

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

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. One of the first to employ 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. Another example is the British composer Brian Ferneyhough who deliberately makes his scores partly unplayable, in order "to consistently overstep the bounds of the human possible", and consequently mistakes and erroneous playing become an intrinsic part of the performance. Another example is Miles Davis who routinely gave his musicians contradictory instructions. 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.

Presenting a software, a Max patch called Chasing Chords, as one attempt to apply this strategy. Chasing Chords is a simple musical game that is inspired by first shooter person video games. In essence, it asks a drummer and a piano player to guess and to play in sync with sounds randomly replayed by the software: a sampled bass drum hit and a piano chord respectively. The given task, to play simultaneously with the randomly-generated events, are impossible to solve, the intention to do so however, creates a certain attention at the participant players, which in turn creates a unique quasi periodic texture mediated by the randomly generated events. The emergent texture is, in essence, the identity of the piece. In the presentation, ideally a percussionist and a piano player perform live with the software, else a demonstration and a video recording is shown.

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**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>)

*In A Sense of the Possible: Miles Davis and the Semiotics of Improvised Performance* author Chris Smith (1998) retells the following story: For 'Aida' (1980), he told (bassist Marcus) Miller to play an F and G vamp, but when Miller stuck resolutely to the chords, Davis stopped the band. 'Is that all you gonna play?' he asked. 'I heard you was bad. You ain't playin' shit.' So Miller lled in his wamp ornately on the next take, and Davis stopped the band again. 'What are you playing?' he asked Miller. 'Just play F and G and shut up' (p. 261).