

Playing Taiji: some notes on a musical glossary

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‘Music is joy’

(*Shiming*, Han Dynasty dictionary)

There are many ways in which Taiji is like playing a piece of music. Bruce often compares the spontaneous aspects of Taiji to improvisation when playing jazz. Since I am more inclined toward, and familiar with, classical music, I tend to find correlations in that sphere.

The form itself, for instance, is enormously detailed, intricately structured, interconnected and balanced – very much like a symphony. And just as with a symphony, while the score doesn't change, the possible performances of it are infinite and no two are identical, so too with the Taiji form.

Below are a few musings on Taiji in the form of a partial musical glossary.

tempo, n.

Etymology: Italian, < Latin *tempus* **time**.¹

One of the variables within Taiji is, of course, **tempo**. There are fast forms such as the Wu Style Fast Form made public by Ma Yueliang, the son in law of Wu Jianquan, but even standard forms have a large range of possible speeds. Yang Chengfu was said to have taken about sixteen minutes to do the long form, and there is a video of Zheng Rongguang, an indoor student of Wu Jianquan, doing a blisteringly fast standard Wu form, even when accounting for what appears to be a slightly accelerated playing speed. Generally, Taiji forms are practised moderately slowly – c. twenty-five minutes for a traditional long form.

Within our lineage, the optimal way of achieving a high level *gongfu* (skill developed over a long time) is considered to be by gradually slowing down (*rallentando*). Initially the form is learned at a medium-slow pace: the speed at which you can remain most aware of alignment, connection, flow, etc. As your facility with the form grows, you gradually begin to slow down, being careful to not to go so slowly that you end up starting and stopping (*staccato*), which is a sign that you are going too slowly for your nervous system to maintain the flow. As your nervous system opens up and releases its tension, you can go more and more slowly. At the same time this enables you to go faster and faster. This is not true of attempting simply to go faster, which does not enable you to go slower. The very slow form also develops your concentration, the ability to rest your mind on an object without strain and keep it there; the antidote to the monkey mind.

An essential aspect of tempo for the Taiji player is **adagio**.

adagio, adv., n., and adj.

Origin: A borrowing from Italian. **Etymon:** Italian *adagio*.

Etymology: < *ad* at + *agio* **ease, leisure**.

The standard musical definition of **adagio** is: 'With reference to the tempo in which a piece is to be sung or played, or a dance performed: in slow time; leisurely and gracefully.'

Its etymology is ad-agio: 'ad' towards, 'agio' ease. Fundamentally, the word is about a manner or way of moving, rather than about speed per se.

¹ All etymologies and definitions are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edition: <https://www.oed.com>.

This manner of being oriented towards ease is directly relevant to the practice of the internal arts. Whatever speed you are moving, the internal quality of being at ease and leisurely, is essential to becoming and remaining present.

The sense that you have all the time in the world is the opposite of being in a rush. Rushing is a mental state rather than a physical one, though it often manifests as rapid movement. One can be sitting down and still be rushing, as *Zhuangzi* observed:

Good fortune and happiness are ever so still,
He who is 'about to' is not still
This is called 'rushing while sitting'.²

In a similar vein, Aquinas observed that the perpetually busy person is as slothful as the indolent one, since they are both unwilling to be present. This is why *acedia* (sloth) was considered to be so dangerous to the soul. Laziness is not really about how much you are doing or how quickly you are doing it, but rather how present you are.

The same is true of **adagio**. It is possible, with practice, to be internally at ease while moving very quickly as well as very slowly. Achieving **adagio**, will allow our physical speed to naturally reflect the conditions around us and within us, and thus to move at the most appropriate speed, rather than it being a function of our over-wrought minds, emotions and nervous systems.

rubato, adj.

Etymon: Italian *rubato*.

Etymology: < past participle of *rubare* **to steal**, **tempo rubato**, 'robbed or stolen time'.

Meaning: 'Of a piece of music: played with a temporary disregard for strict **tempo** to allow an expressive quickening or slowing, typically without altering the overall pace.'

Rubato is another important aspect of **tempo** in Taiji. If we do not allow some variation in the speed of the form, it can become somewhat congested. This is the error of holding onto the middle.³ If we are only able to do the form at one speed, we are stuck.

In our form, a good example of a change in **tempo** occurs when we reach Single Whip, especially when meditating, where you can slow right down. It may even appear that you have paused there, though internally there is no sense of coming to a stop.

allegro, n., adv., and adj.

Etymon: Italian *allegro*.

Etymology: < Italian *allegro* (adjective) **fast, brisk, animated, lively, happy, cheerful, merry**.

While **allegro** is used of a fast, lively **tempo**, it also means 'joyful'. And just as we can be **adagio** at any speed, so too can we be joyful. It is worth remembering that Taiji and neigong are Way practices. How they are done is as important as what is done, since you become what you practise. The playful and joyful **allegro** side of Taiji can move you towards life; to the joy of being present.

Taiji, like music, is joy.

² *Zhuangzi* 4.10.6-7.

³ See, 'Discretion', <https://taichi.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Discretion.pdf>