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Exploring a Cathartic Moment in a Lengthy String Quartet

By DAVID ALLEN NOV. 9, 2016

A funny notion, selecting a single, favorite page from Morton Feldman's *String Quartet No. 2*. After all, this 1983 opus of titanic duration and fearsome reputation can last anywhere from under four hours to over six, depending on repeats and tempo. Requiring unyielding concentration and unceasing precision to fulfill the composer's demands, it pushes the bounds of what is physically possible.

There are 124 pages to choose from. But in an interview in advance of the Calder Quartet's performance at the Fuentidueña Chapel at the Cloisters in Upper Manhattan on Saturday, one of their violinists, Andrew Bulbrook, picked a moment about an hour from the end. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.

You've settled on a page of rare breadth, as things wind down and broaden out. Why this one?

I'm not going to say he's going for full catharsis, but there's an element of that to the end. There are parts of the piece where the journey is more difficult, and parts where you feel like you're going to make it. At different points, elements reappear, and many of them reappear on the page we're talking about. They're friends — there's a sense of recollection, and because of the duration of the work, there's a haze that goes along with the recollection.

We have a widely spaced five-meter [five beats in a measure]. A little bit of charm: I don't want to say Vienna, but there's a bit of that elegance, in this spread-

out way that's also very reflective, and I think transporting. These five-meter figures have happened a few times — sometimes in eighth-notes, sometimes in sixteenth-notes — and they give a sense of dance to the work. We have these more glacial, half-note figures that have such a simplicity, compared to how dense and slightly dissonant other clustery parts of the work are. There's a sense of soaring openness in that half-note peace.

The idea of catharsis perhaps implies a narrative. Is there one in this quartet?

This narrative is not going to register the same as sonata form. But there can be a mystical narrative that runs through this. I think of when I was first reading Gabriel García Márquez or “The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle” or “The Tin Drum”: books where there's a lot of fantasy mixed with plot. When you first encounter that kind of book, it can be frustrating if you want to know what actually happens. With this Feldman, experiencing what is happening, as opposed to looking for what happens, might be a better way to experience this narrative.

At the same time, what are you expecting of your listeners when you play this quartet?

I imagine the average listener is not going to stay throughout the whole piece. I'm sure people will, and some people will experience part of it, not all of it.

You might think of the quartet existing as an installation. We wouldn't want somebody not to hear 30 minutes of this because they were concerned that they would be doing the wrong thing by trying it. That's a valid way to experience this. The idea of being seatbelted to a chair would be challenging, even for me, to be unable to move and just to have to be there.

But duration is part of the work. It's like a meditation practice: It takes a while to go deep. Five hours, six hours: That might not be possible for everyone, but I think by giving it two minutes, you're just going to have touched the surface. Commit to seeing half an hour, an hour, to allow your body, your being, to adjust to what's around you, to allow yourself to go deeper, both in the music and in yourself.

What about you four? How do you prepare for something so absurdly long?

The way we've been doing it is akin to the way one might train for a marathon. How do you approach that training? You don't run the whole marathon every day, you do increasing chunks that add up. So we do some detailed work on sections, and then we are building up one-, two-hour spans, to build that focus. But we're not going to be playing it every day all the way through, the week before. You need to save something for the show.

The Calder Quartet plays Feldman's String Quartet No. 2 on Saturday at the Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park, Manhattan; 212-923-3700, metmuseum.org.

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