unskilfully tries to adapt to the situation, using a trick or a quick solution to patch things up. It is said then, a bit patronizingly: 'well, it didn't go too well, but in the end he was improvising'. This saying includes an opinion that improvisation can never result in things as good as the ones resulting from well-planned and prepared actions.

4. I have encountered similar opinions among many musicians who declared unwillingness to improvise, claiming that improvisation, especially free improvisation is associated with high risk; it can work or not work. It follows that improvisation is integrally related to very likely failure in action.

5. On the other hand, paradoxically improvisation, as an action associated with freedom and spontaneity has always been respected and appreciated by artistic circles; it has been, inter alia, expressed in René Daumal's statement: 'You cannot always stay on the summits, you have to come down again'¹. It means you are not an artist all the time, you just happen to be an artist in the moment of authentic creation, that is almost mythically connected with free and spontaneous action, not limited with any rights/rules.

6. That's exactly how the ancient Greeks understood poetry, denying it the right to be an artistic discipline, due to not having rules of action.

7. Freely improvised music and intuitive music, which appeared at the European scene in the 60's of the 20th century, at first seemed to bring improvisation - spontaneous and unrestricted - back from the abyss of stereotype of incompetence, ineffectiveness and amateurishness. There were even artists like Stockhausen or Cardew, who pointed out to the necessity of preparing oneself to playing improvised or intuitive music in their utterances and reflections (Stockhausen used the term 'intuitive music' in the same meaning as Cardew spoke about free improvisation to avoid above-mentioned negative connotations of the term 'improvisation' in culture, and especially in the history of European music; both terms will be used interchangeably throughout this text).

8. Unfortunately their remarks are only expressed intuitions without continuation, that hardly anyone remembers nowadays, even people involved in 'freely improvised music'. In my opinion, this status quo stopped the development of freely improvised music, leading it to become a stylistic idiom, hence to deny its own nature.

9. Forgetting or not continuing creative achievements of above-mentioned artists resulted in 'pattern-based' approach to improvised music, while improvisation itself is certain way of action, not a stylistic. You cannot see improvised music through 'what' to play, but rather through 'how' to play.

1 René Daumal, *Mount Analogue: a novel of symbolically authentic non-Euclidean adventures in mountain climbing*, Boston: Shambhala, 1992.

10. In other words, free and intuitive improvisation is a kind of action strategy and as many artists presumed over the centuries, is in fact an exceptionally effective strategy, allowing extraordinary creative actions, results of which can exceed our expectations (or even go far beyond our ability to understand).

11. But to become aware of it, one has to, firstly, give up the idealistic 'perspective', determining our thinking of the world and of acting in the world, the perspective that European artistic practice was strongly influenced by. Improvisation, in my opinion, is extremely non-idealistic. Secondly, it should be considered a way of action, and a way of action that is not related to any specific stylistic (this particular feature was called 'non-idiomatic' by Derek Bailey).

12. And if it is the way of activity, as every action could be subject to improvement. It is my deep belief, not at all coincide with the tradition. Free improvisation in music demands a new and different from the previous strategy.

13. So far, European thinking of improvisation classified it as a 'whisper of gods' – *furor poeticus* in Platonic tradition, hence an extraordinary state of mind associated with interference of supernatural forces. Another name for this state is inspiration. The problem with improving an inspired action is that inspiration does not depend on us and there is actually not much to improve.

14. In this situation there is no possibility of improvement (or bringing to perfection) of improvising skills. In my opinion, Stockhausen's postulate of 'non-thinking' determining performing intuitive music (my research has shown it could be of Buddhist origin), and Cornelius Cardew's 'improviser's virtue' were conscious steps, taken in the darkness, but leading to the separation of improvisation from the influence of idealism and godly inspiration.

15. For past several years I have devoted my work, both as a philosopher and an improvising musician, to continuation or development of these ideas. It is not a coincidence that I, alike the mentioned predecessors, am using philosophical action strategy coming from the Far East.

16. Searching for philosophical basis of artistic action strategy derives from a deep belief that any human action, including (especially) artistic action, is based on certain *a priori* assumptions regarding the world we happen to live in. In this area philosophical questions are

posed and philosophical answers are given, often in the form of artworks. This is of course about art, hence something that can't be reduced to a play of strictly sensual elements.

