A Pulse-Slowing Playlist for an Unmoored Time

Here are seven works that speak to the coronavirus time warp, in which days creep along but months vanish in a flash.

Credit...Stephanie Dalton Cowan

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Before the coronavirus, investigating how humans perceive time was mostly the work of psychologists. Then the pandemic confined half the globe to their homes, upending routines and blurring the markers we’d relied on to keep track.

Now, time is an obsession. Google has registered a surge of searches for the day of the week. Individual days creep along, yet April sped by and May evaporated in a flash. And nature moves ahead on schedule, indifferent to human confusion.

Investigations into the perception of time have long been the work of composers, too. Pierre Boulez distinguished between the time we count and the time we inhabit. When I spoke to the percussionist Steven Schick, he brought up those two categories.

“One of the difficulties right now is that we have an underdeveloped capacity to simply occupy time, and we rely on our multiple strategies to count it,” he said. “And when these have been robbed, we are unmoored from the matrix that makes us feel comfortable.”

Since the end of the 19th century, perhaps briding against the nascent industrial age, composers have played with different ways of creating music resistant to man-made mechanics of time keeping. In the United States, the apotheosis of that phenomenon was the music of Morton Feldman, which, as the critic Michael Andor Brodeur wrote recently in The Washington Post, observes exquisitely subtle changes over vast stretches.

Here are seven pieces that speak to the Covid-19 time warp: a playlist of music for the unmoored.

**Wagner’s ‘Parsifal’**

“Here, time becomes space” is the key line of Wagner’s “Parsifal.” At the end of March, the Italian novelist Francesca Melandri published a letter in The Guardian predicting what Britons would go through in the weeks to come. Since Italy was ahead in the pandemic’s trajectory, she said that she was writing from the future. The idea of the future as a country made sense to me. Sequestered in a three-bedroom apartment with my husband and three school-age children, I had come up with a way to carve extra room: I could get up very early in the morning before anyone else. Time became space.

**Satie’s ‘Gnossiennes’**

For hundreds of years, Western composers have used bar lines to subdivide a piece of music. Visually, they help musicians find their bearings in what would otherwise be slippery stream of symbols. But they also help them shape meaning by pointing out where to place emphasis. Take them away and a score becomes like a novel by James Joyce, pages and pages of prose without punctuation.
Beginning in the late 1880s, Erik Satie did away with bar lines in compositions like the hypnotic “Gnossiennes” for piano, which feature delicate modal melodies in the right hand that seem to bob on the rolling arpeggios played in the left.

**Messiaen’s ‘Abyss of the Birds’**

In the music of Messiaen, time becomes a theological preoccupation. He sought ways to escape the linearity of human time to convey the eternal. He was fond of rhythmic palindromes that subverted the traditional one-way flow of a phrase. Slow tempos and expansive silences work to dissolve the listener’s grip on a discernible pulse or pattern, and transcriptions of birdsong stand in for a music perfectly freed from consecutive time.

“The Abyss of the Birds,” a movement for solo clarinet from his “Quartet for the End of Time,” emerges out of silence so stealthily that it appears to have no beginning. Quicksilver flashes of birdsong erupt within the motionless calm in a way that points to the unknowability of nature.

**Philip Glass’s ‘Einstein on the Beach’**

In his search for nonlinear expressions of musical time, Messiaen also drew on Indian traditions. So did Philip Glass. In his work, pulse returns to the forefront and the mechanics of time keeping remain in full view. But with the help of Indian techniques of building time — through the accretion of rhythmic cells, repeated with tiny omissions and additions — the resulting music no longer forms a narrative line. Instead, pieces like “Knee Play 1,” from the opera “Einstein on the Beach,” unfold like a mandala that transfixes the listener. The changes in design are not hidden at all: Here, the singers intone the numbers of the beats. And yet the music feels perfectly static.

**Meredith Monk’s ‘Falling’**

The voices and instruments all trace the same snaky line, lubricated with keening glissandos. But after a few unison iterations, the ensemble splinters, with individual voices trailing slightly behind, like in a glitchy video conference.

Over time, the looping lines overlap like multiple ambulance sirens mixing in traffic-stilled streets. They evoke a single story reiterated over a multiplicity of perspectives. In “Falling,” individual voices eventually peter out, one by one, until a single voice traces one last iteration, subtly mutated in its rhythm. The final silence feels less like an end than the gestation of a whole new cycle.

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**Anna Thorvaldsdottir’s ‘Existence’**

Drones are an extreme expression of music that refuses to be subdivided or measured. Some modern composers wrote evening-long drone epics consisting of nothing other than a sustained,
all-enveloping chord. For the Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdottir, they become the geological foundation of ecologies of sound that carry powerful emotional charges, somewhere between terror and awe.

Pieces like “Existence” may also contain layers of discernible temporality, but the underlying growl of low-voiced instruments — actually a complex ocean of sound rather than a static drone — seem to belie human efforts at imposing order. At times the surface activity is sufficiently beguiling to draw attention away from it, but the hum is there all the time, changing and churning with inhuman patience.

**Jacob Cooper’s ‘Stabat Mater Dolorosa’**

When Jacob Cooper wrote this slow-motion take on Pergolesi’s “Stabat Mater,” he was inspired by studies suggesting that time seems to stretch in the final moments before death, like a freeze-frame fall into the abyss. But this exhaustingly poignant work now seems to capture the Covid-specific grief of the bereaved, bereft even of the rituals of mourning. In a 28-minute long dirge, Mr. Cooper takes the opening bars of a gorgeous 18th-century lamentation full of aching harmonic suspensions and renders it in extreme slow motion so that its pulse becomes undetectable.

Suspensions were a favorite expressive device in the Baroque era, created when one of two voices moves a step, creating a temporary dissonance that is resolved when the other voice follows suit, restoring consonance. At normal speed, this creates throbs of delicious tension, more a tease than real discomfort. But at Mr. Cooper’s glacial pace, each dissonance is left hanging so long that it seems to suck the oxygen out of the air. Traditional harmonic motion relies on human memory, the knowledge of where the music started and wants to return. But stretched out like this, a listener loses track of origins, and with it any hope of resolution.