

Wachowski, Witold

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The Road Interview with Bartłomiej Brat Oleś⁵⁸

Witold Wachowski

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translated by Luiza Kotys

Many words (of varying quality) have been said about music. Have you ever been annoyed by such questions as: “What is jazz?”, “What do you feel when you play?”, “What is the spiritual dimension of improvisation? – or maybe this hasn’t yet affected you that much?

Such questions do not bother me at all. People who need that kind of classification and musical labels have always been intrigued by how music comes into being, what it means for musicians who perform, what they feel while creating it. That’s why such, sometimes provocative, questions are asked and one shouldn’t be irritated about that. They concern, not necessarily intentionally, the issue of expressing oneself through music, which is not as easy and popular as it may seem among musicians, especially the younger ones and those thoroughly educated. In order for the artist to be able to answer these questions, a process is needed, a process that is inseparably connected with doubts concerning one’s chosen way, the universality of what one does etc. In my opinion, the essence of improvisation lies precisely in expressing oneself through music, but to achieve that, one needs to achieve a high level of musical awareness, not only concerning style and the instrument, but also mental awareness. Sure, it’s easier to gain applause while using borrowings of the language that had already been created by someone famous and accepted by the community, musicians and listeners.

Are you one of these artists who get nervous because of reviews? Is it a question of personality – or of getting used to it, keeping yourself between the enthusiasm of the “fans” (who appear not only in rock music) and the precision of music critics?

If the review is a stupid, amateur scribble, the only thing to do is wring one’s hands. Unfortunately, there is less and less decent jazz criticism in our country. It’s easy to write about recognized and stereotypical things, whether it’s mainstream or the so-called avant-garde. We’ll find hundreds of identical “lukewarm” recordings in both stylistics. There’s no risk here. Risk is connected with writing about things that seek their own style, things on the border of different stylistics, running away from com-

⁵⁸ http://oles-oles.com/BBO_english

mon standards; sometimes one review may bare the whole truth about the writer. Admittedly, a new Internet tendency may be observed – blogs, where the authors express their opinions about albums and concerts or simply share the information about what they have been listening to recently or what they consider interesting, but that does not have much to do with professional criticism. However, it is a very valuable phenomenon, because it leads to an unstoppable exchange of information between people who are interested in that particular subject, who buy CDs and listen to music.

Your musical biography includes among others rock music. What do you feel about the rock today? On the other hand: have you been treated as a musical deserter? However it doesn't have to be a rule (we are familiar with jazz-rock and other fusions).

Rock is where my musical path started; I played with my “backyard” mates, with whom I haven't had any contact for a long time, I don't even run into them on the street. However, my first official recording was with a blues band, not a rock band. I never considered myself a full-time rocker. In those years I was more interested in just playing – it didn't matter what. The phase of being a musician who will play some rock in Jarocin, blues and everything that is needed where it is needed is far behind me. By the way, I do listen to rock sometimes: to Bruce Springsteen, Robert Plant, Pink Floyd or Tangerine Dream, but mostly older recordings. My Vinnie Colaiuta fascination drained off while I was getting older, but a part of his is still somewhere inside me for sure. Rock does not correspond with my musical sensitivity, wild guitars wind me up. There's no betrayal of ideals involved, because my approach was rather youthful.

To what extent was your way to professionalism professional, strewn with diplomas? Here comes again the question of "professionalism" and "education" in the context of jazz and music of jazz-like provenance.

My road to professionalism was somewhat rocky. I graduated from musical schools with classical profiles: marimba, vibraphone, timpani; they were my musical daily bread, and none of these instruments was the one to make me feel comfortable as a musician. The profession of a musician was not really respected in my house. My father, admittedly, was a conductor, but jazz??? I put my first drums together all by myself, I made the handles using a tap and pucks with the help of my friend's father who was a turner and made some elements for me, which helped me assemble everything. When I was 17 I recorded my first album with a group called Blustro Blues Band and that's how it started. I remember listening to Charlie Parker for the first time – I was stunned, jazz came in. I practiced like crazy 11 hours a day, because I knew that if I wanted to play jazz, I had to know the instrument from inside out. There were many hours of rehearsals and many various projects when finally the first recordings with Custom Trio, Andrzej Przybielski and Adam Pierończyk appeared, as well as the reviews and my presence on the musical market.

