



## What I'm doing when I do what I can't do

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### Point of departure

An aesthetical idea that has been used in various ways in post-World War II avant-gardist and experimental musical practices is to give performers insolvable or contradictory tasks.



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## Point of departure

One reason for these strategies is to force performers to think and reflect in order to make up their own conclusions, and another is to change playing intention, from expressing something to solve a problem.



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## Point of departure: *Cage*

One of the first to explore this strategy was probably John Cage, who in turn was inspired by Zen-Buddhist practices, such as its short Koan forms, which most likely are contradictory with respect to content.



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## Point of departure: *Koan*

**Koan**, Japanese **Kōan**, in Zen Buddhism of Japan, a succinct paradoxical statement or question used as a meditation discipline for novices, particularly in the Rinzai sect. The effort to “solve” a koan is intended to exhaust the analytic intellect and the egoistic will, readying the mind to entertain an appropriate response on the intuitive level. Each such exercise constitutes both a communication of some aspect of Zen experience and a test of the novice’s competence. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/koan>)



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## Point of departure: *Mediation*

Such an instruction or task might be described as mediation, which refers to any framework or process that intervenes in our perception of the external world and hence contributes to the construction of our conceptual and experiential worlds.



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## Point of departure

In the experimental musical tradition a performance may be to solve a series of given tasks rather than self-expression and/or expressing concepts.



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## Examples of tasks: La Monte Young

An example of such a task is the American composer La Monte Young's piece *X for Henry Flynt*, who asks the performer to "repeat a loud, heavy sound every one or two seconds as uniformly and as regularly as possible". The interest the piece creates lies in the performer's inability to play uniformly, no sound is identical to the other.



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## Examples of tasks: Ferneyhough

One example from the avant-garde tradition is the British composer Brian Ferneyhough who deliberately makes his scores partly unplayable, in order “to consistently overstep the bounds of the human possible”, (in Cobussen 2017) and consequently mistakes and erroneous playing become an intrinsic part of the performance



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## Examples of tasks: Ferneyhough

No longer able to play what the score demands, she has to make choices and to take responsibility; she can only perform the piece by not doing what the score prescribes and by doing what the score does not prescribe. [...] The performer has to improvise without being asked to improvise nor having a desire to improvise; she has to improvise without being an improviser. (Cobussen)



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## Examples of tasks

A third example is Miles Davis who routinely gave his musicians contradictory instructions. In *A Sense of the Possible: Miles Davis and the Semiotics of Improvised Performance* author Chris Smith (1998) retells a story of bass player Marcus Miller playing Aida with Miles.



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## Chasing Chords

Chasing Chords is a musical game that asks a drummer to hit the next audible bass drum sound in sync when it is heard; and similarly asks a piano player to guess and to hit the right chord, out of three possible, in the same manner. The given task is impossible to solve!

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## Chasing Chords

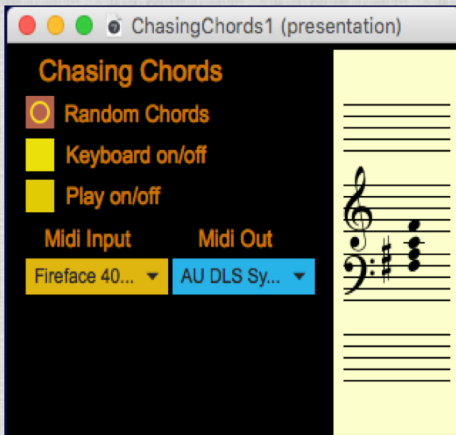
The *Chasing Chords* can be seen as a mediating system, where the musical outcome is made up of several random processes.

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## Chasing Chords

The piano chords are generated at the outset of each session and consists of all 12 notes: three chords with four notes each, no double notes.





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## Chasing Chords

Chasing Chords can be seen as a game to play, and according to sociologist Graeme Kirkpatrick play is meaningless in itself.

However:

*[...] the human disposition to play is at the heart of the human creative response to being cast adrift in a meaningless universe. If it is not meaningful in itself, play is the activity that makes meaning possible by spinning forms out of the darkness.*

Chasing Chords is a game that creates a musical form



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## Chasing Chords

Or, one may regard the Chasing Chords as a toy:

In *Play Matters* Miguel Sicard argues: "they (toys) creates an opening in the constitution of a particular situation that justifies the activity of play".

