MUSICAL SPONTANEITY IN ENLIGHTENMENT AND CHINESE THOUGHT

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The (Western) Enlightenment's construction of China was mediated through a Confucian lens, prioritizing ideals such as meritocracy and social order. This limited engagement resulted in a distorted view of Chinese philosophical traditions that neglected the concept of spontaneity in Daoist thought. While the idea of wuwei (effortless action), fundamental to Chinese spontaneity, has become widely recognized today, this article examines the resonance between Enlightenment and Chinese interpretations of spontaneity. In the Enlightenment, spontaneity was viewed as a defining element of the musical fantasia and improvisation. By exploring the intersections of Enlightenment and Chinese perspectives in musical contexts, this comparison reveals that both lineages interpret spontaneity as a multidimensional creative capacity, one that centers both instinct and imagination, yet remains open to deliberate cultivation. These traditions harmonize through a shared emphasis on aesthetic freedom, even as each preserves its unique cultural distinctiveness.

It has long been observed that the (Western) Enlightenment's perception of China was primarily Confucian, shaped by European admirers of its ideals of meritocracy and social order. As Franklin Perkins (2004) demonstrates, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz viewed China as a source of intellectual frameworks for advancing Western civilization. Leibniz held that the rational structure of the Chinese language could support a universal, mathematically inspired sign system. He also recognized in Chinese philosophy a "natural theology" that could complement European Christianity, as indicated in the title of his treatise *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (172). These ideas facilitated the Jesuit missionaries' treatment of Christianity as "a supplement of Confucianism, a spiritual side to complement Confucian ethics" (15). The French *philosophes*, too, were fascinated by Confucianism. Their curiosity, however, was not necessarily motivated by purely imperialist agendas (Clarke, 1997, p. 26; Harvey, 2012, p. 67). For Voltaire, Confucius was a sage who taught ethics and order without claiming divinity; the poem under the Confucius portrait on the wall of his Ferney residence reveals his veneration for the Chinese philosopher: "Interpreter of right reason alone/Enlightening minds without dazzling the world/He spoke only as a sage and never as a prophet/Yet he was believed even in his own country" (Statman, 2023, p. 20). Voltaire's play *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1755), adapted from a Chinese drama, presents Confucius's moral teachings in five acts as a triumph over barbarism and Western dogmas (Davis, 1983, p. 544). As David Allen Harvey puts it, for Voltaire, Daoism and Buddhism were "superstitions of the ignorant masses,"; the latter was especially deemed cultish and ignorant (2012, p. 61). The Jesuits showed similar attitudes, but while they took the greatest interest in Confucianism, their efforts were not enthusiastically supported by other Catholic orders, such as the Dominicans and members of the French Société des Missions Étrangères (p. 47).

Beth Harper has suggested that early modern missionaries favored the Confucian Classics because they regarded Confucianism as the "cultural code of the elite," serving both as political philosophy and a "stabilizing force" throughout Chinese imperial history. Confucian-

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ism also focused heavily on external behavior without asserting an absolute truth about the human soul. Thus, compared to Buddhism and Daoism, which are perceived as more religiously superstitious, Confucian doctrines showed greater potential to complement Christian ideas. The impression that Daoism operated as a superstitious system that undermined rationalism led to the neglect of foundational Daoist texts (2019, PP. 27–28). Such receptions of Chinese traditions suggest that Enlightenment writers and thinkers were not well aware of the distinction between Daoist philosophy (daojia) and Daoist religion (daojiao).[1] That is not to suggest, however, that Enlightenment philosophers had absolutely no knowledge of Daoist writing. As Perkins notes, the early Confucian canon became accessible to the West primarily through the Jesuits, who transmitted these works to Europe via the 1687 Latin translation that consists of texts from the *Lun Yu* (Analects), *Da Xue* (Great Learning), and *Zhong Yong* (Doctrine of the Mean) (2004, p. 19). The volume, *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus,* provided brief introductory examinations of Daoism and Buddhism (Mungello, 1989, pp. 247–99). It was not until 1788 that the first Latin translations of the *Daodejing* appeared in London, although they were unpublished at the time. Despite their earlier dismissal of Daoism, the Jesuits achieved the first translation of the *Daodejing* into a European language, in Latin, as a present to the "Royal Society" in London. Jean-Pierre Abel Rémusat, who in 1814 established the first Chair of Chinese at the Collège de France, further introduced European intellectuals to the *Daodejing*, equating "Dao" with logos while noting its difficulty to translate. Rémusat, influenced by Jesuit figurists who saw Christian symbols as being "pre-figured" in the ancient Chinese classics, speculated about hidden Hebrew references within the text but left the first comprehensive, annotated translation to his successor, Stanislas Julien, in 1842 (Pohl, 2003, p. 470).

