

## **Mutually Speaking: Feldman on Wolff and Wolff on Feldman**

### **by Nicola Walker Smith**

*The following article was first published in Musical Times (Vol 142, No 1876, Autumn 2001) pp 24-27. It is reproduced here by kind permission of the author. Nicola Walker Smith introduces a brief talk by, and talks to Christian Wolff about, Morton Feldman.*

In 1973, Morton Feldman invited Christian Wolff to SUNY, Buffalo, where Feldman had recently been appointed the Varèse Professor of Music. In this brief introductory talk, given before a performance of Wolff's music, Feldman gives a rare insight into the powerful impact that Christian Wolff had on the members of the so-called 'New York School' of composers in the 1950s.

#### **About Christian Wolff: a talk by Morton Feldman**

Kierkegaard tells the story about a man who notices a large printed sign in a storefront window. On the sign is written, 'We press clothes'. So he goes back to his room, gathers up some suits and brings them to the store. 'You've made a mistake,' they said, 'we don't press clothes here. We just print the sign in the window.' Most likely, Kierkegaard was attacking Hegel for just giving us the sign and not the real thing. Now, the real thing in today's music, especially in today's music, is up for grabs. But I do know that our notion about what it could be or should be is probably just the sign in someone else's window.

When I first met John Cage in 1950, not long after, Christian Wolff appeared on the scene. He was sixteen years old. Christian Wolff was studying with Grete Sultan. She was a friend of John Cage's and, being that Christian was composing, probably thought that it would be a good idea for them both to meet each other. John Cage and myself were living in the same building at that time and so I got to hear the news as soon as it happened. In fact, I had lunch with Cage the very afternoon that Christian Wolff was expected. Later on in the afternoon, John came downstairs and tumbled into my apartment, shaking with excitement. He just couldn't get over the music that he'd brought, especially from someone so young. We must be reminded that, in early 1950, in New York City, there was very little, practically no, experimental music being done. Boulez was on his way, but his music wasn't known here at all until about a year later. Stockhausen was in Paris studying with Messiaen. There was really no avant-garde in either America or Europe of an experimental nature. Some years after this meeting with Cage and Christian, Cage went on to say that he felt that Christian Wolff's importance at this time is equal to Webern's. I agree with that precisely. Though Christian Wolff is still an extremely young man, he has been a tremendous influence on two generations of composers. One of the most notable of these composers he has influenced is John Cage. I am sure that if John Cage didn't have Christian's music with him all these years as his North Star, his trip would have been quite different. I too am profoundly indebted to Christian Wolff. I think of him as my artistic conscience. I'm a composer who desperately needs an artistic conscience. For as long as I remember, I've dangled between the real thing and the sign in the window. Or, more precisely, that mammoth sign in that mammoth window with the legend written, 'The Big Time'. In a sense, Christian Wolff has ruined my life, but he has saved my art!

This talk was given as part of the Slee Lecture Series at SUNY Buffalo, on 15 April 1973. It was transcribed from tape (on file in the Feldman Archive at Buffalo) by Nicola Walker Smith.

In an interview conducted by Nicola Walker Smith at Dartington Hall in November 1999, Christian Wolff, on one of his rare visits to England, returns the favour by giving a glimpse of his own personal insights into the music of Morton Feldman.

## About Feldman: an interview with Christian Wolff

Nicola Walker Smith

When Feldman died you wrote a short paragraph for a special edition of MusikTexte in which you talk of the mystery of his music, the way in which Feldman appears to leave no trace of how he's put it together. You say, 'He is the only composer I know whose work appears to be put together in such a way that it can only be explained through the impossibility of becoming the composer ourselves.' This puts me directly in mind of Rothko: we see no brush strokes, no means of creation.<sup>1</sup>

It's almost as if the paintings have just 'materialised' or come into being of their own accord...

Christian Wolff

Yes, but, the paradox is that only Rothko could have made them. And only Feldman could have made the music.

NWS

Both artist's work is devoid of any visible or traceable means of construction yet, as you say, both are very much 'in' the work. It reminds me of the story Feldman tells about Mondrian who once tried spray painting his areas of a single flat colour. He said, 'Not only did the picture not have the feel of a Mondrian, it didn't even have the look of a Mondrian!'<sup>2</sup> How can we explain that mystery?

