

# THE PAUSE IN MUSIC AND LIFE: ITS MANY QUALITIES

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In music, sound and silence are interspersed and interpenetrated. Depending on the relationship they establish with each other, different qualities and meanings can emerge. Observing this dynamic can lead to interesting discoveries about the meaning of silences and pauses in our lives as well. How and when do they happen? What qualities can they have? How do we relate to them in our soul and take advantage of their messages and opportunities? Listen ...

Good evening, everyone. The idea of this conversation is to look at the element of “pause”, see how it happens in the musical context and then make some considerations in relation to the moment we live in.

To talk about music, I think it's important to start by mentioning that listening to music is different from listening to other sounds. Our listening works in a very peculiar way when we are facing a musical phenomenon. This can be exemplified in the following way: when we hear any sound, a noise in the house, in the car, on the street, in nature or anywhere else, the most common question that arises in us is: what produced that sound? In truth, we always seek the sound's source. It is the sound of the wind, it is the sound of the sea, the sound of rain, of the river, of leaves, of animals, the noise of a machine, of objects in the house, etc. Whatever it is, it is always sound “of” something. The moment we identify the sound source and give it its name, we answer this often unsettling question, that invades us. This answer is important, because we are guided in space by the sound of things, we gather information about the world through sounds. Being able to identify the different sounds is part of our survival instinct. A sound can mean food, water, danger, a call, etc. In this sense, we share this dimension of listening with animals.

Listening to music is something different. Intuitively, we are not looking for the sound source, but rather we are looking for “what song is this?” In this sense, our listening is not looking for things, objects or something external beyond the tones, but the identity manifested in the tonal relationships between them and their musical meaning. In essence we have only 12 tones (think of the seven white keys and five black keys on a piano), which are replicated a few octaves above and below in the context of our listening range. It is in the particular configurations and relationships of these tones that a musical identity, a melody, a sequence of chords and even a rhythmic pattern are perceived. This configuration receives a name, be it a song or an instrumental piece. Even when it is being played by a different instrument or played a little faster, a little slower, higher or lower; if the proportional relations between the tones and their durations are maintained, we will recognize it as the same song (even if we don't know its name). It cannot be ignored that the variations of instruments (timbre), intensity (strong or soft), whether it is in a high or low register and even the tempo (fast or slow), have an impact on the subjective perception of the listener; since these elements are important qualifiers of the musical experience. The same melody played on a violin or a trombone certainly sounds different and can affect the listener's reception. But, at a more essential level, as long as the proportionality of their tonal and rhythmic ratios is maintained, none of these versions has the power to transform this song into another song, change its identity.

Actually, this is due to the fact that the musical experience has its essence not exactly in the acoustic dimension, but in the relationship that is established between the tones, a relationship that is given by the set of tones and rhythms organized in a system. This does not happen with the other sounds of the environment. This system is something alive, generating a “force field” created by the tones themselves and for the tones themselves to express their musical meaning. Each tone exists as a vector in this field, a will impulse that “wants something”: it seeks a resolution or generates an expectation, it asserts itself, creates a question, opens up a new possibility, manifests balance or unbalance. Throughout a song, the set of tonal and rhythmic configurations generate a flow of events that pass from state to state, in a constant transformation. It can be observed, for example, how a strained chord dissolves in another or follows an intensification of tension; how the last chord of a song can emphatically (or not) resolve the musical narrative that has been developing. In correlation to all of this, the various moments that happen throughout a performance, lead us subjectively to different soul states. Each of these moments can be called "states of force", an emergent state with a peculiar characteristic, active in the

relationship with the moments that precede and succeed it; in a general and systemic way, along with all the other moments of the piece.

It may happen that in the middle of a song, as well as before its beginning and after its end, what we call “silence” occurs. This is not an absence of acoustic phenomena, as this, under normal environmental conditions, simply does not exist: noises from chairs, people coughing, humming of an air conditioner and others sounds, are part of the acoustic environment of any concert hall. The silence we are referring to here is the absence of tonal and rhythmic forces in a given musical context. The pause, in this sense, does not indicate the absence of an event or acoustic stimulus, but the absence, at least in the external sphere, of the forces that act in music; the pause occurs when the acoustic dimension of the music ceases and is no longer perceived in space - but its force remains.

