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Training Tips for a Marathon Musical Performance

The Calder Quartet gives a rare performance of Morton Feldman's 1983 piece 'String Quartet No. 2'



The Calder Quartet will perform Morton Feldman's 'String Quartet No. 2' at the Met Cloisters.

PHOTO: CALDER QUARTET

By **ANDY BETA**

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It isn't often that the words "chamber music" and "endurance marathon" are uttered in the same breath.

But it has been that kind of season in New York culture this fall. In September, the Museum of Modern Art screened Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 15½-hour magnum-opus film "Berlin Alexanderplatz." Last month, performance artist Taylor Mac sang and riffed his way through a 24-hour history of American popular music.

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This Saturday, lovers of modern classical music get their own endurance event at the Met Cloisters,

when the Calder Quartet offers a rare performance of Morton Feldman's 1983 piece "String Quartet No. 2." With a duration that can stretch beyond six hours, the 124-page, fully notated score is a puzzle, a brain teaser, a feat of strength and an endurance test—of the physical and mental limits of its players and its audience.

Native New Yorker Morton Feldman was one of the most acclaimed

modernclassical composers to emerge in the postwar era. Along with his better-known friend and mentor John Cage, Mr. Feldman favored an experimental style called “indeterminate music,” which allowed for substantial interpretation of a score, even letting elements of chance impact a performance. While such riffing is a hallmark of jazz, this was a revolutionary approach for the more rigidly scored classical music.

“My obsession with surface is the subject of my music,” Mr. Feldman wrote in a 1969 essay titled “Between Categories,” likening his work to abstract painting. “One might call them ‘time canvases’ in which I more or less prime the canvas with an overall hue of music.”

Using that base, musicians can paint the rest.

Last week, the Calder Quartet—cellist Eric Byers, violist Jonathan Moerschel and violinists Benjamin Jacobson and Andrew Bulbrook—convened in a Los Angeles living room to practice “String Quartet No. 2.” After a few minutes, they slowed to a halt and talked about the difficulties inherent in the piece.



The Calder Quartet PHOTO: CALDER QUARTET

“You need a magnifying glass to figure it out,” Mr. Byers said, leaning closer to his music stand, noting that Mr. Feldman’s handwritten score

featured many enharmonics, notes that sound the same but are written differently on the musical staff.

It not only gives the composition a handwritten feel, the players noted, but also keeps them on their toes.

“I can’t imagine it will be easier to read after playing for three hours and then coming upon it,” Mr. Bulbrook said. “You have to stay really focused to catch these things.”

With his late compositions, Mr. Feldman, who died in 1987, began working on a scale unimaginable in modern classical music, with pieces stretching beyond 80 minutes or more.

“I find my mind goes into the same place when playing Feldman as when I’m running an ultramarathon,” said Mr. Moerschel during a pause in rehearsal. “Moments of physical pain or discomfort come and

go, but the vast majority of the time, my mind gets into the sounds and textures of the piece as well as the feedback from my body.”

Taking cues from Mr. Moerschel’s marathon training, the quartet decided not to attempt the full composition head-on. Instead, they rehearsed it in chunks, slowly working up to the longer duration. The discovery: They weren’t fully in shape, and were still working out the physical aspects of the performance.

So what felt sore after an hour?

“Your bow arm,” Mr. Byers said. “Any chance to put it down—even for a few seconds—is a relief.”

“Unfortunately, discomfort is going to be a part of playing the piece, just as it is for a marathon,” Mr. Moerschel said. “Once you accept that, you can set your focus on enjoying the adventure and the accomplishment.”

Mr. Feldman’s compositions are often hushed, contemplative things.

“There’s something extremely meditative about Morton Feldman’s work and the chapel is conducive to this kind of work,” Limor Tomer, the Met’s general manager of live arts said of the museum’s Fuentidueña Chapel, where the concert will take place. “You can really slow time down, almost to a stop.”

Mr. Bulbrook agreed that while the length of Feldman’s “String Quartet No.2” was daunting, it also allowed for a deeper concentration to occur, for both musicians and listeners: “There is a real subtlety to this music that creates an atmosphere for something sublime to emerge.”