

LIFE AS A JOURNEY THROUGH MUSIC DISCOVERING THE RHYTHMS OF LIFE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

"I see my life in terms of music".

Albert Einstein

I have often thought that music is the perfect medium to understand, give shape, and give meaning to the various vicissitudes of life itself. Music has accompanied me throughout my growth, from childhood to adulthood, has given a voice to emotions and events, slotting into life like pieces of a puzzle and synchronizing with my experience at the specific moment in time of its presence. I often find myself with songs in my head for no apparent reason, only to realise they are describing my emotions, or moments of experience – they communicate my *self*. Music is a permanent soundtrack of my life, thoughts, and emotions.

"Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent". Victor Hugo

Some years ago, I was on a spiritual retreat with a female guide who had been trained by and was an expert in the spiritual and shamanistic culture of Native Americans. This was a one day "walk into the wild", into the woods, where we were to experience nature as our teacher. This meant, in brief, to receive messages from the universe, or to understand ourselves, or our lives, through the nature around us.

After a day of walking, listening, sharing, we sat together in a circle in a small clearing in the woods to meditate, eyes closed, guided initially by our female guide, and then in silence. It was a relaxing meditation that asked us to merely be aware of any images or messages that came up during the meditation. During the "silence", I listened with all of my senses to my surroundings.

The woods we had ventured into were beautiful, peaceful and calm, but sat on a tall hill very close to a main roadway which, on that particular sunny, warm day, was exceptionally busy with noisy cars and motorbikes. I found my attention fluctuating between the natural elements around me – birdsong, leaves rustling, the breeze - and those of the busy road below. I listened, unfazed, open-minded. The rumble of an engine, the beeping of a car horn, someone shouting something unintelligible, the constant hum of the traffic. It was all... *music*. I suddenly had a moment of clarity – or enlightenment, if I can dare to call it that – where I imagined the entire planet, and then universe, as one giant orchestra, moving and fluctuating between tempos, rhythms, pitches, timbres, melodies, harmonies. I felt a deep and great connection with the universe, that everything *was*, and then began to *feel* the music of the world around me, as if everything were a musical instrument in a universal orchestra, a universal piece of music, from the birdsong to the rumble of an engine, I felt an incredible sense of beauty, connection, peace, and harmony. I imagined a great creative energy of the universe as a conductor, conducting the music of every living thing, our planet, the universe. It made sense to me, like when something clicks in place, it was a way of describing the world and my relationship to it at that moment.

Once the meditation had finished, I was so overjoyed with this feeling of connection, meaning and understanding that I had had, that I excitedly shared my experience with the rest of the group. I watched their eyes as they stared blankly at me. Once I had finished, one by one they told me how the noise had had the exact opposite effect on them, that they had been too distracted by the noises from the road to concentrate on those of the natural environment surrounding us, and found the meditation difficult. At the time, I remember feeling disappointed that they had not shared the same experience as me – but I was reminded of how one person's music, is another person's noise.

The effects of music, or what actually *sounds* like music, is therefore subjective – as we listen to music, we can feel pleasure, horror, and everything in between. The same goes for an inflicted pause, or *rest* - a "holiday" from the frenzy of day to day living can be experienced as an extraordinary opportunity, or pure suffering, and everything in between.

During this very unusual moment of our existence – the arrival of Covid-19 – this reflection on music as the rhythm of life often came back to my mind. Looking back, these past months have given us completely unexpected moments, and rhythms, which doesn't mean to say these were necessarily unpleasant – pandemic aside, of course.

Let's think back to the moment when lockdown began – at that time, it was as if we were all speeding along a highway, and then suddenly we were all asked, at the same time, *everyone*, to pull the handbrake. Some did so

quicker than others, some willingly, others not, but we all stopped, every single one of us. In music, this would be the equivalent of what's called a rest, one of those that doesn't just last for one bar, but two, three, five. 30. 40. 60.

But it isn't really *stopping*, is it – music, just like time, moves forward, even during rests. There's a poetic notion that music is like "painting on silence", therefore, to better understand music, one must have experienced the lack of music – silence. Mozart and Debussy famously said that "music is not in the notes, but in the silence between" – just as silence, rests, help us to understand the colours of notes, of life.

The fact of having to "stop" – then, slowly, gaining one's bearings, beginning to move gently, even if only within – searching for new rhythms, experimenting with slowness, playing with quick and slow tempos, for me, personally, was a beautiful, marvelous experience, almost mystical. I cannot deny the initial difficulties – the body, accustomed to another rhythm, a different music, was initially flinching, tense, as was the mind – but letting oneself go to the imposed rhythm of that time, which was *andante lento*, *lento*, *lentissimo*, made room for beauty and awareness in a way that I didn't think possible in the current state of the world. We had more time to observe, and I observed nature's reawakening, timid at first, I watched it take *back* its *space*, which is long overdue – to me, this was a truly moving experience. Giving oneself the time to enjoy the big little things of life, watching nature grow, move forward, prosper (despite everything it has previously been subjected to), to observe its daily rhythms, listen to its music, was wonderful. I realized that despite the "slowness" of daily life during lockdown, the days flew by like candles in the wind.

Humans, like music, have a progressive movement - we are perpetually thrust forward, following the tempo and rhythms of the universe as we presently know it. There is no *real* "going back" – everything *must* go forward, somehow. Even if one remains motionless, immobile, perfectly still, one is still in motion – physically, as the planets, Earth, moon and stars around us revolve and orbit, and internally, as the body functions, and ages – and spiritually, as the mind continues to travel, even if at times it may not appear to be so, towards the future. Of

course, memory – to which music is intrinsically linked – can appear to take us back to a specific moment, stage, emotion of our lives – but this is *memory*, muscular, sensorial, spiritual memory. It helps us to "relive" that moment, whether we like it or not. It does not, however, reverse *time* itself, nor does it *physically* move us back to that *place* in our lives.