Professionalism, in a universal sense is, in my opinion, a sincere and in-depth approach to what you do. Everything depends on your attitude and what you want to achieve. You simply have to know the basics, it's indisputable. Naturally, schools help, but they won't teach you creativity if you don't have it already. It's enough to list four names: Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Bill Evans. Each and every one of them would be an amateur without a diploma in today's academic categories, but they were the ones who changed music. As I observe the development of music, not only jazz, I notice an even bigger drop in creativity and originality. It's a great paradox – although we've got more and more well-educated musicians, there's less and less creativity in music.



On the Internet, there is a pleasant video of you, Marcin and Mikołaj Trzaska performing “portably” on the street. On the other hand - you knock out your audience with such a project as "Contemporary Quartet". Would you like to maintain this wide artistic breath, from a contemporary troubadour to the Warsaw Autumn atmosphere? Or maybe the right course of the development is from the former towards the latter, and someone who has been permanently introduced to the musical high society loses the authenticity of a street musician?

This, as you called it, “charming movie”, was a single incident on the artistic level of Mikołaj Trzaska. Because of this, an album was made, together with a short movie interlude, and they didn't mean a thing to me and they didn't mean a thing to all the serious projects I'm involved with on a daily basis, like Contemporary Quartet, Chamber Quintet, Oleś Duo and many more. I'd like to be identified with them. The street performance with Trzaska may be called an ‘artistic breath of air’ or an exception to the rule, as I've never performed on the streets. However, one thing remains the same – no matter where I play, I always try to preserve my musical authenticity.

Philharmonic background of the "Contemporary Quartet", musical precision on "Mikro Muzik"... would you consider playing Webern? Or if not something by him - it is just my subjective reference - then maybe something by one of the other punctual, terribly meticulous composers - watchmakers, operating on a microscale and on the verge of silence. Would you take such or similar projects into consideration?

Such projects are in the past. There's no use in entering the same river twice, you have to move forward.

But at the same time there is the temptation of a jazz rebellion, Brötzmann-like powers, liberated improvisation and romantic, rebellious faith in world-changing art. To what extent do you identify yourself with these ideas? I'm not expecting a black-or-white answer; I'm rather trying to bring out more than one layer of your musical personality.

Brötzmann's ideals are completely foreign to me, no matter of the perspective they are considered in: rock, jazz or philharmonic. Such music is of no interest to me, I seek my own artistic path. I've never tried to start musical revolutions, but rather to find a way to develop my composing and instrumental individuality. I consider Peter Brötzmann to be the musical equivalent of Pollock; no one in the world of the so-called arts will paint the way he did, because it would be a great mishap, however, as we can see, in the world of free jazz Brötzmann's epigones are doing quite well. There are even Polish departments opening, the question is: what for? Speaking of believing in art that changes the world – if it was possible, the world after Bach should have become an idyll.

And what exactly is new music or a "novelty in music"? Are the Oleś brothers' albums new music?

Are Trane's recordings already "old" music?

This distinction is a bit artificial and, in my opinion, wrong. Music can be divided into two categories: good and bad. The first one is also original by its nature. Looking for novelties in music is a waste of time nowadays, unless we assume that new music is music that is being made now. Trane's music, despite its age and the number of copycats of his great talent, hasn't aged a day, because you simply can't copy his spirituality. It's not the sounds everyone can play that constitute the essence of music; the essence of music is the meaning the sounds convey. If our music stirs up emotions and the listeners find original things in it, then it's very nice, no matter if someone calls my music old or new. The path is the most important thing for me. The process of my continuous development as a composer, but mainly as an instrumentalist, is in the foreground. In this way it will never end, because I'll never stop developing, my music evolves constantly and softly, one can say – it becomes more seasoned.

