

## Why your watch can't tell the truth



RMN (Domaine de Chantilly) / René-Gabriel Ojéda



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A collection of ballads, motets and songs: *Tout par compas suy composée*, early 15th century. Baude Cordier.

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A watch reveals only the surface of time, which is in fact endowed with both depth and elasticity. Einstein demonstrated its relativity as well – yet another aspect of time unaccounted for by a watch. And yet that is doubtless wherein lies the secret of time that appears “suspended”. This kind of time is a living and singular time that is within individuals and not in watches. In his novel *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann evoked the paradoxical elasticity of time. In substance, he wrote that a boring day appears endless, while a life of boredom flashes past in a moment; inversely, a day filled with fascinating activity is gone in an instant, while a life of fascinating activity seems to last for ages. If it were truly to keep time, the watch should enable its owner to immerse himself in a life of fascinating activity. Instead, it does nothing more than display universal time. The latter kind of time cannot be kept. None can hope to possess it, since it belongs to all. Worse still, the watch exiles individuals from their own personal time into the no man’s land of collective time.

Music, on the other hand, is able to keep proper time because it restores listeners’ individual time. Hearing a tune you loved 20 years ago brings the past rushing back with a vibrant presence. Music can also propel us far into the future. Music unites the past and future of the listener within a continuous present. Musicians are thus definitely more skilled at mastering time. Watchmakers might understandably be shocked to realise that time is not something you look at, but something you listen to.

**Its hands can't dance.** Watchmaking is tirelessly repetitive and the circling motion of hands is deadly boring, whereas in music, variation is the keynote. Despite an ever-present tempo, it oscillates constantly through the magic of variation. That is what maintains musical tension and holds the listener’s attention. What is known in the world of music as *rubato*, or “stolen time”, helps us grasp how variation makes the beat elastic. *Rubato* is the shaping or phrasing of music to achieve subtle rhythmic manipulation and nuance in performance. It consists of

taking time and then giving it back – for example by extending the first beat of a waltz, and then accelerating on the two following beats. But a good musician, while locally extending or accelerating beats, is also capable of respecting the overall duration of a piece. It is almost as if the seconds hand were to move at varying speeds while the transition of minutes remained as precise as ever. If a watch were a true timekeeper, its hands would be able to dance.

**It doesn't have multi-layered hands.** Music also reveals the depth of time. The concept of rhythm helps to explain what this means. In a piece of music, one particular rhythm is generally dominant, the pulsation or beat. But in actual fact, even the simplest tune has several rhythms. You can see what that means by singing *Frère Jacques* slowly, at a normal pace and then fast. Each beat encompasses one syllable, then two, and four or three syllables when sung fast. When *Frère Jacques* is sung at a normal speed, the ear simultaneously perceives three different beats. The time of *Frère Jacques* is thus a multi-layered time. Within a symphony, several instrumental lines, each with several different rhythms, are subtly overlaid. Listeners perceive both a general rhythm and the layering of the various beats of each line. This simultaneous perception doubtless contributes to enveloping them within the close-knit weave of a multiple kind of time. If a watch were a real timekeeper, each hand would be multi-layered to reproduce the depth of time in its different rhythms.

**It can't make people play.** Even a stunningly beautiful watch is an instrument that basically works to make us work. A watch is incapable of making people play. The best it can do at times is to mark the temporal boundaries of play. Authors such as Huizinga and Runco<sup>1</sup> define play as a gratuitous activity engaged in by freely consenting participants; and work as an activity that has a specific purpose and is shaped by external constraints. In ancient times, the word *negotium* – trade – meant “I don't have time for *otium*” – idleness. According to sociologist Bernard Stiegler<sup>2</sup>, working time was considered as a very common time, the time of an individual who does not have

the means to be idle, a time to which one is subjected, a time of slavery. The noble time of *otium* was the exclusive preserve of free men. But the time of idleness in that age was not the leisure time of modern consumers. It was devoted to grand games, to gratuitous speculation in the fields of philosophy, mathematics and poetry, to games of skill and intellect, and to music.

Therefore smash your watch. Music is all about play. Composers play when they speculate on the following note they should write. Performers play an instrument, and by rendering their own singular version of the written notes, also play with the score. And finally, listeners play, because music leads them back and forth between images and sounds, between absence and presence, between feelings and thought.

Just like the composer, performers and the music itself, listeners are inwardly mobile. The musical game makes them permeable to all manner of sensations and impressions, and stirs them to their very depths. Music both immerses them in time and releases them from its empire. Time is suspended, captured and guarded.

One might even be tempted to conclude that watches show a time of slavery, and that we should begin by smashing our watches if we wish to keep time. But it's a step we won't take, because although a watchmaking artisan is powerless to create a true timekeeper, he nonetheless nurtures a passionate enthusiasm, of which the watch he creates is a visible trace. And if it can serve to convey the spirit of the person who crafted it to the person who wears it, perhaps the watch may thus indeed occasionally serve as an authentic timekeeper. ●

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens – A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Maurice Temple Smith Ltd, 1970

Mark A. Runco, *Creativity – Theories and Themes: Research, Development, and Practice*, Elsevier, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Stiegler, article published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* n° 65, special issue entitled, “Comprendre le Capitalisme” (Understanding Capitalism), 2006.