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Music is You Interview with Marcin Oleś⁵⁷

Witold Wachowski

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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?

I have been asking myself these questions for as long as I can remember and I keep doing it constantly, even though they annoy me, because I’m unable to answer them. I think that if the average musician’s nature was more reflective, we would be dealing with different music, that is, we would be surrounded by different music (for in the times we live in people are surrounded by music, which is historically quite unusual). The thing about music, as one of the arts, is that it can change our disposition or broadly understood mood. It is a great responsibility, but also a possibility for manipulation (personally, I regard music as the art most exploited for the purpose of manipulating people, followed by photography, movie, theatre...) Among the questions you have asked, there is only one of a different kind, because what you feel when you play is irrelevant for the perceived spiritual dimension of music, and all the more for the answer to the question what jazz, music or improvisation is.

I’ll be more specific: I took “what do you feel when you play?” from among the questions which musicians tend to answer: “Dude, it is mysticism,” “It is a connection with the Absolute,” “I leave my body,” etc. The boundary between the conscious and the intuitive in music – do you think it’s worth researching at all?

This question supports the idea of the spiritual aspect of music, which in fact can, and should, be challenged. For, assuming that we are dealing with a musician, thus, a person who practises playing an instrument almost daily (this is an aspect we don’t have in mind asking such questions), we would have to ask if this facet appears also in this daily routine. And if not, then maybe the *connection with the Absolute*, or the *mysticism* you’ve just mentioned are merely illusions accompanying public performances, thus, the illusory force/aspect of music? I’m not trying to say that such feelings cannot appear – I have frequently experienced them myself, so I know that a *spiritual elation*

⁵⁷ <http://oles-oles.com/mArco>

doesn't have to be spiritual on the recording, and the other way round: something which seemed to be inferior turns out to be spiritually elating to the listener. Try going to the philharmonic and looking at the musicians: do they all seem to be equally *spiritually elated*? Besides, the boundary between the conscious and the intuitive is a process rather than a state, which is why it can't be easily defined. What I mean is that without the conscious we cannot reach for the intuitive – let's imagine a musician who hears a phrase, but is unable to transfer it onto the instrument, or the other way round - a musician who is able to play any phrase, but none comes to his mind, so he plays those clichés. Well, technical skills can get in the way instead of helping just as their absence, and intuition, although it's a seal of every artist's authenticity, evades being methodically captured.

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?

Increasingly, reviews are the opinions of people who have decided to review, share their attitude to what they have heard, or to put it bluntly - to make public their sense of good taste or lack thereof. I don't take musical criticism like that, I don't want to be reviewed like that and this shouldn't shape public opinion. But it is like that and there is no way to fight it, although it's possible to learn to resist it. The paradox is that it is increasingly difficult to review on merits, and at the same time more and more people take part in this discourse, which is so elusive both in terms of intellectual concepts, and of intuitive judgment. Besides, fewer and fewer people are able to impart a wider view and increasingly frequently we have to deal with the specialists in the field of a given genre, which is absurd inasmuch that the history of the given "genre" is sometimes 20 years.

If not the reviewers, then maybe scientists would make better verifiers? I will ask a question most artists find annoying: would you let your brain be scanned as a part of neurological studies on meditation?

A good reviewer is probably someone who has a very good theoretical knowledge to which he/she ought to resort, as scientists do. Without it, it is impossible to show the continuity of music, point out the instances of imitation and epigonism, but also bring out the substantive, strictly musical issues. Brain scanning will not help here, as it is unable to describe a piece of music, it can only indicate what parts of the brain take part in its creation. This kind of research will not cause any revival of criticism, but it can explain the mechanisms by which our bodies function, and maybe in the future it will prove useful for the development of the individual and in everyday life.

You are an author of a blog where you present interesting and structured reflections on music and its background. Once, looking through it, I thought: "Well, I'm jealous, some of these remarks could be expanded upon and appear in AVANT." At the beginning of March you posted an entry concerning the ethics of an improviser... Without going into self-evaluation - could you tell me if you regard extended self-reflection and knowledge as necessary elements of the musician's maturity and professionalism? On the other hand, there is an opinion that a good musician is some kind of a joyful performing beast, operating with hands and heart, to whom thinking can be simply harmful.