The Rhetoric of "Chinese" Rigidity: Kant and Nietzsche

Daoist philosophical thought still exerted a limited influence in nineteenth-century Europe compared to the twentieth century; Nietzsche, for example, a major philosopher, possessed only a superficial understanding of Daoism and interpreted China primarily through Confucianism. His invective against Kant makes this dismissiveness explicit: he labeled Kant in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) as the "Chinaman of Königsberg" (2002, p. 104), a jibe at what he saw as Kant's uncreative rigidity. In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche then lumped the Chinese with Kantian moralists and Christians as the same group of mediocre and lacklustre people: "Today we see nothing that wants to expand, we suspect that things will continue to decline, getting thinner, better-natured, cleverer, more comfortable, more mediocre, more indifferent, more Chinese, more Christian... what is nihilism today if it is not *that*?" (2006, p. 25). "Chinese" here comes to capture an unfree, herd-like mediocrity, an imagined opposite of the noble, self-creating individual that he valorizes. In *The Anti-Christ* (1895), he mocked Kant again as an epitome of "Königsberg Chinesianity," ridiculing his insistence on moral absolutes and virtues in a rhetoric that evokes the stereotype of an ancient Chinese bureaucracy that is unenlightenedly ritualistic and enslaved to rule:

> One more word against Kant as a *moralist.* A virtue needs to be our *own* invention, our *own* most personal need and self-defense: in any other sense, a virtue is just dangerous. Whatever is not a condition for life *harms* it: a virtue that comes exclusively from a feeling of respect for the concept of 'virtue', as Kant would have it, is harmful. 'Virtue', 'duty', 'goodness in itself', goodness that has been stamped with the character of the impersonal and universally valid—these are fantasies and manifestations of decline, of the final exhaustion of life, of

[1] According to some scholars, similar misconceptions have continued today. See, for example, Fischer, "Creation of Daoism."

> the Königsberg Chinesianity. The most basic laws of preservation and growth require the opposite: that everyone should invent his *own* virtues, his *own* categorical imperatives." (2005, pp. 9–10).

Nietzsche also turned to Chinese paintings to weaponize "Chinese brushes" as a symbol for the decay of the exciting and lament the stagnation of his own thought:

> Oh, what are you anyway, my written and painted thoughts! It was not long ago that you were still so colourful, young and malicious, so full of thorns and secret spices that you made me sneeze and laugh… we mandarins with Chinese brushes, we immortalizers of things that let themselves be written – what are the only things we can paint? Oh, only ever things that are about to wilt and lose their smell! Only ever storms that have exhausted themselves and are moving off, and feelings that are yellowed and late! (2002, p. 296)

Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, Kant himself had articulated a similar judgment decades earlier. In *Observations on the Feeling of Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), Kant also categorized Chinese philosophy, language, and arts as "grotesque" by citing Chinese paintings as examples: "What ridiculous grotesqueries do the verbose and studied compliments of the Chinese not contain: even their paintings are grotesque and represent marvelous and unnatural shapes, the likes of which are nowhere to be found in the world. They also have venerable grotesqueries, for the reason that they are of ancient usage, and no people in the world have more of them than this one." (p. 58)

Kant's racial aesthetics was also informed by his conceptualization of "national temperaments": he depicted the Chinese temperament as "calmer" than the European (p. 73). Nietzsche perhaps fell into a similar snare as Kant, who has been accused of Orientalism (Said, 1978, p. 119), in allowing his perception of Chinese philosophy to be dictated by a restricted view of Confucianism. His dismissal of Kant as an expression of "slave morality," or what he called "Chinese" decay, perpetuated a reductive equation of Kantian rationalism with Confucian ritual.

Spontaneity in Daoist and Enlightenment Thought

Having briefly traced how Enlightenment and nineteenth-century thinkers' aesthetic and philosophical categories had misrecognized Chinese thought, this article now turns to consider what becomes visible when Daoist and Enlightenment conceptions of spontaneity are read comparatively—not through the distorting lens each tradition cast on the other, but on shared musical ground. Present-day perceptions of Daoism, particularly as philosophy, contrast significantly with those of the Enlightenment. Knut Walf observes an inverse relationship: "In looking at the perception of China and all its cultural aspects as opposed to the reception of Daoism and Daoist writings in the West, it is surprising to notice opposing developments. In the West, interest in Daoism has evidently increased in the time when the West dissociated itself from China" (2005, p. 286). As Confucianism becomes closely associated with ideas like social control and hierarchy, Daoism emerges as a possible "Alternative Other" within the Chinese tradition, serving as an idealized, spiritual alternative through a Western lens. Unlike Enlightenment philosophical discourses, the Daoist concept of spontaneity, which combines *wuwei* and *ziran*, is widely recognized today, and the general distinction between Laozi and Zhuangzi's emphasis- that the former emphasizes spontaneity's role in social-political and cosmic harmony while the latter stresses personal and cognitive freedom- also seems generally understood. In recent years, scholars have further sought to explain the effortless and unselfconscious state of *wuwei* through the psychological concept of "flow" (Slingerland, 2014).

