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A Rare Performance of Petr Kotik's Daunting Work

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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

Dec. 17, 2013 9:14 p.m. ET

The composer Petr Kotik has been reading Gertrude Stein for more than 40 years, and her work remains a riddle.

"I don't think it's clear to this day," Mr. Kotik said. "It's not about clarity."

He doesn't mean that as a slight. The avant-garde writer, who died in France in 1946, has long served as a muse for Mr. Kotik. "Many Many Women," his six-hour work for six singers and six instrumentalists, which will be featured in a rare performance Friday at Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea, is inspired by Stein's 1910 story of the same name.



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Musicians rehearse 'Many Many Women,' a piece by Petr Kotik based on a book of the same name by Gertrude Stein. *Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal*

Her writing, much of it abstract and rooted in repetition (a sample passage from Stein's "Many Many Women": "Each one is one. Any one is the one that one is. Each one is one"), is well suited for music, Mr. Kotik said. "It's not really 'about' anything. She says that description is explanation. She's not expressing ideas. An idea by itself is not so great—it's the process which makes it what it is."

Mr. Kotik, a longtime fixture on New York's downtown music scene, discovered a Stein's writing in the early 1970s, shortly after immigrating to the U.S. from Czechoslovakia.



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Petr Kotik. *Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal*

"I had never read her because she's untranslatable," said Mr. Kotik, who spoke only rudimentary English at the time. "I bought the book, opened it up and said, 'I have my text!' I didn't know even where to start looking, and then I never looked for anything else."

Using paragraphs from Stein's story in conjunction with musical passages, he composed "Many Many Women" at a time when other composers, including Philip Glass and La Monte Young, were also writing works that lasted several hours. "We didn't know what we were doing," Mr. Kotik said. "There was no precedent for pieces like this. I had no idea if it would be possible to ask somebody to sit through it."

Sitting through it is one thing. Performing it is another.

"Oftentimes for the first hour I'm thinking, 'Oh God, can I do this?,' " said Thomas Verchot,

a trumpeter who will be part of the "Many Many Women" ensemble on Friday. "But after that first hour, I get into a zone akin to meditating."

Singer Steven Hrycelak agreed. "There are moments when it's really long and moments when it flies by," he said. "There is something hypnotizing about it."

"You get carried along with it. It's transporting," said Paula Cooper, who hosted the first performance of "Many Many Women" in New York at her gallery in 1977. "Most repetition is meditative, and this is such a pleasure to hear that it becomes transcendent."

Friday's concert marks a return of sorts, after plans for one last year were waylaid by superstorm Sandy. Invisible Dog Gallery in Brooklyn held a condensed performance instead, but according to Noni Pratt, who attended a rehearsal last week, the opportunity to hear the full six hours is special.

"It's hard to pull yourself out of it," she said. "The longer you stay, the deeper it goes."

Mr. Kotik said that audience members are free to come and go during the concert, though he prefers they stay. "At the beginning I suggested to the audience to make cuts, to go and have dinner and come back," he said. "But then when people would leave, I would say, 'I hope you had something better to do.'"

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