17. It seems that improvised music, or in other words, creating music with free improvisation methods could appear in Europe only after the mid-20th century, when the changes in the world's perception offered by science started to spread within social consciousness. The changes, related to the processual thinking of the world and to the belief in non – existence of static objects together with the belief in constant movement in the subatomic world.

Acceptance (or, at least, not radical rejection) of Bergson's thesis on the change being the basis of reality and exploring the experiences of culture, for which *Yiqing -The Book of changes-* is an essential writing, seems just natural in the attempt to formulate a philosophical strategy of free improvisation.

18. There is an action strategy in Daoist philosophy, allowing to act in a very effective way under constantly changing circumstances. On non-arranged conditions, when we don't know the algorithm according to which the situation develops. It is and has been used in different fields of human activity: in everyday works, martial arts etc. It was also a basis of artistic practice of *wenren* circles, artist-philosophers, who treated art as a continuation of their philosophical practice.

19. Shitao (1642-1707) – painter and poet of Qing époque used to call it 'Method without method'. Its main characteristic, was flexibility resulting from the state of mind, allowing to use the strength of Nature, the strength of changes the surrounding reality is subjected to, in the creative process. According to Chinese painting theory the Nature is usually called *zachua*, which literally means 'the creator of changes' and it refers to the Daoist conception of world subjected to continual change, which itself is the only constant element of the universe.

20. The postulates included in the Daoist action strategy meet the expectations for a strategy needed (but not specified yet and maybe even unconscious) for effective practice of free improvisation in contemporary music. The naturalness and spontaneity in action which should actually be an 'action without action' – *weiwuwei*, as well as acting in accordance with one's primordial nature, i.e. being like 'the uncarved block' (*pu*) are supposed to guarantee an action that is effective and appropriate to the circumstances. Everything has to happen just like in Nature, that is *ziran*, which means 'happening all by itself, effortlessly, spontaneously'. This is exactly how freely improvised musical works/pieces emerge. If not, they are not a result of

free improvisation. Therefore, free improvisation requires this kind of action strategy not to become another type of idiomatic improvisation.

21. In classical Daoist writings we find out that the key to the Daoist action strategy is a state of mind called the 'transparent mind' or the 'Sage's mind'. How does such a mind work? In contrast to the structured mind, which does not perceive the reality, but the only the cultural frameworks defining the reality (structures that the culture had framed the reality into, these are usually static structures), the 'transparent mind' can effortlessly see the reality in its continual movement, in its flow. Thanks to that it discerns the development of situation, and even becomes a part of situation. 'When the perfect man employs his mind, it is a mirror. It conducts nothing and anticipates nothing; it responds to (what is before it), but does not retain it. Thus he is able to deal successfully with all things'.² This state of mind in fact specifies all the other postulates, i.e. the possibility of 'action without action', being like 'the uncarved block', adapting to Nature etc.

22. The state of mind called 'Sages's mind – transparent mind' in Daoism is in fact the most important postulate, that an improvising musician/artist should fulfil. Thanks to a peaceful mind, non-concentrating on ideas or memories, an improviser can act 'here and now', which is *de facto* the essential requirement of his activity. In free improvising practice 'transparent mind' is a basic 'tool' for action. According to my research, that was exactly the state of mind Stockhausen meant while postulating that the musicians performing his intuitive scores should attain the state of 'non-thinking'.

23. Only in the 'transparent' state of mind one can follow the development of the situation not contaminated with culture-based structures. In that state of mind one can be aware of the whole surrounding situation, not focusing on its particular elements. It is a specific state of perception, when we perceive (as if we did it unintentionally, without an effort of concentration), all the aspects, all the elements of the situation, and at the same time we remain unfocused on any of them. We can freely react to the development and transformations of the whole, adjusting our action to them.

24. 'Transparent mind' is a mind that is not determined by prepared in advance ready-made solutions and is capable of cooperation with a naturally, spontaneously and unpredictably developing situation. This state of mind allows a spontaneous and adequate reaction to a situation that has never been experienced before. In this state of mind, when we can see the

2 Zhuangzi, ch. VII

movement of reality without the distortions made by our ideas about it, we can overcome our own limitations coming from stubbornly sticking to our strongest beliefs about our abilities and skills.