At the same time, Philip J. Ivanhoe (2010) has also argued that while Daoist philosophy champions the idea of spontaneity in the form of what he designates as "untutored spontaneity," Confucianism teaches "cultivated spontaneity"—although both "to some extent" also

"always partake of each other," and their entanglement often stems from a perceivable gap between the "rhetoric" and the "reality" of spontaneity (pp. 194–95). According to Ivanhoe, under "untutored spontaneity," a person's actions spring from instinct rather than practice or training and are undisturbed by "unnatural" or artificial interference (pp. 185–87). On the other hand, "cultivated spontaneity" is an acquired ability that demands "concerted and sustained efforts at learning, reflection, and practice" (pp. 187–94). Ivanhoe also divides what terms as "Western" spontaneity into two types: the first views spontaneity as a quality of actions that arise "entirely from natural impulse" and "without premeditation or effort"; the second refers to a spontaneity that arises freely from an autonomous agent, as represented by Kant, which demonstrates "the ability of rational, free, and autonomous agents to transcend the natural order" (pp. 183–84). "Untutored spontaneity," Ivanhoe suggests, echoes and illuminates the first "Western" type of spontaneity that is more common among poets (p. 199). While drawing on psychological insights and Western categorizations may invigorate cross-cultural interpretation of spontaneity, comparing Enlightenment and Chinese approaches to spontaneity within musical frameworks prevents Chinese philosophy from being reduced to a sinicized version of the psychological notion of "peak performance" or Western romantic naturalism, while still highlighting their shared aesthetic meaning. Music offers particularly fertile ground for this comparison, since spontaneity during the Enlightenment was regarded as a defining element of musical fantasy and improvisation. A musical examination of the intersecting perspectives on spontaneity offers a richer intercultural foundation for interpreting spontaneity as a creative capacity that prioritizes both instinct and imagination while remaining open to the rigors of deliberate cultivation, realized in distinct cultural forms and manifestations.

Spontaneity in Daoist philosophy is primarily conveyed through two interconnected terms: wuwei and *ziran*. Although *wuwei* is often translated as "no action" or "non-action," these two expressions can be misleading, since *wuwei* does not denote an absence of action. In *wuwei,* there is action, but the action feels effortless, embodying also the notion of *ziran*, which can be roughly translated as "natural." Daoist metaphysics recognizes the *Dao* as the ineffable "formless form" and the dynamic flow of energy, *qi*. The person in *wuwei* can thus be described as being directed by the *Dao* as he or she "acts" in harmony with the natural flow of the *Dao* without resisting it by force. Because of the fluid nature of movement that diminishes the ego, David Hall and Roger Ames prefer "non-assertive action" as a translation for *wuwei* (1998, p. 52), whereas Andy Young suggests "effortless effort" and "creative quietude" (1996, p. 167). Kathleen Marie Higgins (2005) also suggests that wuwei can be considered a virtuous "non-assertive virtue" (pp. 128–29). In recent decades, philosophers have increasingly sought to explain and interpret *wuwei* musically. Edward Slingerland (2014), who translates *wuwei* as "no trying" and "no doing" but also acknowledges terms like "effortless action" or "spontaneous action" are more accurate in meaning, considers jazz playing an exemplification of *wuwei* and depicts a person in *wuwei* as behaving like a body that automatically "gives in to the seductive rhythm of a song" (pp. 7–8). Mario Wenning (2011) evokes rhythmic analogies: a person in *wuwei,* in his words, is "in tune with the rhythm of his or her environment by responding to challenges of that environment as they arise in ever readjusting forms." Living by rhythmic sensitivity and spontaneity, he or she is "not subject to following a universal set of norms as the Confucians (or Kantians) would have it" (p. 67). For Higgins, Zhuangzi's person in *wuwei* is like a musical virtuoso: "Zhuangzi's virtue is that of the virtuoso: it is concerned with consummate performance. Formulated rules interfere with such performance, particularly if one keeps them prominently in mind" (p. 134). Spontaneity in the Enlightenment was also understood, practiced, and interpreted in musical contexts, being considered a defining element of the musical fantasy and improvisation. While the fantasy player

