

Returning After COVID's Time Warp

As musical life begins to resume after more than a year of pandemic-induced hibernation, we are finding that the world seems to have changed at a faster pace than actual chronological time. What fresh approaches can we take to restart our musical lives, continue to innovate and experiment, and embrace our brave new worlds?

by Simon Woods



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"I thought I was prepared. I knew all the theory. Reality's different."

That's a line from one of my favorite movies of recent years, director Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar*, which was released in 2014. All Nolan's movies demonstrate a deep fascination with time, often to an almost baffling degree—and his most recent movie, *Tenet*, is no exception. When I was in Los Angeles, I was lucky enough to spend some time with Nolan (he's a classical music lover) and with Kip Thorne, the Nobel Prize-winning Caltech-based physicist who's behind all the science in *Interstellar*. I don't think I'm misrepresenting Professor Thorne in saying that everything in *Interstellar* is entirely scientifically legitimate, if not yet actually realizable.

The movie centers on the search for an inhabitable planet in a distant galaxy, as humanity's survival becomes increasingly less assured on Earth. There's a moment during the search that has been haunting

me recently, because it seems such a metaphor for the moment we find ourselves in today. Three astronauts leave a spaceship to land on a planet that's situated on the edge of a black hole. Returning after spending a few more hours than intended on the planet's surface, they are shocked to find that their fellow astronaut who had remained on the spaceship has aged 23 years, due to the impact of "time dilation" near black holes—as Einstein predicted in his Special Theory of Relativity.

Just over a year ago, concerts came to an abrupt stop. For the last 16 months, we've worked remotely, improvised ways to sustain our organizations, invented new ways to work as teams, built out new digital media strategies at unprecedented speed, figured out how to play music socially distanced and with masks, and generally thrown everything we knew at adapting to a moment that none of us ever expected or asked for. Ingenuity and flexibility were the survival strategy. As each month

passed, timelines got gradually sucked into the black hole, as hopes for returning to live concerts, with a few exceptions, moved from the next month to the summer, to the fall, to the next year—and then finally the realization dawned that only with a COVID vaccine would we see the return of anything we recognized as normal.

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Now, with an ever-growing proportion of the U.S. population vaccinated and the lines on COVID graphs plunging, we're finally pulling away from the force field, as



returning to concert halls with full audiences at last comes into view.

But while we've been away, the world has changed beyond measure. Extraordinary events have happened in those 23 metaphorical time-distorted years. As of late spring, more than three million people had died from the pandemic, leaving behind gaping holes in their families and grief at the loss and the sheer pointlessness of it all. Health workers toiled on the edge of exhaustion to keep people alive and give comfort to those who couldn't make the journey to recovery. Many whose incomes felt secure before the pandemic found the bottom dropping out of their finances. Communities of color and people with limited means suffered disproportionately. More Black, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Jewish people were targeted and brutalized. We had a presidential election where truth, justice, and democracy teetered on the edge. And an iceberg larger than Rhode Island broke off Antarctica.

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What does this moment ask from us? I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels torn between longing for the return of familiarity and owning up to the change we know in our hearts is needed. On one

hand, the joy and relief of being able to return to playing concerts for audiences is an incredible antidote to the vast strain and stress of the past year, which has extracted such a steep toll on the mental health of many across our field. Personally, I can't wait to sit in close proximity to 2,000 of my best friends and experience together the magic of 100 musicians playing together. But I'm anxious that after what we've been through, so many of the assumptions we have long made about orchestras, the music they play, the people who are included, and the traditions they enshrine, will feel even more deeply in need of renovation than they did before. And I don't want the adrenaline flooding our nervous systems as those first notes sound to inure us to the opportunity to think differently.

At every turn, we must ask ourselves: "What decision are we making, why are we making it, what's our purpose, who benefits, and who isn't here?"

Over the past decade, many orchestras' mission statements have quietly transformed from descriptions of musical activity to aspirational statements about intended impact, as they consider their broader role in their communities, in civic life, and in society. Never has there been more need for every decision in our sphere

of influence to be driven by a focus on what we mean, not what we do. In a post-pandemic world where resources are few and need is great, impact is the galvanizing force. Every concert presented, every community engagement, every audition, every staff vacancy, every educational engagement, every board nomination, every tour, every recording, is an opportunity to ask ourselves: "What decision are we making, why are we making it, what's our purpose, who benefits, and who isn't here?"

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So as the complex machinery of orchestras starts spooling up again after this enforced hiatus, let's prepare ourselves for a roller-coaster ride: the physical thrill of the sound of a live orchestra, the joy of a musical phrase that's as familiar as an old friend, the pleasure of reflecting on a concert over a drink with loved ones—and the deep jolt of uncertainty as we embark on the process of adapting to a world that has aged disproportionately to the actual number of months passed. Time to raise a glass to survival and resilience, enjoy the moment, let the emotion flow—and fasten our seatbelts! **S**