Sicard defines two types of toys:

*Expressive toys and Mechanical/procedural toys*

Chasing Chords can be both!





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## Chasing Chords

Firstly: the creation of the three chords involves two random processes, namely selection of one of the three pre-generated chords, and duration until the next successive event occurs. Whereas the bass drum involves just one process, namely duration between successive events.



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## Chasing Chords

Secondly: the computer generated events in Chasing Chords are moving targets, and in practice it is impossible to intentionally hit the right chord at the right moment. The bass drum is obviously easier to catch, but still almost a mission impossible.



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## Chasing Chords

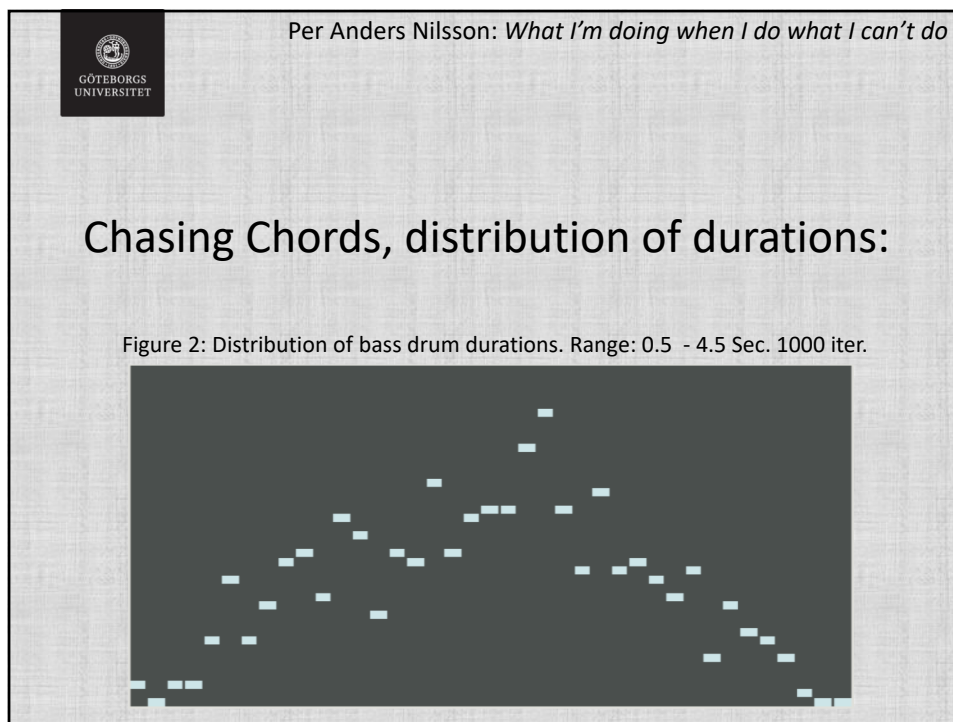
The resulting musical pattern is a combination of these random processes; the random generations of drum hits and piano chords, and the musicians' struggle to hit them.




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## Chasing Chords

A crucial parameter is durations between successive events. In the current version, the durations is set within the span 0.5 – 4.5 seconds, with a probable weight set to the middle value; achieved by using two random generators working in parallel that produce a gauss-like distribution.



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Conclusion

What then, is the meaning to play with the Chasing Chord?



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## Conclusion


The Chasing Chord software changes musical interaction; from acting and re-acting with respect to co-musicians activities and musical outcome, to solve a problem. Solving the task is meaningless in itself however; the software rather mediates a move of the player's attention and playing intention: from expressing something to solve the given task.



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## Conclusion


The interest Chasing Chords may create is the perceived uncertainty when the next event will occur, and whether any of the players will succeed to hit them. The particular identity in the musical outcome, is, as I see it, impossible to achieve without the software.



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## Conclusion

The combined output from the computer and the musician's struggle to solve the problem, creates a "groove" that is mediated by the computer. The function of the software is to direct the players into a certain mood of interaction, however they must try to solve the task.



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## Natural Artefacts at CNMAT, March 2014





Thank You!