or improvising musician must possess spontaneity as a personal disposition, the music sounded forth must also project a sense of immediacy and inspiration. Johann Georg Sulzer's *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste* (General Theory of the Fine Arts) (1771–74), a widely influential eighteenth-century aesthetic treatise, established spontaneity as a defining quality of musical fantasies and improvisations. Writing in "Fantasiren; Fantasie. (Musik.)" included in *Allgemeine Theorie*, Sulzer declares that "When a composer plays a piece on an instrument as he gradually conceives it, or when he does not play an existing piece but one that he invents while playing, he is said to be fantasizing." He also characterizes fantasies as "the first drafts of the draughtsman, works of exceptional power and beauty, which could not have been created in a calm state of mind" (pp. 368–69). As Richard Kramer (2016) has already observed, Sulzer's entry indicates that eighteenth-century fantasy was largely perceived as a "spontaneous act whereby ideas that come gradually to mind are at once realized in performance" (p. 5).

It must be emphasized, however, that the fantasy (or fantasia) and improvisation were not considered fully identical in the eighteenth century, since the fantasy could exist as a type of pre-composed piece. C.P.E. Bach, whose *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (*Essay on The True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*) (1753) became the standard treatise for students who wished to learn the art of keyboard fantasy, endorsed pre-composed fantasies. Nevertheless, having written many pre-composed fantasies and being a brilliant improviser himself, C.P.E. Bach maintained that a sense of spontaneity must be experienced in the composed music. The composed fantasy was expected to show "true, musical creativeness," and the recitative on the keyboard instrument should sound with "complete, unmeasured freedom" (p. 153). In other words, even if the keyboard fantasy were preconceived and notated, it should still impress with a sort of "staged" spontaneity and convey a sense of unmediated expression, offering the listener the impression of a musical thought unfolding in real time.

Still encapsulating the ideal of spontaneity, the fantasy was ultimately understood as a mode of musical creation, and it is in this sense that it has been, and is often, lumped together with improvisation. In his treatise *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (*The Perfect Chapelmaster*) (1739), Johann Mattheson described the fantasy as "the most free and unrestrained manner of composing and singing that one can imagine"; in a fantasy, he asserts, there exists "nothing as opposed to it as order and restraint" (p. 217). Such ideas were preceded by Athanasius Kircher's earlier definition of the fantastic style, *Stylus Phantasticus*. Kircher was a Jesuit polymath with expansive knowledge, having even published *China Monumentis Illustrata* in 1667, to explore the similarities he discerned between the languages and religious customs of Egypt and China. In *Musurgia Universalis* (*The Universal Musical Art*) (1650), he described *Stylus Phantasticus* as "the most free and unrestrained method of composing," which is "bound to nothing, neither to words nor to a melodic subject" (585). Other music theorists in the eighteenth century also emphasized the fantasy's spontaneous nature. Carl Friedrich Cramer, in 1783, wrote that the fantasy displays a fleeting nature as "a collection of momentary ideas, thoughts, capriccios" (1251). Earlier, in 1768, Jean-Jacques Rousseau insisted that the musical fantasy "no longer exists when it is completed." Fantasies for Rousseau are marked by "their readiness to present themselves"—and "as soon as it is written or repeated, it is no longer a *fantasy*, but an ordinary composition" (p. 166).

Kant also considered spontaneity: in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant defined spontaneity as the "faculty for bringing forth representations itself," as a cognitive capacity of the understanding (p. 193). Kant did not evoke music in discussing spontaneity, but he turned to musical ideas almost two decades later in Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (1798), in the context of "obscure representations," which are representations we are not conscious of. Kant employed the keyboard fantasia as an illustration, but he considered it not a pre-composed genre of music but rather spontaneous musical creation, in alignment with the views of his contemporaries. Kant described the musician who plays a fantasy on the organ as a "freely improvising" musician, one whose improvisation "turns out so well" that the impro-