What do you think about the following, supposedly most popular procedure of practising one's skills of improvisation: [1] analyzing harmony, [2] selecting "scales" and chord sounds, [3] reorganizing "licks", that is, the practised phrases or their fragments, with reference to the rhythm used, and finally: [4] constructing a form that creates tension.

This is a very proper academic analysis, very useful in terms of education, because it's worth knowing what's played in a piece. There's only one question: will you introduce it as a rule or will you really improvise? Being a true improvisational musician requires three stages of development: imitation, simulation and innovation. The last stage is the most difficult and not every musician cares enough to achieve it. The majority is satisfied with the first stage. It's easier to be applauded and accepted then. To really improvise, you need to listen to the musicians you play with and to what's going on around you, and have enough executive freedom to react to it creatively, creating musical dramaturgy together.



You have worked with various, sometimes outstanding musicians. What has made the cooperation easier: their technical skills perfectly corresponding to your needs, or a compatibility of characters, personalities, views - the musical cooperation being, in a way, an effect thereof?

Every person has a different wealth of experience and comprehends music in a different way; therefore, it's hard to demand that we understand each other at the same level. There's no rule, although technical skill always helps; however, to be open-minded is of great importance. While working together with all possible kinds of individualities, the musical effect is always a result of the contact of personalities. Sometimes the artistic process is easy, because the artist, whom I sometimes know only from his/her recordings, finds him-/ herself perfectly in my music and can develop it by bringing his/her personality into it. Sometimes you need some way to do it, a longer moment, a discussion – sometimes about non-musical subjects in order to make things work, although until now I haven't had many problems with it. When you invite an artist consciously, there are no disappointments. The most vital thing is – you need to know how to listen to each other and this rule applies to everyone.

What is the role of the audience in your development as a musician? Would you say that it cooperates with the musician in some way during the concert, for instance, during the entirely improvised parts of performed music? I ask about it time and again, because the answer doesn't seem so obvious to me.

The audience is very significant; if it is sensitive and listens closely – it receives more, if not – one has to fight for the audience, but sometimes it's not even worth trying and you just have to do everything as well as you can. The audience is always a part of a concert, it's one of the musicians taking part in the performance. People prove their interest in what we do by buying CDs and therefore they give sense to our actions. It's even more valuable because, as it's commonly known, jazz is not a very popular kind of music.

You have created music for theatre and film. What kind of experience is it? Can it be defined simply as "illustrating" or "accompaniment" – or is it a quite different work?

Composing does not differ much from writing music as such. The only difference lies in convincing a director or a producer that this particular composition really fits a certain scene [laughter]. Everything hinges on the sensitivity, openness and flexibility of the person who orders the music. Sometimes the music is illustrative, sometimes it accompanies a scene. Writing theatrical and film music is usually done on commission and it does not differ much from performing services. A hairdresser does a customer's hair the way the customer wants it, and may stumble upon a wish to curl hair on a bald head.

You have played different instruments; finally we know you as a drummer. How much do you feel connected with the instrument(s)? Or more radical, does the sound of percussion is the one that you dream of or that you think?

The percussion is one of the most important things in my life, I jokingly say that percussion is my lover. The amount of time I have spent with it is impossible to measure; even these days I try to practice 3 or 4 hours a day. I'm constantly changing something, no matter whether it concerns the technique or the instrument itself. Seriously, to play music professionally, one has to feel one's instrument; if they don't feel it, they can't play it well. The percussion gives me the freedom to express myself and is a medium through which I tell my stories. However, I compose on the piano, even though I would never appear playing it in public.

You have intrigued me. Why piano? Is it a matter of personal preferences or specific characteristics of the instrument, of the sound ...?

The piano simply is the most comfortable instrument to do it. If I had absolute pitch, I probably could do without it, but as I don't, I need an instrument that allows me to check the melodies, gamuts or harmonic solutions. It's nothing unusual; many composers use the piano to create music.