CW

Well, mystery is mystery and all you can do is kind of circle around it! I was once asked to contribute something to a collection of essays and analyses of Feldman by Tom DeLio.<sup>3</sup> I spent a long time looking at *Piano Piece 1952* - the one that consists entirely of dotted quarter notes and, whilst there were all kinds of tantalising suggestions, it soon became clear that there was no 'system'. So I found myself just describing it. He had done it entirely by ear - there was no other way to see it. In the essay I suggested that Feldman's music was unanalysable and, as a result, DeLio refused to print it. I seemed to be undermining the whole project!

Perhaps analysis is possible in the longer, later pieces. *Triadic Memories* looks to me as though it has a plan, though it's probably one that he worked out as he went along. I think he just jumps into the water with nothing to hang onto whatsoever and sees where it takes him. It's intuition. There's a famous story of one of those long pieces: around page 70 or something he got stuck and in order to get himself going again he went back and almost randomly picked out, say, page 22 and recopied it as page 71. That got him going again!<sup>4</sup>

NWS

Feldman himself was very uncomfortable about analysis<sup>5</sup> and invariably preferred metaphors from the visual arts as a means of describing his work...<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As the art critic Robert Goldwater suggests, '[There is] no hint of how they came to be, nothing that suggests the action of the artist either through gesture or direction or impasto, nothing that defines the imposition of the will, either through an exact edge or a precise measurement.' Robert Goldwater: 'Reflections of the Rothko Exhibition', in *Arts Magazine* vol.25 no.6 (March, 1961), p.44.

<sup>2</sup> Morton Feldman: 'The anxiety of art', in W Zimmerman, ed.: *Essays* (Kerpen, 1985), p.94.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas DeLio, ed.: *The music of Morton Feldman* (New York, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> 'The only time I do have a system is when I'm stuck, and it's almost like a little gasoline or a little push of the car to get it going.' 'Feldman on Feldman', lecture given at the Contemporary Music Festival held at Auckland Park, Johannesburg in 1983, transcribed by Rüdiger Meyer.

<sup>5</sup> 'How I did it is not something that can be analysed after the piece is finished.' Morton Feldman, unpublished lecture delivered to art students in the 1960s (precise date/location not known) at the invitation of Dore Ashton. Aural History Unit, Yale University (transcribed from tape by Nicola Walker Smith).

<sup>6</sup> The esteemed art critic Dore Ashton appears to validate this approach when she says 'If, as Schopenhauer maintained, music is not a reflection of phenomena, as are the other arts, but a direct projection of the will, or soul, then the terms of discourse are all but impossible. Music commentary must go outside its own non-representational realm... Where then is there a suitable metaphorical vocabulary? Apparently, for younger composers, it exists in the plastic arts'. Dore Ashton: 'New York - Feldman's music', in *Canadian Arts* vol.21, January 1964.

CW

There is a definite parallel with the painting here, especially with this feeling that you're not just seeing the painting but you're also experiencing the 'process' of the painting coming into being. The music has a very similar feeling. So you're right, the painting really does help understand the music. That's the way he talked about it and that's the way he must have thought about it.

NWS

Intuition clearly played an important role in the creative process and Feldman would often talk about the 'heightened state of concentration'<sup>7</sup> he experienced whilst composing. Is that something common to all artists?

CW

Yes, if the work is going to be any good! But in Feldman's case I think it's a different kind of concentration. Most composers work with some kind of a method that they've either learned or they've invented and which carries them along. What Feldman did was to jettison that compositional methodology and to concentrate purely on the sound or a representation of the sound. On the one hand it reminds you of the idea of action painting but then it's also concentration on the material for itself.

NWS

I'd like to talk a little more about this idea of intense concentration on the individual sound, the material itself and on how this leads to a focusing on the present moment - what has been described as the 'moment to momentness' of Feldman's music, his ability to 'hold' the moment. I have a theory that it is Feldman's approach to time, his ability to evoke a sense of timelessness, that gives the sense which many people describe, of not so much listening to as 'looking at' his music, experiencing it more like a painting in fact.

CW

I think the fact that the material is so homogeneous makes it very difficult to distinguish the past from the present. You have this rather restricted intervallic world with its particular sonorities and instrumentations...