What happens, as we will see later, is that precisely what disappears from the ear as external data, is heard within us. Pauses in music lead to an inversion of the direction of our attention. We stop listening outside and start listening inside. It is also noted that the quality of what appears in our interior is permeated by the states of forces of the music that has manifested itself up to that moment; as well, oddly enough, as for what will follow. The important thing, then, when talking about the pause in music, is to perceive and characterize the quality of these states of force as a silent counterpart of music; and how they reverberate within us.

To exemplify this point of view, we will now listen to four small extracts of music containing pauses and try to characterize their qualities. I recommend that you listen to the works in their entirety afterwards so that you can experience the quality of the breaks in their larger context.

We will start with the “Overture” of W. A. Mozart's opera “The Magic Flute”.

We have at the beginning and then again in the middle of the piece three great chords of the orchestra in juxtaposition with pauses.

Example 1

W. A. Mozart - The magic flute - Opening (excerpt)

To hear follow the link <https://marcelopetraglia.com.br/?p=1013#ex1>

As we can see, we have these chords juxtaposed to pauses. When it comes to the opening of an opera, one can immediately ask: what is the meaning of this alternation, sound-silence, sound-silence, sound-silence, and the music that follows? Considering the two moments where you have the chord blocks with their pauses, you can see that what follows the first block has a certain character of announcement: one can speak of “expectation”, “opening a portal”, which is gently followed by a movement in a major key until the entrance of the main theme which is developed in the form of a fugue. The second appearance, on the other hand, comes after a clear cadence of conclusion. The song could end there ... but it doesn't. The chords themselves are no longer as bright as the first ones and what follows directly is the main theme, but now dealt with in a minor mode.

As a first observation, it can be said that pauses serve to mark moments of transition. They bring with them the possibility and openness to lead to quite different situations, connecting sometimes polar environments. Here it is not the appropriate place to make a detailed analysis of this great work by Mozart, or even to try to define precisely the meaning of these pauses, but it is worth considering the following: The “Magic Flute” has as one of its central motives the theme of “silencing”. The great challenge of the hero of the story (Tamino) is, even in the most difficult moments, to be silent; in order to reach a state of greater conscience and conquer the right to marry his beloved (Pamina). He must learn to respect an inner process. At another time (somewhat comicaly), another character (Papageno) has a lock put on his mouth. The symbol could not be more explicit; he is telling us: "be silent and listen". These are perhaps some of the questions that could be investigated in this work.

As a second example, we have the beginning of J. S. Bach's “The art of the Fugue” Counterpoint XI.

#### Example 2

J. S. Bach - The art of fugue - Counterpoint XI (excerpt)

To hear follow the link <https://marcelopetraglia.com.br/?p=1013#ex2>

Here we hear rests interrupting the flow of melodies. In this brief example, two events stand out:

1) the pauses in each voice act as a kind of contraction, or a “brake” in the discours - rest, tone, tone, tone / rest, tone, tone, tone / rest, tone, tone, tone / rest and the resolution of the tension accumulated by these contractions in a downward movement to the center of tonal balance of the piece. It is worth noting that, despite the rests, we clearly perceive the arc of the melody as a whole. Here we have not rupture, but the continuity of the flow crossing the rests and connecting the various segments of the theme.

2) A curious aspect of this example is that as the following instruments introduce the theme and become intertwined with the others, we continue to hear the rests even if other instruments play at that very same moment. We hear rests, but there is really no silence.



Here it is clear that, in music, a pause is not characterized by acoustic silence (absence of sound), but rather as a space where tonal forces act beyond the tone. That being said, we saw two other aspects of the pauses that are quite different from the previous example.

In the next example, Johann Strauss II's “Blue Danube” (something well known), we will hear the evolving of a waltz, which becomes more and more intense, until the moment when the sound flow is interrupted with a general rest by the orchestra .

### Example 3

J. Strauss II - Blue Danube (excerpt)

To hear follow the link <https://marcelopetraglia.com.br/?p=1013#ex3>

It is quite noticeable how much the intensification that precedes the pause contributes to its state of suspension and expectation. But, in my view, the most significant thing in this case is given by what comes after it. Contrary to Mozart's example, there is no change in direction or mode here; the theme is resumed in its initial form and “life goes on ...”,

everything starts anew, and can evolve again. You hear something known, which ends up giving this rest, despite the great expectation it produced, the experience of relieving tension, taking a deep breath to return to a comfortable environment.

In this fourth and final example taken from the piece “Tabula Rasa” (1977) by the estonian composer Arvo Pärt, the pause occurs in the passage between the two large sections of the piece.