Time therefore moves forwards, whether we perceive this as being fast or slow, as does music. If we think of the music of our lives – as if we had a perpetual orchestra, jukebox, Spotify, whichever you prefer - playing the music of each moment, describing each moment, then we can think of life as having tempo, rhythm, timbre, pitch, dynamics, melody, harmony.

Tempo (ironically, Italian for *time*) is the "speed or pace of a given piece (of music)" and is usually measured in bpm (beats per minute), as if measuring the "heartbeat" of a piece of music. There are a series of different tempos for music, especially classical music, but the three main areas of tempo are, in easy terms, slow, medium, and fast.

"To live is to be musical, starting with the blood dancing in your veins. Everything living has a rhythm. Do you feel your music?" Michael Jackson

Let's ask ourselves this question – what is *our* music? Of course, this can change drastically from one moment to the next, it isn't always necessarily the same, it follows our life, but to ask ourselves this, *now*, is a way to understand the time we are living. If we dare to say that the musical rhythm of the world before Covid-19 was fast, *prestissimo*, even *accelerando*, when lockdown was enforced, the rhythm of our lives changed entirely. Perhaps it was a lesson we all needed to learn; planet included. If learning to slow down, to enjoy a slow tempo, to broaden the pace, is part of our life lesson, if we do not attempt this, life will thrust this upon us in one way or another. How many times have you heard of people who have always lived life in the "fast-lane", who suddenly have something happen in their lives that forces them to slow down? This is no coincidence, perhaps it is a life lesson rearing its head, whether we like it or not, and we must listen to these lessons, foresee them, if possible, before they take us by surprise. Perhaps Covid-19 appeared for this very reason.

For some, however, lockdown was boring. Before, we were accustomed to continuous and constant stimulation, which, perhaps made us feel "alive". On the other hand, on days like those during lockdown which appeared to move forward without any changes in tempo, some may find themselves thinking they are not really *living*. To begin with, it can be a good thing to feel that something is moving (rather) slowly, with a constant pace, but as time goes on, the constant feel of this tempo can seem to drag on. Habituated to the patterns of consumerism, when bored, we *feel* as though we are neither producing, nor consuming. Boredom terrifies us.

We do everything we can to push it away – in our era, this often means staying connected to social media, messaging, gaming, TV, etc., in other words, we seek distraction. However, boredom is a place we should learn to exist, cohabit, in order to transform it, raise it and make ourselves, our lives, and the world around us, better. There are examples of people who have been hospitalized for a long time, who discovered or nurtured a talent – Frida Kahlo, to make a very well-known example, or Melody Gardot, an American Jazz singer and musician – and transformed a time of “constant stillness” in active anticipation and beauty.

After lockdown, the moment arrived – reopening. For some, *finally*, for others, all too soon. For everyone, a small or big change, and change in music, in rhythm – those who just want to “go back to the way it was”, others who say “never again”. For those who love slowness, or learned to love it, this change in rhythm, this acceleration, may have been experienced as a difficult task to face. Let’s go back to the image of the orchestra, with its conductor. Before being able to play together, the orchestra must get in tune, prepare, be *ready* to move together. Let’s imagine that during that moment of preparation, the conductor starts conducting the first movement of the piece, something intense and *forte*, with a fast tempo, that involves all of the instruments, without paying attention to who is ready to begin and who is not. It would be difficult in such a circumstance to find all of the musicians ready to play *together*. Some musicians might find themselves ready, but many would not, and they would find themselves chasing after the piece until they could catch up. The first impact of this “start” would most likely not be very musical, or accurate, to the ear. To have the pretense that everything and everyone can start again with the same pace is counterproductive, in fact, probably impossible. Hence why, when lockdown was eased, this was done slowly, step by step. To open up to compassion, empathy and awareness is perhaps the best approach.

Before lockdown, we all had *our own life* music. Lockdown forced us to change it, and now once again we are asked to adapt, to find new music for the so-called “re-opening”. It is not possible to have everything as it was before – let’s not throw out the baby with the bath

water, there must have been something good beforehand – but it is not possible to think that after such a long pause, everything and everyone is ready and capable of starting again with the same energy and rhythm as before. We realized

that it is possible to do things differently, better, sustainably, *in every way*. Something has shifted on a cosmic level, we are all searching for new music, new rhythms, to proceed with a new, perhaps unexplored, way of living the experience of life.

The beauty of following the movement and rhythm of life, of searching for your own rhythm, is that you can surprise yourself, and others. If we allow ourselves to take off our “habitual mask” and play positively and consciously with tempo, with respect and compassion for ourselves and others, this can have surprising results. A change in tempo can create a feeling of strength – being able to adapt and know how to adjust makes us feel like we own the moment, we “can do it”. It helps us to stay positive in the face of adversity, and to remove prejudices and preconceived notions.

Exploring tempos that can even seem impossible to achieve at first can help to be more flexible, to adapt better, to be more compassionate, empathic, skilful, and ready for action. Personally, these all seem to be positive things to achieve.

To experiment with the tempo of our lives, whilst clearly respecting the tempo of others, listening to our music and the music of others, seems to be a good way of creating empathy and understanding. And the world definitely needs that.

“A Man should hear a little music, read a poem, look at a beautiful image every day of his life, in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful which God has implanted in the human soul”.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe