

# What Can the Temporal Structure of Auditory Perception Tell Us about Musical “Timelessness”?

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ABSTRACT: “Timelessness” is an area of intense interest for many composers and authors interested in 20th- and 21st-century music, but it is not always clear exactly what the term denotes. In particular, the distinction between the *induction* of timelessness (the listener’s subjective experience of time is altered or suspended by music) and the *perception* of timelessness (the listener recognizes that the music expresses altered or suspended time) has yet to be clarified. This paper argues that, while experiences of timelessness may be *induced* by a wide variety of musics and are not necessarily contingent on specific musical qualities, the *perception* of musical timelessness involves relationships between music’s temporal organization and the temporal structure of auditory perception. Of particular interest are segmentation, sequence, pulse, meter, and repetition. Music whose temporal organization optimizes human information processing and embodiment expresses “human time,” and music whose temporal organization subverts or exceeds human information processing and embodiment points outside of human time, to timelessness. This hypothesis is illustrated with examples from the 20th-century repertoire by Truax, Ligeti, Crumb, Reich, Tenney, Messiaen, and Grisey, music that has been associated with timelessness.

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[1] What can it mean to speak of music, the temporal art *par excellence*, as “timeless”? Composers and theorists of the 20th and 21st century speak with fascination about a radical transformation of time in certain strains of post-tonal music, describing the “spatialization of time” (Hasty 1997, 297), “a real dissociation from the past and future” (Kramer 1988, 382), and “an eternity that is present in every moment” (Stockhausen 1963; quoted in Heikenheimo 1972, 120–21). While discrepancies between time subjectively experienced and time objectively quantified are widely recognized—our estimations of duration and of the “speed” of the “passage” of time are notoriously inaccurate and contingent on a variety of contextual factors (Kramer 1988, 369)—the discourse of musical timelessness seems to go far beyond quantitative comparisons of phenomenological assessment and chronometric measurement. Authors frequently imply a complete withdrawal from the