#### Example 4

Arvo Pärt - Tabula Rasa (excerpt)

To hear follow the link <https://marcelopetraglia.com.br/?p=1013#ex4>

It can be said that we have heard a dramatic intensification here, something that almost gets to be oppressive. Then a rest, a void, perpetuates the state left by the final tones. What follows, however, is something entirely new and somewhat surprising. It seems that we are taken to another plane. I would like to suggest that this rest has the characteristic of a “transcendence pause”, that is, a pause, or a silence, that needs to happen, when something demands to be led to another state of existence. Here we hear only the moment of transition, but, as stated earlier, in the context of the piece as a whole, the meaning of these pauses is strongly deepened and extended.

There are, of course, many other types of pauses, that are just as interesting. But I hope that what has been heard and commented so far has been sufficient to indicate how one can experience a pause in music: as a state of force, a state of mind and mainly as a question directed to our interior.

I would also like to propose that, among other things, pauses can be experienced as:

- 1) an invitation to inner listening (as in the example of Mozart)
- 2) an interruption, a break that halts a process (as in the example of Bach);
- 3) a suspension, which creates an expectation (as in the example of J. Strauss);
- 4) a restriction that prevents something from happening (perhaps what we are experiencing in this pandemic is something like this);
- 6) a threshold break, which constitutes a portal for something totally new to happen

(as in our last example);

7) a moment of inversion in a cyclic process, as in breathing, the moment when inspiration ends and expiration begins and also in the opposite direction. If we notice well, there is always a small stop between these two directions, a kind of zero point in the movement. This moment is in fact an integral and fundamental part of every organic process, since everything that is alive, lives in pulsating cycles;

8) a rest (or dissolution break). We haven't heard any examples of this type, but you can see it at the end of a process, when everything comes to rest. Here, of course, the duration of this break should be considered. If it gets lost in the void (or if nothing is resumed in the sequence), it stops being a pause, becomes a new state or something else. Therefore, the duration of the pause, whether it is long, short or endless in relation to its context, is something that affects its own identity and meaning.

Thinking now about the current moment and trying to relate it to what was said, I believe that it is possible to make some considerations, of which the first stems from the question: are we on a break? For many people, it can be said: yes. They had to interrupt the flow of the things they had been doing, which for them was vital and important, there is a clear impediment or suspension. Others had to adapt to very unnatural ways and conditions of life. For some, we could still say "the music has changed", but there is no pause. Perhaps it has become even more accelerated, dense and complex. I see many people working harder than before, more involved and even overwhelmed with professional and personal issues. This turns out to be a far cry from what can be understood as a pause; the connection with the external world, with the world of things remains very strong. And as has been suggested, the pause is the moment when what is not tangible materially manifests itself; where everything also turns inward (of oneself and of things). Certainly, many machines stopped and, in this case, we could characterize this pause (from the point of view of the machines) as "paralysis" or "stagnation", because in fact there is a vacuum of forces or any other quality in this event. Therefore, this moment seems to combine several types of experiences, although it is undeniable that, from a functional point of view, the vast majority of people are isolated in a certain situation (more or less active) from which it is difficult to break free. I remember a children's game where everyone ran freely until the catcher shouted "mandrake!", and everyone had to stand still, frozen in the position they were in. The catcher could then take up to three steps to reach and touch

someone (who would become the next catcher). If he couldn't, he would say “mandrake free” and everyone would walk and run again. Taking this game as a metaphor, one can ask: where did each one stop in this pandemic (if it stopped at all)? How has this world event reached each one of us? For some, it may be a pause and it has its specific quality. For others, maybe not.

Therefore, a final question and reflection is now necessary: what is the meaning that this moment has and will have for each one of us? Recalling what was said earlier, in the context of a pause, its meaning is given by what came before, but also by what comes after. It is certain that when "the music comes back" it will resignify this moment. In this sense, how are we preparing for this afterwards? Am I expecting something like the “Blue Danube” break? Which strongly suspends the action, but then everything goes on as if nothing had happened? Will this pause lead to something like in Arvo Pärt's play, where the return of music brings something totally unexpected? There remains, then, the possibility for each one to project this future; listen in this future. So that your break can later be perceived as a good thing. That despite the suffering that many are feeling, this pause has been worth it. That will depend not only on what we lived before and on the break itself, with all its tensions, but on what will come next. It will also depend on how much this “silence” has been used for an internal restructuring that will lead to a more positive state in the future. So I invite each of you to reflect on your personal experience at this moment, suggesting as a stimulus the following questions:

- How much and in what scope is this moment a pause?
- With what quality does it present itself?
- How do I want to take advantage of this moment so that this break becomes something significantly positive in the future?

