

Why 24 Pianists Are Playing the Same Piece 840 Times

A French composer specified that his composition be repeated hundreds of times. His wishes will be followed at N.Y.U. today.



Share full article



14



By **James Barron**

Sept. 8, 2023

Good morning. It's Friday. Today we'll look at why 24 pianists will spend all day today — and at least part of tonight — playing the same piece a total of 840 times. We'll also get details on Mayor Eric Adams's latest comments on the migrant crisis.





Marilyn Nonken, who will take part in playing one piece — “Vexations,” by Erik Satie — 840 times. James Estrin/The New York Times

It’s a safe bet that no one will say [“Play it once, Sam”](#) at New York University’s Paulson Center today. The assignment for the 24 pianists who will be there is not to play a short piece once, but to play it a total of 840 times.

The piece is not “As Time Goes By” from “Casablanca.” It’s “Vexations,” written in the 1890s by the French composer Erik Satie. He specified that it was to be repeated 840 times. He did not explain the significance of the number or why he preferred it to, say, 839 or 841.

Only one pianist will play at a time, with one relieving another, tag-team style, after 35 repetitions. [Marilyn Nonken](#), the chair of the Department of Music and Performing Arts Professions at N.Y.U., expects the whole thing to be over by about 9 p.m. She will lead off, at 6 a.m.

“It’s about concentration,” she said. “Even though it’s not an extremely difficult piece, your brain plays tricks on you. There have been pianists who have played the entire thing themselves and talked about going crazy as they do. Even playing for an hour or so, just focusing and staying grounded and staying rooted is not the easiest thing.”

Obviously, how long the performance actually takes depends on tempo — how fast each pianist tackles the piece, which is only one page long. Nonken said she had “attempted to give a guideline of approximately how fast we’d like people to play.”

But one of them, Richard Cameron-Wolfe, is guessing the last note won’t be heard until around 2 a.m. He has experience with “Vexations.” He has played it, by himself, four times. He said he would be on hand at the end, no matter how late, even though his assigned time slot is early and he is scheduled to step away from the piano at 9:30 a.m. “I’m a true believer,” he said.

Today’s performance celebrates the 60th anniversary of what was apparently the first such marathon, which took 18 hours and 40 minutes and was organized by the composer John Cage. [The New York Times assigned critics to two-hour shifts](#), with a theater critic filling the 2-a.m.-to-4-a.m. slot. The music critic Harold C. Schonberg was on hand for the

beginning and the end of “conceivably the longest concert since Homer sang the entire ‘Iliad’ and ‘Odyssey.’”

One pianist from that endurance test is expected to take part today — the composer David Del Tredici, now 86. “There’s not a lot of latitude with what you can do” with “Vexations,” he said, but he tried. “They told me after I played it a few times to stop being so expressive, just play it straight,” Del Tredici, who went on to win [the Pulitzer Prize for music in 1980](#), recalled this week.

The performance at N.Y.U. will be free, unlike the one in 1963, at a theater in the East Village where tickets cost \$5 (just under \$50 now). The organizers promised refunds of five cents for each 20 minutes that audience members were present. They threw in an extra 20 cents and gave back \$3 to the one person who lasted from start to finish. He later appeared [on the television game show “I’ve Got a Secret”](#) along with one of the pianists, [John Cale](#) (who went on to be a founding member of the Velvet Underground.)

Cameron-Wolfe said the piece is “loaded with ambiguities,” starting with the number 840. Did it refer to the number of days in a romantic relationship? Cameron-Wolfe said that the piece dated to not long after Satie went through a breakup. The Times critic Harold C. Schonberg’s take was less dramatic: Satie “wrote 840 for reasons best known to himself. He was, after all, the great eccentric of French music.”

Cameron-Wolfe said Satie’s instructions for playing “Vexations” were also, well, vexing. Satie wrote a sentence in French above the first line that can be translated like this: “To play this pattern 840 times in a row, it would be advisable to prepare beforehand, and in the deepest silence, by serious immobilities.”

As with the 840 repetitions, he did not explain what he meant by “serious immobility.” And as for Cameron-Wolfe, it took some serious mobility for him to get to the performance. He lives in Taos, N.M.

“I’m mostly concerned about the overnight JetBlue flight and what shape I’ll be in when I get off the plane,” he said. “But I said if anybody doesn’t show, I’ll go back up and give it a couple more whacks.”

WEATHER

The heat advisory has been extended until 6 p.m. tonight. Anticipate