25. I think that every improviser experienced playing things he had never expected he could play. He had never prepared them and never had thought about them. And yet it happened, we had played something that surprised us and didn't seem to be improvisation, understood as rushed and chaotic putting together more or less matching pieces. In the state of 'transparent mind' all the pieces are created here and now, therefore they fit together like a glove. The one who manages to attain the state of 'transparent mind' in practice is the one that will be able to adjust perfectly to the process of free creation.

26. In *Nanhua Zhenjing* there are numerous stories about people acting so effectively that their deeds are considered 'as if it were the work of spirits'. When Carpenter Qing, having created such a bell stand that 'all who saw it were astonished', explains how he did it, he says: 'necessary to fast in order to compose my mind'³.

27. Because, according to Laozi, only in an appropriate state of mind 'The skilful traveller leaves no traces of his wheels or footsteps; the skilful speaker says nothing that can be found fault with or blamed; the skilful reckoner uses no tallies; the skilful closer needs no bolts or bars, while to open what he has shut will be impossible; the skilful binder uses no strings or knots, while to unloose what he has bound will be impossible.'⁴. Therefore: the one who can play and create music – can dispense with compositions prepared in advance.

28. The 'transparent mind' associates with the ideal of 'blandness', being (as well as the 'Sages's mind') one of the most important and sublime being/acting ideals of the philosophical assumptions of artistic creation. Interestingly, blandness appears also in Derek Bailey's writings on free improvisation, seen as an inalienable attribute of freely improvised music. It means a wide or even the widest range of possibilities, which is not at all equivalent to an overload with options of action, i.e. 'hackneyed patterns/boilerplates'; it means exactly

3 Zhuangzi, ch. XIX

4 Laozi, 27

the state of 'Sages's mind – transparent mind' allowing us to perceive the developing situation – emerging piece of music – and freely take part in its co-creation.

29. Classical Daoist writings are full of descriptions of people actin in such a state of mind and of stories about entering this state of mind before an artistic performance. One of the most famous and most widely quoted is the passage about a painter: '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.'⁵

30. Before starting creative activity, the artist has to enter an appropriate state of mind, allowing him to perceive the surrounding reality in a better and more thorough way.

31. In the state of 'transparent', peaceful mind we can act spontaneously. Spontaneity in action is the simplest action, emerging from the development of situation, from the progress or evolvment of a piece of music. The most important issue in free improvisation is not to start improvising with any ideas about what is going to be improvised, that is what could the piece sound like at the end of the process or about what and how I am going to play. In other words, you can't prepare any musical material that could be used during the process.

32. Collective free improvisation not emerging from the 'language' side, i.e. from musical materials prepared in advance (prepared both as sound phenomena, that is well-rehearsed 'licks'⁶- hackneyed phrases- , and as 'ideas' only) is created by the simplest means, resulting from the development of situation, hence suiting it best at the same time. Consequently, we could say that the situation determines itself and establishes itself, i.e. the piece creates itself, which is of course a metaphor, but it captures the essence of this kind of action. To put it

5 Zhuangzi, ch. XXI

6 *lick* in Jazz Slang: a pre-fixed musical phrase, used by a soloist in improvising

simply, none of the artists involved in free creation/ collective improvisation leads the ensemble, shows the direction of the situation development or 'conducts' the ensemble's play, but only reacts to the occurring changes.

33. If we call 'an actio' preparing and realisation of certain ideas (dividing conception from its realisation, in European way), then freely improvising musicians 'don't act', because all the sounds they produce are created 'here and now' in a particular concert situation. They just have to be extremely attentive and vigilant to perceive the entity of situation, the whole emerging piece of music and to react with sound in real time to the development of situation. *Weiwuwei* - 'action without action'- is a philosophical conception corresponding to this kind of action. Applying this strategy we can do things that seem impossible to achieve. In classical Daoist writings we can find guidelines on *weiwuwei*. As Laozi says: 'to sees in every direction; to know how to not doing'⁷, and Wang Bi comments it in the following way: 'When you can see clearly how things are in the world (...) then everyone and everything is actually changing'.