This question is similar in its nature to that from the beginning of our interview; nonetheless, it emphasises a slightly different aspect. For while the musical, aesthetic and technical consciousness are, in my view, fundamental (I mean all of them, not one of them treated selectively), self-reflection is an additional, and a not-at-all essential, quality. You can unreflectively become an esteemed and popular artist, but I am not sure if you would also be an exceptional one. This is because self-reflection is the search for your own self, your place and role, which often gets in the way of staying naive. While musicians can be joyful beasts, I would rather opt for alpha individuals who can present values to others and set the directions.

To what extent was your and your brother's 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 musical adventure consists rather in transposing family traditions, absorbing, in childhood, sounds played live and being an apprentice of the masters. In this sense I can say that my way to professionalism was professional, but rather in the historical, pre-academic sense of this word. My official musical education ended after four years, excluding the musical studies at the pedagogical faculty. The music secondary school which I started to attend disappointed me greatly, so I quit it and decided to learn on my own. I am by no means convinced that it is the most appropriate form of education; similarly, I think that it is difficult to develop harmonically within the treadmill of the music education system. Schools put an emphasis on preparing the musicians for working at philharmonics, or – in the case of the most talented - for solo careers. Self-teaching, on the other hand, imposes a narrow specialisation, which is also disadvantageous. I think that being a musician should be considered as constant, incessant development and this is what schools should prepare their students for.

On the Internet, there is a pleasant video of you, Bartłomiej 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?

What for me is the most beautiful in music is its unlimited richness, not just a selected one of its aspects - although, of course, as a musician I explore this richness through selected aspects. From my perspective, a wide artistic breath guarantees development and retaining freshness, provided, of course, that there is the "inhale-exhale" awareness, namely, the awareness of that from which you draw and of that which can stem from it. I think everyone has their own story, but it is worth remembering that until the 20th century being a musician and a busker were two sides of the same coin. It was only Arnold Schönberg who called for *abandoning the futile attempts of drawing attention to oneself and stopping dreaming of mutual happiness of the audience and the musician*. American jazzmen, in turn, brought this buskery back into favour, and, as a performing musician, I am primarily interested in a consolidation of these, as it could seem, contrary approaches, which, actually, should never be separated.

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?

It has been ten years since these projects, and I haven't played anything by Webern in this time, although I greatly appreciate his music. On the other hand, many fragments of music I have played took place on the verge of silence, and although they were not punctual by definition, they were in some sense inspired by punctualism. But what I observe goes beyond the music, and even though I would like to perform various types of music, both Bach and Webern, my employment prevents me from doing in the near future.

But at the same time there is the temptation of a jazz rebellion, Broetzmann-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.

In my view, the time of rebellion is over and in our times these rebellions are, in a way, melancholic journeys inspired by the past and by the values which may have shaped the new world and after which we long, but which, at the same time, have already served their historical purpose. This longing prevents us from reflecting on the present and its possible contribution: the musicians, lingering in the past, dress up as the old-time masters as if they were theatre actors, enact their roles, and we - the spectators - are being subjected to an illusion. The difference is that in the theatre the illusion is conventional, while in music it tends to be forgotten. I am not comfortable with this movement, I challenge the point of its existence in our times and I cannot appreciate its value, just as I find remaining in the jazz mainstream pointless - moreover, I equate these two phenomena.

The three forbidden questions would be: what is the essence of music, jazz, improvisation. Let me tease you a bit: could you answer any of these questions by negation? That is, for example: what improvisation definitely isn't, although it is mistakenly described as such.