In addition, I thank everyone for your precious attention and the opportunity to share these thoughts that relate music to life, aiming, even if in a groping and somewhat speculative way, to take a step in the transformation of our conscience. I also thank the support of the organizers of this event and I sincerely wish that everyone will keep safe and well.

## Appendix

Following and complementing this text, are some of the questions and answers asked in the referred presentations, that more or less directly are connected with the exposed theme.

### Questions & Answers

Q - Could it be said that there is an "eco aesthetics" in music?

A - I confess I am not clear about this concept (eco aesthetics), but I assume that it can be understood in two senses: 1) One can speak of an aesthetic appreciation (immediate and sensitive appreciation) of the "echo", of the reverberation, of the forces of music beyond the acoustic data. This would be a characteristic of the musical pause and therefore, yes, something pertaining to the phenomenon of music as a whole. 2) Another consideration comes from recognizing that music is an environmental factor. Music lives in the space around us and like any environmental factor, it is amenable to an aesthetic experience. Also like any environmental factor, it requires care to preserve its potential. Relating this to the question of pause, looking at the question of the boundaries between sound and silences in music, it is interesting to observe two fundamental moments for listening: before starting a piece and the final moment when the sound of the music ceases. Usually, it is expected that there will be a certain silence framing the musical piece. Why? A possible answer would be: the initial silence is filled with possibilities, like a pregnant field of forces. It opens and tunes the ear to the world of music; a world of tonal forces. Already shortly after the end of the performance, it offers the synthesis of the tonal "biography" that we have just heard (its "echo"), in its purely immaterial state; in a way, its essential meaning, which encompasses all the moments lived in the course of listening to the work. Good conductors have the ability to conduct the public, they know how to cultivate and sustain these two moments. They thus give them a character of pause, activating and preserving the musical forces inaudible from an acoustic point of view. In this sense, an "ecological" action taking care of the whole of the system in its various dimensions.

Q - How are the forces present in music called?

A - We can call them "dynamic qualities of tones", as well as "dynamic qualities of rhythms and metrics" (see ZUCKERKANDL, 1976, p 97-139; ZUCKERKANDL, 1973, p 151-200). When we speak of forces, we want to indicate a will in the tones, tones that want

something, that have a certain incompleteness and therefore aim to move towards a state of greater balance. The most classic example is when you hear the ascending diatonic scale, without, however, reaching 8<sup>ve</sup> of the initial tone:



There is clearly a strong expectation and incompleteness of the situation that awaits the final tone. Countless examples, including other melodic gestures or chord relations could be presented; which would lead us to perceive how the tones configure a “field of wills”, boosting the musical movement or even indicating the desire to stay in oneself. It is important to note that it is a mobile “dynamic” quality, as it is not a quality of a specific tone (of the D, the G, the B-flat, etc.), but it is a quality that manifests itself in the tone in a given musical context . Thus, for example, an A may have a quality of center of balance at a given moment in a melodic passage and have another quality (imbalance) at another time. Sometimes the simple change of the tones that precede, succeed or sound simultaneously to this tone, can lead to a change in its dynamic quality. The same occurs in relation to rhythmic and metric structures (measures). Each of the beats and upbeats of a measure has its characteristic force quality and will tint with it the tones it receives. Musical listening, in the final analysis, is a listening of forces.

Q - Can you comment more on the difference between pause and silence?

A - Despite an apparent conceptual overlap, pause and silence have different characteristics. Rests in music do not necessarily correspond to silence from an acoustic point of view. It is known that absolute silence, from an acoustic point of view, is something that does not exist for those who have a more or less healthy ear. Even in an anechoic chamber<sup>1</sup> you can still hear something. What is considered “silence” is generally a low level of noise or environmental acoustic information of any kind. In the case of music, for example in an open air performance, despite the ambient sounds, the music includes rests; as authentic as any other musical rests heard in a concert hall. What makes a rest in the music is the reverberation of the rhythmic-tonal forces beyond the sound, heard in another plane of listening. It is clear here that music and the acoustic environment belong to different orders of existence. Another point to consider is that rests are momentary

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<sup>1</sup> Cameras with maximum sound and electromagnetic insulation.

events, inserted in a context, and gain their meaning from the relationship they establish with this context. Silence, on the other hand, can be a more permanent attribute of a place: a desert, a windless top of a mountain, a temple, are usually places of silence.