34. Zhuangzi says: 'Confucius was looking at the cataract near the gorge of Lu, which fell a height of 240 cubits, and the spray of which floated a distance of forty li, (producing a turbulence) in which no tortoise, gavia, fish, or turtle could play. He saw, however, an old man swimming about in it, as if he had sustained some great calamity, and wished to end his life. Confucius made his disciples hasten along the stream to rescue the man; and by the time they had gone several hundred paces, he was walking along singing, with his hair dishevelled, and enjoying himself at the foot of the embankment. Confucius followed and asked him, saying, "I thought you were a sprite; but, when I look closely at you, I see that you are a man. Let me ask if you have any particular way of treading the water." The man said, "No, I have no particular way. (...) I enter and go down with the water in the very centre of its whirl, and come up again with it when it whirls the other way. I follow the way of the water, and do nothing contrary to it of myself - this is how I tread it."⁸

35. That's what an improviser is – a swimmer, and the sounds are the water. 'Action without action' is the kind of activity that allows to act under unpredictable circumstances, exclusively

⁷ Laozi, 10

⁸ Zhuangzi, ch. XIX

on the basis of ability to enter into relationships with others and to creatively adapt to the environment. You can act this way only with a peaceful mind, and then 'Its firmest virtue seems but poor and low'.⁹ Freely improvised music is comparable to art of sword fighting, like in the saying: 'The most dangerous blows are light as a feather and come effortlessly'. Acting in the state of transparent mind enables effective activity, appropriate to the unique situation in which improvisers participate.

36. During free improvisation all the clichéd patterns of action, as well as the clichéd opinions evaluating ways of action, only disturb free creation. While we practicing free creation/improvisation we go back to the sources of creative behaviours. We do not follow the well-trodden paths of musical styles developed over the centuries, but we freely use all the possible ways of producing the sound that our instruments are offering to us. With no pre-fixed ideas or arrangements for 'how to' or 'what should it be like'. We are a part of the developing situation's nature. It is not so much that we participate in it, but we actually become the situation, so we cannot make a wrong move/sound, because all the moves/sounds we make spontaneously are a part of the emerging piece of music. Each and every reaction, each sound we produce perfectly adjust to the developing situation, because it's created by this situation. We do not perform it from outside, it comes from the depths of the emerging piece's nature. An improviser is perfectly adapted to the circumstances, to the transformation of the situation he's involved in. 'To be unthought of by the foot that wears it is the fitness of a shoe; When one's wisdom does not think of the right or the wrong (of a question under discussion), that shows the suitability of the mind (for the question).'¹⁰

37. The action strategy we can find in the classical Daoist writings was applied to the artistic activity of *wenren* circle, in the concept of performativity of art related to the *qi* flow (*qiyun shendong*) and it influenced it the creation of the ideal of *fengliu* - Chinese artist- eccentric. It was also applied to martial arts, in which the rule of flexibility, applicable only in the state of 'transparent mind' became crucial, both in the strategies for waging war with an army, and in the martial arts practice such as Taijiquan. An intuitive insight into reality makes us adapt to the situation, like the water to the dish, and yet 'There is nothing in the world more soft and weak than water, and yet for attacking things that are firm and strong there is nothing that can

9 Laozi, 41

10 Zhuangzi, ch. XIX

take precedence of it; - for there is nothing (so effectual) for which it can be changed. Every one in the world knows that the soft overcomes the hard, and the weak the strong, but no one is able to carry it out in practice'.¹¹ These words were written by Laozi 2500 years ago. I think it's time to learn them.

38. Above-mentioned remarks regarding the action strategy we can find in the classical Daoist writings and its adaptation to the practice of free intuitive improvisation in contemporary music are a kind of 'work in progress report'. Both as a philosopher and as an artist I am investigating the strategy of action in the state of 'transparent mind', 'action without action' and its applicability to my own artistic practice as a musician-improviser. Nevertheless, each time I present this idea, my fellow musicians show a great interest in it and after a while I get a message that many of them started reading Laozi or Zhuangzi.

11 Laozi, 78