viser would have wished to notate it (pp. 24–25). Previously, Kant had stated in Anthropology (1772–73) that humans possess "no power at all, through reason, to overcome the obscure representations that lie in sensibility" (1772–73, p. 251; Fiori, 2025, p. 123). In this sense, the most profound creative acts proceed from a state that can be perceived as pre-rational. But as Kant's keyboard fantasia example demonstrates, spontaneity allows reason to interpret and render the obscure in sensible and sonic representations that can be cognized. The improvising musician exercises a "special judgment" to select ideas accordingly, and this judgment is still marked by aesthetic sensitivity because "a single stroke of the finger not in accordance with the harmony would immediately be heard as discordant sound (1798, pp. 24–25). Kant's association of the keyboard fantasia with the aesthetic concept termed "free beauty" in *Critique of Judgment* (1790) also indicates clearly that improvised playing remains grounded in aesthetic judgment. Free beauty "presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be," and music fantasias, for Kant, embody free beauty in that they aesthetically "do not represent anything" (p. 114). This spontaneity, manifested in a musical context of fantasy or improvisation, reveals an often-overlooked aspect of Kant's spontaneity: an emphasis on the power of imagination. Kant himself declares in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) that "it is one and the same spontaneity that, there under the name of imagination and here under the name of understanding, brings combination into the manifold of intuition" (p. 262). As Thomas Land (2006) has argued, Kant, in embracing spontaneity under the name of imagination, affirms an exercise of spontaneity primarily centered on sense perception. Thus, the Enlightenment Kantian spontaneity is not merely about rational autonomy but also about the creative play of intuitions and feelings that organize sensory data into phenomenal experience. In distinguishing between the faculties of sensibility, the passive capacity for receiving sensory data, and the understanding, the active capacity for conceptual thought, Kant positions the imagination as an active power that can bridge the two—it performs a spontaneous synthesis that orders raw sensations into cognizable mental representations (Matherne, 2016).

Effortlessness, Emotion, and Autonomy

Kant's improvising musician also embodies genius, although one that seems to display an "ambiguous status" (Bowie, 2003, p. 33). Enlightenment music theorists and critics understood the play of spontaneity in musical contexts similarly—it is rooted in imagination and entwined with the concept of genius, rather than resting on rationality alone. The Austrian composer Joseph Haydn was recognized as an exemplar of Kantian genius; his biographer Georg August Griesinger (1810) depicted his Kantian genius as one revealed in his unconscious creation—a state in which he "did not himself know how he found within himself the ideas for it and nor did he have it in his power to think out such at will or methodically and to instruct others how they might produce similar works" (p. 60). Haydn would improvise daily in a manner that can be perceived as Wuwei-like, if one were to adopt cross-cultural terminology, yielding to his imagination and impulses to bring forth music extemporaneously. He described his improvisational process: "In instrumental music, I generally allowed my purely musical fantasy free play" (Griesinger 1810/1963, p. 155). In letting his imagination take the lead, Haydn allowed the music to develop naturally and "unconsciously." He did not, according to himself, need to labor assiduously to seize or generate an idea. Rather, an idea would "catch" him, and he would continue to develop it. He told his biographer, Albert Christoph Dies: "I must have something to do—usually musical ideas are pursuing me, to the point of torture, I cannot escape them, they stand like walls before me. If it's an allegro that pursues me, my pulse keeps beating faster, I can get no sleep. If it's an adagio, then I notice my pulse beating slowly. My imagination plays on me as if I were a clavier…I am really just a living clavier." (1810/1963, p. 141)

This depiction of himself being played by musical ideas somewhat mirrors the language of what Kant notes, in *Anthropology, Friedländer* (1775–76), that "we not only play with such obscure representations, but we are also ourselves a play of obscure representations" (1775–76/2012, p. 56). At once a player and a quasi-instrument being played on, Haydn went so far as to claim that he had become one with his instrument, sounding music as an inspired-and-inspiring "living clavier." Haydn's narrative underscores the role of effortlessness, a concept foundational to Daoist spontaneity, for he did not need to strive for ideas. But this characteristic was not unique to Haydn's improvisation, since in the Enlightenment, effortlessness was often presented as an underlying trait of musical spontaneity. One of the most well-known praises of the young Mozart's ability in improvisation came from the Benedictine priest Placidus Scharl, who highlighted Mozart's ability to develop a fugue or an invention with "strange variations" effortlessly, all the while "constantly changing passages as long as one wished." Mozart, in his words, was "at once author and performer," whose "fantasia-playing" revealed an extraordinary ability to "extemporize with inexhaustible inspiration" (Deutsch, 1866, p. 512).

