

Cultural Heritage & Museums Music Germany News Featured Stories

The slowest music piece in the world changes the chord

Music lovers gathered this week at a small church in Germany to witness a once-every-two-years event - the introduction of a new chord in the world's slowest piece of music

On Monday (Feb. 5) a group of volunteers added another pipe to the mechanical organ housed at the Burchardi Church in Halberstadt, changing the sound emanating from the instrument for the first time since February 2020.

The piece, which is scheduled to unfold over 639 years according to Cage's notation of unpredictable tones played at the longest possible intervals, started its first phase in 2001 with the simple sounds of the organ's blower and wind on just a few pipes. Now, after 71 separate tone changes scattered over 31 years, the music has lapsed into silence once again as it prepares to re-emerge from its pause.

This marked the 16th chord change since American avant-garde composer John Cage's "Organ2/ASLSP" (As Slow as Possible) began playing in 2001. The chord was last changed exactly two years ago, on February 5th, 2022. According to the project's website, the next scheduled change will take place on August 5th, 2026.

In contrast to its initially shorter performance, the piece's premiere in 1987 lasted just under 30 minutes. However, subsequent performances, including one by organist Diane Luchese in 2009, lasted for an impressive 14 hours and 56 minutes. The experimental composition is scheduled to unfold continuously until 2640, making it the longest music piece performance ever undertaken.

The John Cage Organ Foundation, which stewards the project, views this transition as highly symbolic. "The leisure and gentle composure with which many listeners absorb the inimitable sounds often has something meditative. In addition, most visitors are fascinated by the philosophically optimistic approach to time and the future." reads the description of the project

The piece provides moments for meditation as tones linger softly in the church's resonant acoustic for stretches of months or years. "The time until the conclusion will repeatedly raise new questions and lead to philosophical interpretations. With Walter Benjamin one could speak of a present that is not transition, but in which time stands still and comes to a standstill".

If this project is realised today as planned to the end, then at least the building of the former Burchardi church will have experienced such a long-lasting peace as never before in history on the 4th of September 2640.

Organ experts say this protracted realization of Cage's score also poses interesting technical questions about maintaining the instrument and ensuring fidelity to the composition across centuries. The foundation sees the project as a long-term art happening that will continue engaging new generations with cutting-edge music and philosophical ideas about experimental art forms, while also preserving an important part of Germany's cultural heritage.

The project has developed a dedicated following excited to experience these rare variations in the ambient soundscape created by Cage's composition. Some attendees had booked tickets years in advance for Monday's transformation of a single chord.

As the second phase of "Organ2/ASLSP" now gets quietly underway after midnight, listeners can continue following the piece's incremental development through the foundation's website and social media channels, witnessing step by step how an iconic 20th-century composition unfolds itself over the architecture of time.

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