Q - Is emptiness also a pause?

A - When observing a traditional chinese painting, for example, of a misty landscape, represented by some stains and lines, where a considerable part of the paper is left blank, we may be tempted to call this unpainted space "empty". But curiously, for the observer, this blank space on the paper, in dialogue with the lines and stains, is anything but empty. Yes, there is a void of ink, but it is potent in strength and meaning. It was enhanced by those few strokes and ends up expressing something as much or more significant than what was painted with paint. So you can think of the pause in music in the same way; the acoustic silence of a musical rest becomes an event of high significance. There are undoubtedly cases in other contexts of life, where one can speak of emptiness or meaninglessness. But that, in my opinion, would no longer have the character of a musical rest; it would be something else.

Q - As in musical intervals, can a pause be considered more consonant or dissonant?

A - If we want to make this kind of relationship, yes, I believe that it is possible to recognize a given rest as highly tense (dissonant). A rest, on the other hand, can have the quality of something quiet, or "consonant" in the sense that, in it, tensions are resolved and a state of agreement is reached, even if it is only a rest.

Q - How can one understand the rests in the initial motive for 5th Symphony of Beethoven?

A - To talk about the quality of these breaks, I think it is important to consider the specific interpretation of the work. There are versions where these rests are practically overrun, while in others they are highly valued (and many other variants). Assuming that the last stage in the creation of a musical work is its interpretation - and in the case of orchestral pieces this is very much in the charge of the conductor - the meaning that each rest will have will depend on the specific reading that the conductor makes of the work. That is why it is worth listening to different performances. In addition to these variations, it is undoubtedly a short rest. I believe that it can be generally understood as a "retention rest", because it interrupts the flow of the same idea, there is really no change of state here after

its occurrence.

Q - How can we make children aware of the meaning of breaks?

A - Thinking in terms of musical education, every time we sing or play something with the children, there are three important moments that can be observed: before starting the music, the rests that eventually occur during the piece and after it ends. You can take advantage of these moments to cultivate an attitude of active listening to the musical forces manifested in silence. We are, for example, in front of a group of students and we are going to start a song. We give the tone and a moment of silence follows. It is at this moment that each one connects with the flow of what wants to sound. In this silence, listening is directed towards the future and becomes a guide for the voice (the voice itself does not know where to go). Respecting and cultivating this moment of silence, making it a habit, I believe can help to develop this dimension of listening. Something similar can happen at the end of the song, preserving the echo of the forces in the acoustic silence that is established. The rests that occur while playing also deserve this type of attention. All of this is largely conducted by the teacher or whoever is leading the children. To the extent that this qualitative experience of rests is a reality for him or her, children intuitively, through practice and imitation, will tend to develop this ability.

Q - Is the quality of the pause related to the quality of listening, of music and life?

A - I understand that the quality of listening is very much related to the intensity of listening attention, to the ability to give attention to the information that arrives through hearing. This applies to music, to be sure, but also to many other situations: in conversation, in listening to one's voices and thoughts, in listening to the environment... For that it is necessary to open a space and provide a good dose of energy to become sensitive to what comes to meet us. The quality of listening would then be dependent on the ability to pay attention to something, forming a "screen" in which the phenomena will print itself. If my attention is directed to some other event in consciousness (a pain, an image or anything else), I lose focus from the original object, the music or person in front of me. If I may, I want to say that I am increasingly convinced that we have a limited amount of attention to give in this life. The attention I give to something or someone will not be given to anyone else. Even people who do many things at the same time, I think they do it because they manage to change their focus very quickly and not because they have different focuses of attention at the same time. The attention is at each moment only in one place. In this sense, it is

perhaps the most precious thing we have.

Q - Is pause action?

A - Yes! But it is an inner action. A musician playing a rest is extremely active (a musical rest is not a moment of rest for the musician). The rest is full of forces and, as a listener or as a performer, when we perceive it, we engage in its activity. The audience perceives the musician's activity during the musical pause. A good musician has the ability not only to conduct the tones, but also to conduct and fill the "silences" with his inner activity. The activity is constant, only that in one moment it is physically manifest and physically audible, in another moment it is on another plane, but equally audible.

### **Acknowledgment**

I sincerely thank Andrea Paz for her great help with the revision of the English version of this text.

### **Online presentation videos**

Available at:

EcoSocial - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzz4vj-TgOY>

Rudolf Steiner University College - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HQrMBFSaLI>

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