Haydn let his imagination guide him, but he also allowed his mood to direct his play. He reported to Griesinger: "I sat down, began to improvise, sad or happy according to my mood, serious or trifling. Once I had seized upon an idea, my whole endeavor was to develop and sustain it in keeping with the rules of art. Thus, I sought to keep going…" (Griesinger 1810/1963, p. 61). This fluctuating state of sensibility, manifested as an openness to emotions that transform, may at first seem incompatible with Daoist perspectives of spontaneity, since the Daoist sage's tranquility can be (mis)taken as indifference or an absolute lack of engagement with emotion. However, as Halvor Eifring (2019) demonstrates, *qing* 情, usually translated as "emotion," even though this term does not necessarily best capture the essence of *qing* due to its more volatile connotation, constitutes a part of the spontaneity involved in *wuwei*. While *wuwei* cannot be reductively explained by or equated to spontaneity, it denotes a way of relating to whatever is spontaneously present in one's mind or the surroundings. The person in a state of wuwei responds sensitively to both external and internal changes, including fluctuating emotions. *Zhuangzi*'s *Qiwulun* addresses the ever-changing *qing* like music: "喜怒哀樂, 慮嘆變慹, 姚佚啟態; 樂出虛, 蒸成菌。日夜相代乎前, 而莫知其所萌。" (Zhuangzi 2:2) Joy, and anger, grief and pleasure, worry and sighing lamentation, instability and fear, confusion and idleness, capriciousness and manifested expressions; they are like music coming out of emptiness, condensing into fungi; they alternate before us day and night, and nobody knows from where they spring.[2] Views espoused by Enlightenment music theorists, such as Sulzer, who argues great fantasies, which are "played out of a certain abundance of feeling and in the fire of enthusiasm," are music that "could not have been created in a calm state of mind" (pp. 368–69), might also seem to clash with the ideal of *wuwei* as it rejects a state of stillness in spontaneous creation. Yet *wuwei* does not mean a passive calm: *wuwei* is not dominated by emotions, but it is also not a passive tranquility, nor does it fight against or suppress emotions. The individual in a *wuwei* state is self-composed and remains in touch with one's inner emotions. Like Haydn, who does not resist but rather follows his mood, the musical person in *wuwei* roams according to their *qing* without losing control.

In Daoist thought, the spontaneous self recognizes its emotions without losing control partly because the person in *wuwei* is also self-forgetful, as conveyed in the concept of *wangwo* (忘我). The phrase *wuwo liangwang* (物我兩忘), too, captures an oblivious forgetfulness of both the self and the surrounding things. This forgetting of the self and surroundings in Daoist thought applies to the ideal musician, who can develop musical skills to the point of becoming fully oblivious of self and surroundings with a combination of training and self-forgetfulness, forgetting even the passing of time (Kohn, 2014, pp. 165–66; Wenning,

[2] Translation mine.

2011, p. 65). One of the most-cited accounts of C.P.E. Bach's playing of the fantasia foregrounds a comparable state of self-forgetfulness. In 1770, C.P.E. Bach, playing his Silbermann clavichord at home, seemed to enter a transcendental state of self-forgetfulness. According to Charles Burney, writing in 1773, the composer-improviser became "so animated and possessed," so "inspired," and was absorbed into his own music (270). The aesthetic of self-forgetfulness of the eighteenth century, as Harri Mäcklin (2021) points out, considers self-forgetfulness a state characterized by a "pre-reflective self-consciousness." Many Enlightenment accounts of self-forgetfulness interpreted self-forgetfulness as an experience of being caught up in "rapture." Denis Diderot, for example, reflected on his self-forgetfulness while contemplating Claude Joseph Vernet's *Occupations of the Riverbank* (1766). "Where am I at this moment? What is all this surrounding me? I don't know, I can't say," writes Diderot. What's lacking? Nothing. What do I want? Nothing. If there is a God, his being must be like this, taking pleasure in himself" (Diderot 1774/1875, p. 98; Mäcklin, 2021, p. 527). Diderot also described self-forgetfulness as a "most magical" experience (Diderot, p. 216; Mäcklin, 2021, p. 527). Some other Enlightenment philosophers depicted self-forgetful states in similar vivid ways; Henry Home, Lord Kames, for instance, likened self-forgetfulness to a "*waking dream*," since, like a dream, self-forgetfulness vanishes as soon as one reflects on one's present situation (Kames, 1763, p. 82; Mäcklin, 2021, p. 532). The forgetting of the conscious self is fundamental to Zhuangzhi's *xiaoyao* (逍遙), which, typically translated as "wandering," denotes a mode of being free and leisurely, as thematized in Zhuangzi's *Xiaoyao You* (逍遙遊). Daoist wandering invites many interpretations pertaining to personal life. However, during the Enlightenment, music theorists took a particular interest in incorporating this sense of aimless movement, of structural freedom, the aesthetic of the fantasia. Sulzer, perceiving the fantasia as generically fluid, noted that "some fantasies wander from one genre to another, sometimes in regular time, sometimes without time, and so on" (368–69).

