

A Sound, Then Silence (Try Not to Breathe)

By Randy Kennedy

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5 MIN READ

The sound, a D major chord produced by an orchestra and a chorus, begins abruptly, full force, and fills the air for 20 minutes, like a sonorous foghorn with a stuck switch. It ends as suddenly as it begins, but there is no applause because the orchestra is only half finished — its members sit without playing or even moving, “performing” silence for just as long.

This highly eccentric symphony, receiving its first New York performance on Wednesday, was created by the artist Yves Klein, who is best known for his monochrome paintings. He harbored no small ambitions when he began thinking in the late 1940s about a kind of musical complement to his visual ideas: a symphony of monotony and silence, a much harder thing to do well than he or anyone imagined.

“You can’t really do a full rehearsal of something like this,” said Roland Dahinden, a Swiss composer and performer who has conducted the piece four times in Europe and will take the baton (and stopwatch) in New York. “It’s too hard. Everyone would just die.” Klein was one of the leading heirs of Marcel Duchamp’s Modernist wit, but he was not joking around. “The Monotone-Silence” Symphony, he wrote, expressed no less than “what I wished my life to be.” But Klein, who died of a heart attack at the age of 34 in 1962, never had the chance to hear his symphony realized as he imagined it. For the only documented performance during his lifetime, in 1960, at an art gallery in Paris, with Klein himself in white tie as conductor, only 10 musicians participated.

On Wednesday evening, the fulsome orchestra he dreamed of — 70 musicians and singers — will gather to perform the work at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, at East 73rd Street. The hope among those involved is that the sold-out performance, the product of months of intense planning, will hew closer to Klein’s ethereal intentions than many other versions attempted since his death.

With that goal in mind, the performers and Mr. Dahinden have been preparing themselves mentally over the last few weeks for an unusual test of stamina, patience and repose: to play one note in an “intense and continuous” way, as Klein instructed, for an unreasonable amount of time and then to remain quiet and motionless for longer than most people ever do.

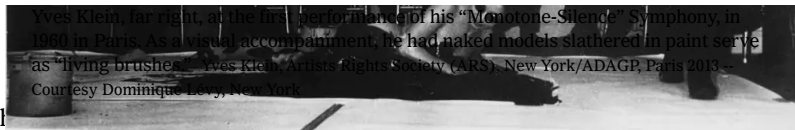
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Mr. Dahinden, who is being flown in for the one-night event by the Dominique Lévy Gallery, which is producing it, added: “When it’s right, you have this huge block of sound. There is such a beauty within the piece. You sit in the audience and you start to hear some melodies and some fragments of melodies, and yet nobody is playing them.” Klein said he saw the work as “having neither a beginning nor an end,” a creation “freed from the phenomenology of time.”

To pull off the first half of the symphony, the singers and musicians — 10 cellists, 10 violinists, 3 bassists, 3 flutists, 3 oboists and 3 French horn players — need to produce the chord with no vibrato or variation, breathing and bowing in such a way as to create a sound with no audible breaks. (Early on, Klein compared the sound to a human scream and played recordings of screams — one quite harrowing example was the voice of the French playwright Antonin Artaud — to demonstrate.)

Sahra Motalebi, a New York singer and performance artist who has helped to assemble the musicians and the choir — which will be made up of both professional singers and experimental musicians — said: “The reality is that it’s like a kind of bizarre primordial universe chorus. It’s not like a note you’ve ever heard.”





Klein conceived of the idea for the work while he was in Paris, where he was formulating “4’33””, a landmark work that involves a pianist not playing the piano but instead attuning an audience to the complexities of silence. Though there seems to be no evidence that Cage and Klein were aware of each other at the time or influenced each other later, Klein also came to view silence as the most important part of the musical work.

“This is really my symphony,” he wrote, “and not the sounds during its performance.”

Daniel Moquay, who oversees the Klein archive and estate in Paris, said the silence is sometimes more difficult than the sound for audiences to take in. “You get into the deepness of a silence and you realize that silence is not a nothing,” he said. “Silence is something that is very, very powerful.”

The work anticipated some of the interests that Fluxus artists would soon begin exploring in New York and Europe in the 1960s, and it feels very much in tune with works by young contemporary artists like Ragnar Kjartansson, who in 2011 staged a critically acclaimed 12-hour performance of the denouement of Mozart’s “The Marriage of Figaro,” by opera singers.

Klein’s symphony has been performed both with the permission of the estate, and without, over the last four decades — once by a chorus of as many as a hundred singers, and at least once by a single musician with a laptop.

During the original 1960 performance, Klein included a companion piece in which three naked women — he called them “living brushes” — covered themselves in his signature deep blue paint and pressed their bodies on paper during the sound half of the symphony, freezing during the silence; that part will not be recreated in New York.

Dominique Lévy, who is opening her new gallery at 909 Madison Avenue, next door to the church, became determined to produce the symphony to accompany her inaugural exhibition, “Audible Presence: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Cy Twombly,” an examination of ideas about time and music in works by those three artists. (Tickets for the free performance were all claimed almost immediately after it was announced.)

Ms. Lévy first heard the symphony in 2007 and said that after the abrupt cut between the sound and the silence, “I had all these conflicting feelings of wanting to laugh and then confusion and then finally deep emotion.”

Early this year, she secured permission from the Klein archive to produce the work and dispatched Jennifer G. Buonocore, the gallery’s associate director, to Paris to delve into the archive, to try to ensure that the work would be realized with the best understanding of what Klein wanted.

But even with the best efforts and intentions, Mr. Moquay said, the symphony doesn’t always work. Of four performances held in a Paris church during a Klein exhibition at the Pompidou Center in 2007, he said he felt that only one was wholly successful. But it worked so well, he added, that a lovely kind of St. Francis moment occurred.

“The door of the church was open, and a pigeon came in and sat where everyone could see him,” he said. “During the 20-minute silence, he did not move at all. It was kind of incredible. And then when the silence was over, he left.”

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