Could you briefly describe us your instrument? I mean a set of elements, brand, durability etc. Is there any set of drums typical for improvised music, jazz ...?

For the last fifteen years I've been using Yamaha Maple Custom with the following dimensions: bass drum 18"x14", toms 10"x8", 12"x8", 14"x10", snare drum 14"x4". Cymbals are by Zildjian and I've been assembling them for about twenty years – right now I'm using the following configuration of trays: 22" K Constantinople Thin High Ride, 22" K Constantinople Overhemmered Thin Ride, 20" K Light Flat Ride, 18" K Constantinople Crash, 19" K Custom Dark China, 13" K Constantinople Hi Hat and 9" Oriental Trash Splash , 8" ZBT/ZHT Splash Hi-Hat. The drumheads are by Remo Ambassador Coated, drumsticks are by Oisca4Drums with my signature, and they have quite recently made a new model for me, but this time it's made from hickory. The change of technique brought with itself the need to change the shape of the drumstick and the kind of the wood it's made from. Hickory is heavier and less springy than maple I'd used before; it's easier to control it in one's hand and it gives my music more calmness and a much deeper sound. I use Yamaha hardware.

The Maple Custom model is an extremely comfortable instrument in terms of size and arrangement. After many years I have completed the instrument of my dreams that works well both in the studio and on different kinds of stages; it allows my music to develop and evolve constantly.

Patrizia Bovi from Ensemble Micrologus says that projecting one's own personality on purpose is an inappropriate approach; it is better to set yourself in the position of the servant of music (although her recordings don't show any gentle humility or colourless conservatoire spirit; they are full-blooded and full of character). And what is your opinion on the boundaries of the expansion of the performer's personality?

Unfortunately, I know neither Patrizia nor her band. Everything depends on whether you play your own music or music composed by someone else. Sometimes the composer or leader of a band invites a certain artist because of their sound, expression. This opinion is more useful in case of the so-called classical music, where most of the written parts have an exactly defined way of being performed, unless the composer wishes to change it. The performer is just a tool. In jazz, the individuality of the performer is crucial. Personally, I believe that expression must always be subordinated to the performed composition, but with preserving artist's sensitivity. It's always good to tell a story. It's the idea for an interpretation that causes music to live and allows us to play it endlessly in so many ways.

How much did the profession of a musician and composer influence your personality and the organisation of your private life up till now? In the sense of restrictions, giving things up, your needs, your lifestyle.

It's a tough issue. If you want to be a musician and to live from making music, you have no other choice but to subordinate your life to music and all the limits bound with it, and it changes a lot. I try to live quite normally, to the extent the financial and organizational reality of this profession allows me. Generally, you should apply survival skills. The amount of offers that you get may be counted on the fingers of one hand. I'd like to leave the question of limitations and what you have to give up unsaid. Self-discipline and working rhythm are important.. Practising, composing and analysing music comprise my everyday life.

In your opinion, do our country's realities regarding the functioning of musical life still leave much to be desired, or has this already changed over the last years?

Sometimes it's hard to keep one's dignity while speaking with people who manage the money spent on culture in our country. All they see is the tip of the iceberg, and our profession comprises years of hard, continuous work. The only thing that has changed is that we have ever more musicians who play better and better for less money or do not play at all. The market has divided itself into those who play for pitiable rates and celebrities. Poland becomes a great musical backwoods. It's not easy to think hopefully about new projects, albums and further development.

What have you been listening to recently?

I don't listen to music only for pleasure, it's just one of the aspects. I try to be abreast of what's happening on the market and, accordingly, I sometimes listen to different things once. While listening, I analyze the albums from musical and instrumental angles. There's no use in listing all the albums I've recently listened to. But if you ask me which album has made the biggest impression on me, then I'll tell you. So... which one?

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Joe Henderson – *Power to the people*; Kenny Werner – *Baloons*; Thomas Savy – *French suite*; Jacaszek – *Glimmer*; Branford Marsalis – *Four MFs Playin' Tunes*.

Photos: BlankaTomaszewska & Grzegorz Domagała