Notably, while Enlightenment aesthetics valued musical spontaneity as an expression of individual autonomy within civic life, Daoist thought used music to transcend socio-political structures altogether in pursuit of personal and existential liberation, as evinced in the case of Daoist musician and music theorist, Ji Kang (223–262 CE), contrasting Confucianism's use of music as a tool for social cohesion and moral education. A leader of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Groves, Ji would retreat from society to live by the principles of *wuwei* and *ziran*, rejecting the rigid expectations of the state in a life of musical reflection. Ji Kang's famous essay *Sheng wu aiyue lun* 聲無哀樂論 (Music Has in It Neither Grief nor Joy) argues that sounds do not intrinsically have in them sorrow, joy, or any emotion. Noting that the same music could prompt different responses in different listeners, Ji was not dismissing emotions, but he held that feelings are internal to the listener rather than a property of the music itself. Ji's theory of music, as observed by many scholars, is thoroughly grounded in the idea of *wuwei* and the human capacity for spontaneity, which allows freedom from social constraint and feudal enslavement (Chai, 2009; Kang, 2014; Rošker, 2014). Most recently, Gavin S.K. Lee (2023), highlighting the socio-political dimensions of Ji's metaphysics, extends similar ideas, arguing that Ji was essentially resisting state-wide systemized emotional engineering—that he "chose to evict emotion from harmonious cosmic and musical structures" through *wuwei* to counter the "normative Confucian mold of social harmony achieved by emotional micro-manipulation." In this "apolitical-political" spirit, Ji wrote Poem II from "A Response to the Two Guos, Three Poems" to Guo Xiazhou and Guo Xiashu, who were likely brothers, as he was fleeing his residence after Guanqiu Jian's failed rebellion against the Sima regime, spelling out the desire to *xiaoyao you taihe*. Music, as understood in this poem, serves the function of casting away material burdens and petty worries. To wander is to enjoy the ultimate state of cosmic harmony:

> 豈若翔區外, 餐瓊漱朝霞。
> 遺物棄鄙累, 逍遙遊太和。
> 結友集靈嶽, 彈琴登清歌。
> 有能從我者, 古人何足多。
> How can it compare with soaring beyond the realm, supping on carnelian, rinsing your mouth with morning clouds?
> Or leaving behind mundane things and abandoning vulgar toils, to wander free and easy in the Primal Harmony?
> Friends I've made I shall gather on the numinous peak; I pluck my zither and raise a lone song.
> As long as there are those who can follow me, how would the ancients be worth praising? (331)

Another key figure of the Seven Sages, Ruan Ji (210–263 CE), who also penned an important music treatise called *Yuelun* 樂論 (Discourse on Music), likewise musicalized the spontaneity and freedom of *wuwei* and *ziran* in his poem. The last four lines of Ruan's Poem XXIV from "Singing My Cares" utter:

> 願為雲間鳥，千里一哀鳴。
> 三芝延瀛洲，遠遊可長生。
> I wish I were a bird in the clouds, singing out mournfully every thousand leagues.
> The threefold fungus extends over Yingzhou; by far roaming I can live forever. (73)

Attentive to the sounds of nature, including crickets and cicadas, Ruan conveys a longing for carefree roaming in the xiaoyao mode, again in a most musical way, by imagining himself as a bird in the clouds. Ruan transitions from internal anxiety to a mournful song, and his lament seems a cathartic release that dissolves his distress and achieves rhythmic synchrony with the natural world.

Cultivated Spontaneity: Confucian Discipline and Enlightenment Proficiency

Can there, however, be possibilities to relate the Confucian "cultivated spontaneity" to some form of Enlightenment spontaneity? Ivanhoe has noted that musical performance offers "rich and productive examples of cultivated spontaneity" and functions as a "primary example in Confucian discourse" (p. 189). To illustrate "cultivated spontaneity," an acquired capacity that demands persistent training and practice, Ivanhoe chooses the pianist as an illustration:

> …one needs such training in order to play the piano in a spontaneous manner, but such training does not guarantee that one's playing will exhibit the quality of spontaneity… The way an accomplished pianist plays her instrument—interpreting what appears on the score and investing it with her personal sense, feelings, and experience—or the free and fluid exchanges shared by members of an ensemble, as they contribute their individual riffs to a performance, display cultivated spontaneity. Their music is flowing out of them with the joyful freedom and elegance that are characteristic signs of such spontaneous behavior…The ability to engage in such spontaneous play presupposes an extended period of learning, practice, and innovation and is based on an acquired skill or set of skills. It is an ability that arises out of a sustained course of training…some type of explicit training—a kind of socialization or enculturation—is necessary for establishing even the possibility of spontaneity. (p. 188)