NWS

He certainly had a distinct leaning towards particular instruments and instrumental groupings: glockenspiel, piano, vibraphone, chimes and marimba were some of his favourite instruments.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in a way, it's surprising he liked these because they have a distinct attack and that, paradoxically, is something he really wanted to suppress.<sup>9</sup>

CW

It is a paradox, but he enjoyed the fact that the piano requires an attack. I mean, it's a hammer! But he does everything in his power to disguise that. He liked that tension between the two. All instruments have to make an attack though he would ask for an 'attackless' sound. It's rather like entering the space but entering in such a way that, when you're there, you seem always to have been there. Again, more like a painting. Of course, music exists in time and there are entrances and exits. In painting everything is present and you see it all at once. Somehow he wanted to combine those two things. I think he achieves this with that very restricted palette of instruments, intervals, dynamic - it all gives that feeling of the 'now'. Yet, in spite of the fact that it's so homogeneous, you nevertheless have a sense of continuing activity. It's as though, and again this applies to the painting (Rothko has this too), in one sense they are very monochrome, they have very few colours

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<sup>7</sup> 'You have to have control of the piece, it requires a heightened kind of concentration. Before my pieces were like objects, now they're like evolving things.' Morton Feldman, in Universal Edition catalogue.

<sup>8</sup> As used, for example, in *For Philip Guston* (1984).

<sup>9</sup> 'We know, in most music, that we're involved with differentiation and that the differentiation comes about with how one attacks the sound. I began to question this nature of attack. I began to say to myself, 'Is this the sound or is this an attack?' And it was in this investigation that I began to see or hear sounds as a much more sourceless element. And consequently my whole concept of the musical plane, the sound plane, began to change.' Morton Feldman in discussion with Wilfrid Mellers: 'The problems of new music', BBC Radio 3, broadcast, 28 August 1966 (transcribed from tape by Nicola Walker Smith).

and so forth, but if you look closely, there's a lot going on. There's actually a lot to pay attention to, even within a field that seems to be all orange, say, whether it's the brushwork that's just shifting the degree of intensity of the colour or so forth.

NWS

Yes, especially around the edges where a whole world of minute activity is going on. And the same is true of Feldman. If you can begin to listen on a deeper level, you become aware of a whole new level of activity within the sound which you were unaware of before. So, again, we have another paradox of the music being non-developmental with a strong sense of stasis like the Abstract Expressionist paintings,<sup>10</sup> and yet there are things happening and changing all the time on a very subtle level.

CW

And the genius is to pull that balance off. To give you that feeling of timelessness and yet have it remain musically interesting, without ever tipping the scale either way, is pretty remarkable.

NWS

Another intriguing paradox is that of Feldman the man and Feldman the music. The contradiction here started to resolve itself for me when I read the Eulogy you wrote for Feldman. You say, 'Underneath he was full of tenderness and, underneath, the music is as tough as nails.' I understand intuitively what you mean by that but could you explain it a little more?

CW

I think various things came together in my mind. One is (and this is connected to that remark that Cage made about Feldman<sup>11</sup>) that in his earlier work, the music's main characteristic was 'heroic'. It was heroic because, at that time, just to do what he was doing was remarkable for a musician (painters less so perhaps). For someone thinking that he would make a career as a composer, to do music like that was suicidal! I also think there are certain extreme qualities of that music, in the context of that period the thinness of it, the silences and the completely uncompromising character of it, which, from another point of view, are also very beautiful. It was always beautiful from the start but, in that context, it was not obviously beautiful. To do that must have required, artistically, a certain kind of nerve or 'hardness'. Cage calls it 'heroic'. It's a question of having the nerve to do that, of having the sense of oneself as an artist, having the confidence to do that and not worry. In some ways I think that persisted all the way through.

NWS

The music, for all its delicacy, does have a very strong identity. It gives a sense of great confidence in its own identity.

CW

Exactly, and that quality of endurance, of sticking with what he thought, what he felt and what he knew that he was - that carried on. That's what I think of as the 'toughness'. But I also see what Cage meant by what you could almost call its 'hedonistic' quality. I remember when the four of us<sup>12</sup> were together for one of the last times at a concert and there was a piece by each of us being performed, Morty came up and he said, 'I'm a little worried about this piece. You guys are going to think that it's just pornographic because it's so gorgeous!'. Compared to what we were doing he was the pure hedonist. But even though his music does have this very sensuous quality, it's a sensuousness that we had to learn to get into. It is never 'pretty'. And at first it appeared very austere because it was so restricted and so minimal.