In my opinion, the questions you named as forbidden should be considered basic for anyone who wants to present their music to others. For it is much easier to answer a question of what music is not, than what it is, what I want it to be and what it should be in the context of who I am in the times it has come for me to live in. Certainly, improvisation is not something ready-made, but it also isn't something random (it's as if you were ready for something that is going to happen to you, but you didn't know exactly what it is). Improvisation is not something you can be indifferent to, but you also cannot become attached to it. Improvisation is not something that comes reluctantly, but it's also not something easy or unreflective. Improvisation is not superficial, but also not pretentious. Improvisation is not unwitting, but it is also not fully subordinate, or even conscious. Neither is improvisation a display of skills, nor is it possible without having them. Like music, it isn't conventional, but it is impossible without any conventions. It is not a science, but it cannot be achieved without science. It is not only intuition, but it is unattainable without intuition. And so on...



photos: © Marta Eloy Cichocka

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

Are Trane's recording already “old” music?

In my view, new music is everlasting. It is able to capture the ideas of the period and its most vibrant elements, so I think that the so-called new music never ages - but only provided that it contributes something important to the musical discourse. That's why the music of artists such as Coltrane always retains an aspect of freshness, which cannot be said about the music of the imitators and followers of the aforementioned Brötzmann. The attempts at transferring phenomena and emotions over time are like commercial photography, which draws from the great artists' works or decorative painting, which can draw on the style of Jackson Pollock, but nothing more. There is no added value or an air of authenticity, at best, there is only fascination. Of course we could cling to the statement that the best music is the sixties' jazz or European free improv, and so on, but it leads to the wilderness of epigonism and mindless mimicry. Most frequently, the music which stems from fascination can at most impress us with its technicality or stimulate our ego, but the more fascination there is in it, the less authentic search for value and personal input can be found.

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.

I'm not sure if it is the most popular method, but I can surely say that it concerns only a fragment of the issue that is improvisation. We can speak about such a, as you called it, procedure in the case of working on compositions in which improvisation is supposed to be stretched over their harmonic structure, and we must remember that harmony is just one of the elements of music. It's impossible then not to know it [this procedure], or not to refer to it during improvisation. At a certain stage of the improviser's musical development, the analysis of harmonies, scales, and chords is (from my perspective) essential. But this is a basis on which professional musicianship – apart from being an underperformer – cannot be built. For me, it is the most important and the most difficult to develop your own language, which is the resultant of all acquired skills, aesthetic taste and musical reliability, by which I mean the knowledge of the genre's development and musical awareness. Improvisation according to harmony is, at a certain stage, much easier than a substantial improvisation based only on the melody, tone colour, or texture of the composition (by substantial improvisation I understand such an improvisation listening to which one cannot distinguish if the musician improvises, plays the theme, or performs a part which was written down earlier).

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?

There are different reasons to create music and, as the listeners, we never know what these could have been. Although I think that a well-tuned band needs a certain emotional bond, it is often a result of playing together and achieving common goals. It is possible only when the musicians are at a similar stage of development, or when a group of similarly thinking friends gathers and tackles music. The best option is, of course, when we deal with brilliant musicians as well as with similarly vibrating personalities, but this is not essential, nor does it guarantee anything.

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.

For a musician, the audience is a mirror and I perceive it exactly as such. Admittedly, I look at this phenomenon from two different perspectives: as a broad, impersonal, general concept of an audience and as the particular group of people present at the concert. I don't think the audience cooperates, I'd rather say that it either helps or not, sometimes even disturbs, so I regard it as another member of the band in a sense. It is, however, important for an experienced musician not to let the quality of his performance be determined by the present audience. On the other hand, in the wide, potential perspective you cannot help thinking of the audience for which you make your music – though it is important to balance what you want to give against what others want, can, and expect to get.

Once, in an interview with Andrzej Grabowski, your answer to the question about your double bass was: "(...) I'm very happy with it, because it's been designed to suit my needs and I "fraternize" with it every day. I would like to have the opportunity to play a fine, masterfully crafted instrument one day, but it's not exactly on my wish list." What do you think about it now? And could you tell our readers something more about the double bass as its master: what are the differences in the quality of each particular copy of this instrument, what is the lifespan of its parts, are there any dangers of using them, especially in an unconventional way (if we can talk about such)...