Ivanhoe's pianist example does not parallel Kant's keyboard fantasia, even though it speaks of the pianist playing "in a spontaneous manner" and sounding "signs of… spontaneous behavior." After all, Kant's example of keyboard fantasia pertains to the idea of obscure representations and focuses on the interplay between cognition and representation—between the inaccessible and accessible—whereas Ivanhoe's spontaneous pianist, as he indicates earlier,

underscores the idea of "skilfulness." In this sense, this pianistic example embodies something closer to the cultivated spontaneity proposed by another Enlightenment philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, termed "proficiency" or "perfected habit." Mendelssohn (1761/1997) defined proficiency as a "capacity to perform an action so speedily that we no longer are conscious of everything that we are doing in the process" and likewise emphasized the necessity of extensive practice to achieve this ability to play without the interference of conscious reflection. Interestingly, Mendelssohn also evoked the exemplary pianist who can play effortlessly after prolonged practice as an example of someone who has acquired spontaneity. In a performance executed by a high degree of "proficiency," the pianist, according to Mendelssohn, shows receptivity, power of imagination, and responsiveness. But what must take place before one can attain such proficiency is precisely rigorous training and extended practice. Through habit and practice, Mendelssohn argues, "each capacity of the soul can become a proficiency," and in proficiency, one is able to perform actions effortlessly with a diminished consciousness: "If we have achieved a proficiency in the performance of a certain action, then the lack of consciousness does not prevent obscure impulses from having an influence on the capacity to desire and producing the arbitrary movements attributed to them. For what causes consciousness to stop? The quickness with which concepts succeed one another." (p. 163)

Mendelssohn finds the trained and skilled pianist, in addition to the typesetter, to be the most fitting embodiment of his understanding of a cultivated, but spontaneous, proficiency. He describes the pianist's movements as instinctual and unpremeditated—they "quickly" follow one another, "often unconscious" to those who have achieved proficiency. The pianist "through constant practice, can "play the most splendid music almost without thinking about it." The pianist is so proficient that the audience who watches his playing can "scarcely follow the speed of his hands." Works become instinctive; the pianist is so well-trained that the "right" choice happens automatically. The pianist already "finds what he is looking for" before anyone else can notice (pp. 163–64). This cultivated spontaneity may at first seem to embody an Enlightenment paradox, since its emphasis on rigorous training to reach a state of effortless action, one which is almost automatized, may seem to risk reducing the human to an unfeeling machine. Turning complex skills into a second nature, so to speak, seems to go against the ideal of heartfelt playing. Eighteenth-century musicians and theorists opposed the idea of mechanical playing; C.P.E. Bach famously used the imagery of a trained bird to argue that a true performer must play from the soul rather than like a machine (1755/1974, p. 150). However, in the context of trained proficiency, automatic skills, far from devaluing the player or the listener's humanity, provide the "vehicle" through which feelings and sensibility can be expressed efficiently without being obstructed by artificial disturbance or the interference of conscious effort. The mechanism of habit acquired by the pianist allows him to perform with a readiness that is deeply purposeful while exhibiting the grace of non-striving.

Scholarship has noted that the gap between the Enlightenment and Chinese conceptualizations of spontaneity is narrower than presumed—that the "effortless" state of *wuwei* can be mapped onto the psychological phenomenon of "flow" and that Western and Chinese understandings can overlap in their interpretations of spontaneity. However, examining their intersections in musical contexts particularly reveals spontaneity as a force of creativity that emphasizes both instinct and imagination, while also welcoming, or even demanding, extensive training and cultivation in some circumstances. Musically, both Eastern and Western perspectives view spontaneity, as exemplified by musical free play, as a realization of aesthetic freedom without a loss of control. From the more Daoist-oriented *wuwei* and *ziran* to the cultivated spontaneity of the Confucian tradition, "Chinese spontaneities" share a musical resonance with Western Enlightenment approaches to spontaneity—there is nothing "unnatural" or "grotesque," in the end, in hearing these diverse lineages echo one another in their interpretations

of spontaneity. Without losing their distinctiveness, they harmonize in their shared celebration of spontaneous feeling, thought, and creation in their aesthetic and musicalized fluidity. But this harmonization is not one that erases difference, nor is it artificially imposed: heard together, neither tradition collapses into the other. Daoist spontaneity does not dissolve into a mere precursor of "flow," nor is Enlightenment spontaneity a sinicized variant of Western romantic naturalism in disguise. Instead, each tradition's musical thought retains its integrity and voice, even as both illuminate a shared aesthetic value.

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