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The Storm Before the Calm: Strange Sounds Emerge From ‘Monotone-Silence Symphony’

By [RANDY KENNEDY](#)

I thought I heard bagpipes. I thought I heard snippets of Philip Glass’s “1000 Airplanes on the Roof.” Toward the end, I could have sworn I heard someone near me crying. But I didn’t really hear any of those things, because the only music filling the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church was a D major chord, sustained with great effort for precisely 20 minutes by a group of almost 70 singers and instrumentalists.

The performance, of the French artist [Yves Klein’s “Monotone-Silence Symphony,”](#) a work he conceived in the late 1940s consisting of 20 minutes of unchanging sound followed by 20 minutes of motionless silence, drew a rapt and mostly reverent crowd on Wednesday night. The symphony, organized as part of the inaugural exhibition, “Audible Presence: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Cy Twombly,” at the new [Dominique Lévy Gallery](#) on Madison Avenue and 73rd Street, has been realized several times around the world since Klein died in 1962 but this was the first time it had ever been heard (and not heard) in New York.

The audience leaned more toward the visual-art world than the music world – the Whitney Museum curator Chrissie Iles; RoseLee Goldberg, the founder of Performa; Alice M. Tisch, a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art. At 8:11, by my watch, the Swiss composer and conductor Roland Dahinden, who has conducted the symphony four times in Europe, took the podium in front of the tightly assembled, black-clad group of musicians. When he raised his hands, the chord began cleanly, as if someone had turned on a radio. It sounded softer than I had imagined, like the gentle final note of a song that decided not to end. It seemed fragile at first, as if the voices and hands might not be able to keep it aloft.

But about a dozen minutes in, it began to sound strangely electronic (hence Philip Glass), like something that humans could not possibly be producing. Mr. Dahinden moved his body and hands sinuously, striving to keep the chord unbroken and consistent, listening intently for flagging energy and attention until, at 8:31 on the dot, he brought his hands up and together and ended the sound as abruptly as it had begun.

In the audience some people closed their eyes, as if meditating or praying. Others read their programs or held phones and iPads aloft to record the moment. Five minutes into the chord the man to my immediate right, who looked a little like the actor John Slattery, except with a beard, fell asleep and snored softly until the silence began and he woke up.

The silence was about as absolute (and enjoyable) as any I've ever experienced in a crowded place in New York City, punctuated only by occasional, distant car horns, a handful of coughs and softly gurgling predinner stomachs. David H. Heiss, a cellist with the Metropolitan Opera who heard about the performance and asked to be a part of it, told me later that the sound half of the symphony felt surprisingly short. "When he stopped it, it seemed to me like we had only been going for 9 or 10 minutes," said Mr. Heiss, a longtime Klein fan. "But the silence felt like half an hour. It was harder than I thought it would be. We were told not to move a muscle."

After the performance Mr. Dahinden was beaming. I asked him where he kept his stopwatch. "On the music stand in front of me," he said. "But it's not just one. I always have two stopwatches, just to be sure, in case one breaks. It's very difficult to count to 20 minutes in your head."