Unlike any other string instrument, the double bass has undergone a significant metamorphosis in the 20th century, becoming a virtuoso instrument. It poses a serious challenge to the luthiers as well as to the musicians, because people who wrote music having the older types of the instrument in mind didn't even anticipate this kind of development. Undoubtedly a hundred years ago nobody expected that in the 20th century double bass jazz players would pluck the strings rather than use a bow. The need

to use both of those techniques has led to contradictory demands concerning the instrument's features. On the one hand you need a heavy, dark sound with a strong, definite attack for the pizzicato technique, but then, open, bright and rather light sound is preferable when playing with a bow. There are no such basses among the historical instruments, because there was no such need. Even now most musicians specialise only in one of these techniques. Nowadays basses like that are made by a few masters around the world and their prices can reach up to thirty thousand euros. Of course, the strings as well as the adjustment of the instrument, the bow, and the technique influence the final sound. And another equally complex matter which looms large in the mind of every "jazz" double bass player is their instrument's amplification.

How strong is your attachment to this instrument? Do you think or dream about music through its sound? Or maybe such musical fantasising is an interactive combination of various sounds? This question is probably very personal, but it is very interesting (just as the fact that some people compose music almost exclusively on an instrument, while others freely formulate quite abstract structures, sometimes difficult to render using the instrument.)

Double bass is a tool which I use to filter the music, give it a final shape and by the means of which I speak my own language. It is not the only instrument I use to compose or through which I think about music, although certainly it is one that I have mastered best and through which my thoughts flow in the most undistorted way.

In what musical constellations do you see yourself in the near future? And another question: which musicians (leaving out those you have already worked with) would you especially like to play with, or maybe already have some plans in that regard?

What I am doing is rather looking for the answers to the question of what I should do to make my music and my language autonomic. What I should do to become a double bass player distinguishable by a single sound/tone and a composer/musician valued for his own language and not for the ability to copy or keep up with the trends. My need goes beyond the pleasure of just playing music and trying to fit into its requirements, and all the more beyond playing improvised music, just like that. This way of thinking is more characteristic for composers than performing musicians, but this is exactly how I perceive the stage I am currently at.

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?

I share this opinion, but it requires to be significantly expanded upon, because otherwise it could be misunderstood. It seems to me that it emphasises the fact that it is the musician who should serve music, and not the other way round. Coming back to the earlier thought, I could say that music created by someone with a servant's ethos has a much greater chance of not aging. If a musician treats music only as a tool or a medium, it is frequently an attitude of making a claim, in which a musician puts him/herself above music. Besides, in a properly understood servant's attitude, based on the appreciation of and respect towards one's subordinate position, submission and esteem are visible. This enforces a certain attitude and a musician has to have a reason to say/play something, which is not the case when he/she merely utilises music. This ethos is similar to the so-called civil service which implies serving the society - and we all know what it looks like in reality (similar statistics applies to music and musicians).

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.

There was a moment when I realised that my life is completely subordinated to music. I am trying to work on slowly changing this state of things, because its consequences are literally painful. I have been experiencing problems with my backbone which have almost stopped me from playing and walking. Music is my passion and my remedy, music harmonises me, but it also brings troubles upon me. A dedication in one of the books I have recently received includes a sentence: MUSIC IS YOU. It made me realise that only by caring about myself, my needs, development, and health can I become a better musician and it is the only way I can make my music better.



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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?

The market is constantly changing and evolving, and according to my recent reflections, it represents trends rather than values. The public can choose between black and white (and I don't have in mind the colours of the musicians' skin), and the thus polarised market imposes constant limitations on its offer. We import more and more foreign musicians, valuing their projects higher than they deserve, and thus we enter a vicious circle, losing our sense of direction. And now, referring to your earlier question, it could be said that the majority of musicians and producers use music rather than serve it. But we must come to our senses and realise that by frequently using the words "outstanding", "the best" or "unique" inappropriately, we lose the possibility of convincing the public to come to concerts just because, not because it is a great event (which is unfortunately a Polish speciality).

What have you been listening to recently?

I've been going through a musical fast lately and I don't really listen to anything.

All photos: Marta Eloy Cichocka (www.zoomwzoom.blogspot.com, www.artforart.pl)