

ART FOR THE FUTURE

# Justice Is as Slow as Possible

In the former East German town of Halberstadt, a musical piece will last over 600 years


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On a recent Monday, the caretakers of the Halberstadt Project made a chord change in the 639-year performance of John Cage's composition *Organ<sup>2</sup>/ASLSP* (As Slow as Possible). That makes 16 chord changes so far in 23 years.

For the most part, this extreme meditation on time and sound is nothing more than an evanescent, pleasant ambient hum in a nearly 1,000-year old church in Germany, in the town where the organ was invented in 1361. If you spend time in the church, walking around the compact organ with its few pipes, the pedals weighed down by small sandbags, and the nearby electronic bellows that keep the air flowing through the pipes, you will hear many things in and beyond the organ's prolonged chord: A gentle wind, the sounds of a ship in a busy harbor, and of course the ambient sounds of the other mortals in the structure, those who — like you — will not live to hear the final note.

When something big is going to happen, like a chord change, it's scheduled far enough in advance so that people can book tickets to be present. On ordinary days, the organ specially built for the performance plays in a tempo deliberately beyond human comprehension of the movements and changes in the mere 8-page document Cage left.

What is it like for the pipes to play, drawing in air, releasing it with exquisite sameness-until-not-same? It's a little bit how time feels in our ordinary lives, like the daily greeting with coffee and oatmeal that is my husband's sweet gesture, going on so long now that one assumes it will never end or even change.

I get impatient sometimes with how mundane life is, all the repetition. Yet in the grand scheme, it's less than a blink, so fleeting. You get fooled, dulled, and can't perceive the shifts so much from day to day. The little habits dropped, the physical alterations in the beloved's face, back, gut, gait. The eventual absences surprise, wound us. But they were happening all along.

The Halberstadt project is an act of enormous trust, a commitment to build and maintain and play an organ until 2640, which means a commitment to train successors who will train successors who will train successors. No human being will hear it from start to finish. It can only be played communally, not by a single artist.

It's like planting a tree, bringing a person into the world, painting a picture, working for justice, writing a book. I trust time to do what it does, to move and to ruin, but maybe this will last anyway. I will try.

The humble little church where this project takes place is already almost 1,000 years old. We trust it, too, to last another 600 years. Maybe our trust, itself, helps to assure that endurance.

Halberstadt has been a witness to quite a lot in its history. There are the twisting and winding of territorial struggles since Roman times, moving through Saxony, Prussia, Westfalia, the Weimar, the Third Reich, then a consequential spell behind the Iron Curtain for forty years in the GDR, and now the modern German state of Saxony-Anhalt.

Through those centuries Halberstadt saw the invention of the pipe organ, the establishment of a major center for Orthodox and later Reform Judaism, the birth of the science of ornithology with [18,000 bird specimens in a nearby museum](#), the establishment of an air works to build planes in the First World War, the destruction of its synagogues during Kristallnacht (the Jewish community was ordered by local officials to pay for the rebuilding), a forced labor camp established as a satellite to Buchenwald during Hitler's regime, the rebuilding of its once-medieval town center after it was destroyed, and now this long, lingering performance on organ, meant to outlast us all.

Halberstadt isn't terribly far from the [Green Belt](#), a natural preserve created in the footprint of the old dividing wall between West and East Germany. "Grief sits in places," says geographer Sonja K. Pieck in her fine book [Mnemonic Ecologies](#), which examines the work to create a unique ecological conservation reserve while also commemorating the human harm and damage done in the name of geopolitics.

When Halberstadt was bombed nearly flat by Ally planes in the World War, most of its medieval downtown and centuries-old timbered houses were reduced to rubble. Some 2,500 people were killed. Killed also, in this and every conflict, are nonhuman bystanders, from family pets to farm animals to wild birds, bears, deer, ground mammals. War is destructive to every living thing.

[Rainer Neugebauer](#), a historian, educator, and philosopher who has dedicated his life to John Cage's work and the music performance in Halberstadt, has this to say about the experience: "One is made part of a wonderful opportunity....Organ2/ASLSP is a kind of utopia foreshadowing a future society" in which production and usefulness will no longer be the criteria for all life, when humans will value slowness and individuality, and will not feel so compelled to seek meaning.

In the slow, simple approach I myself am able to make — YouTube videos — I can already feel the press of this music on me. There's no meaning, but something beyond, a presence and endurance I can sense. The sound is pleasant, one single chord. It works on your nervous system and calms you. Soon after I encountered Organ2/ASLSP and the charms of Halberstadt, I picked up Pieck's book. Between them, it was my first detailed experience in my lifetime of a real place in Germany, not the scraps of stories I'd inherited from family who didn't know it any better than I did.

I read in Pieck's book about the whinchat, and the bluethroat, birds miraculously saved by the novel grassland that was created by the no-man's-land around the wall. I read about the growth of the German conservation movement and the movement to commemorate the Cold War dead along the wall's once-brutal edges.

I read about the healing, the birds, the river restorations, the graves and farms of German families. I heard the one soft drawn-out note on YouTube, and Rainer Neugebauer's hopeful vision for the future. And I knew that all the same I could not go back, that I will never go back.

Even knowing everything I know — that monsters sit inside all of us, that any one of us can be a follower for unspeakable ends, that peace and joy remain possible, that the beauties and kindnesses of these places are real — this is a journey I know I won't make.

Organ2/ASLSP is only 23 years into its 639-year duration. If you ascribe to the mystic belief that a sound itself can make some difference, that, as Neugebauer refers to the philosopher Walter Benjamin saying, "the tiniest detail or fragment contains a core of truth," then perhaps you can believe with me that the organ, and its song in a crumbling church, matter. Neither of us needs to be there, for that to be true.