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<sup>10</sup> 'The degrees of stasis found in a Rothko or a Guston were perhaps the most significant elements that I brought to my music from painting.' Morton Feldman: 'Crippled symmetry', in *Essays*, op. cit., p.103.

<sup>11</sup> 'There never was and there is not now in my mind any doubt about its beauty. It is in fact sometimes too beautiful. The flavor of that beauty, which formerly seemed to me to be heroic, strikes me now as erotic'. John Cage: 'Lecture on Something', in *Silence* (London, 1973), p.128.

<sup>12</sup> The four composers generally known as the 'New York School' consisted of John Cage, Morton Feldman, Earle Brown and Christian Wolff.

NWS

You mentioned the 'four of you' and I'd like to talk a little about the group, the New York School. Cage, Feldman and Brown were all attracted and linked to the visual arts in significant ways.<sup>13</sup>

Were you drawn to that world too?

CW

Yes and no. I didn't have that strong a feeling for the visual arts, certainly by comparison with both Cage and Feldman. Cage was with painters. Morris Graves was a very close friend of his and he was also close to Rauschenberg and Johns in the 50s and doubtless numerous others. He was always involved with visual arts and Feldman equally so. It's quite true that at that time, they were the only people that we could really talk to. They were the ones who found the music to be perfectly OK. Whereas, the musicians really felt threatened by it.

NWS

Do you think it was significant that Feldman didn't have a traditional conservatory training and that, as a result perhaps, the musicians found it difficult to take him seriously, whereas the painters had no problem with that?

CW

Yes, and that is also true of myself. In fact this was a point on which we were all sensitive and we were certainly under attack from all sides including the European avant-garde. Boulez complained that our music was too crude, implying that it didn't have all the technical things that you were supposed to learn. Since we didn't have that we were considered deficient and therefore our work couldn't be any good.

NWS

Was this one of the things that held the New York School together? It was never really a 'school' of thought in the usual sense - you all had very disparate styles.

CW

Yes, I think it was the fact that we were so different from everybody else. We had interrelated ideas and, as you say, the connection to the artists (which in my case was more as a kind of fellow traveller, if you will).

NWS

What would you say particularly drew Feldman to the Abstract Expressionists? Do you think it's true to say that he found his own personal way of writing music by looking to them and the way they perceived their painting? From my research of manuscripts in the Feldman archive in Basel, there certainly seems to be a marked contrast between his works from the earlier 1940s<sup>14</sup> (which were quite melodic and thematic) and those of 1949-51 (a more consciously abstract style), written after he met Cage and became involved in the painting milieu. Was this a direct result of his encounter with Cage and the painters I wonder?

CW

I think it's very hard to decide those things. I don't even know why I did what I did then! I think that what happens (and I think this is very much the case with Feldman) is that you try something and it's different and it's new and you're perhaps a little unsure. Then suddenly you see that there are other people doing things that seem to be in the same area. They might be doing it as painters rather than as musicians, but they are doing it and suddenly that suggests what you're doing is OK. I think it's that notion which Feldman speaks of about Cage,<sup>15</sup> the notion of permission or encouragement. There's a kind of atmosphere, which makes your work possible. But the actual origin of the work itself? That remains a mystery I think; that just happens.

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<sup>13</sup> Cage was linked with Rauschenburg and Johns, Feldman particularly with Mark Rothko and Philip Guston, and Brown looked to Alexander Calder and his 'mobiles'.

<sup>14</sup> *Dirge: in memory of Thomas Wolfe* for orchestra (1943); *First Piano Sonata* (1943); *Andante Moderato* (1944); *Violin, viola, cello* (1945); *Sonatina for Cello and Piano* (1946). Manuscripts on file in the Feldman Archive, The Sacher Foundation, Basel.

<sup>15</sup> 'Quite frankly I sometimes wonder how my music would have turned out if John had not given me those early permissions to have confidence in my instincts.' Morton Feldman: 'Autobiography', in *Essays*, op. cit., p.37.