

Notes on Morton Feldman's "The King of Denmark"

by Eberhard Blum

[English translation by Peter Söderberg]

In February and March 2008 I had an exhibition, entitled "Choice & Chance", at the Villa Oppenheim in Berlin, a centre for contemporary art. This featured some forty of my large graphite works on paper. In connection with the exhibition, the percussionist Adam Weisman gave a concert with the following programme:

Morton Feldman – *The King of Denmark* (1964), first realization

Karlheinz Stockhausen – *Zyklus for a percussionist* (1959)

Morton Feldman – *The King of Denmark* (1964), second realization

I have been familiar with both these compositions for a long time. Their principles of construction have influenced many considerations affecting the construction of my own graphic work (e.g., the question: What could be the nature of indeterminate or aleatoric graphic works?).

Morton Feldman often talked about his piece and also described its relationship to Stockhausen's. Through the percussionist Jan Williams I came to know Feldman's piece in detail. During his tenure at the "Center of the Creative and Performing Arts" in Buffalo, Jan had created a version which fully corresponded to Feldman's own conception of the work. The choice of percussion instruments, which are not determined in the score, was made by Jan according to Feldman's proposals and wishes. More than once I observed them both in the famous percussion room – Room 100 of the Music Department at the University, where early in 1978 we first performed Feldman's work "Why Patterns?", then still called "Instruments 4", for his students – the two of them comparing the sounds of small cymbals and triangles to make the right decision. Then Feldman said: "We are finding the definitive solution!"

The aim of Jan's realization was to make the compositional construction of the work as clear as possible. In the many concerts that he and I gave together, the work was frequently on the programme. Feldman was always happy to give a detailed introduction.

The draft score was created in a single afternoon in August 1964 on the beach at Coney Island, a popular destination for a daytrip by New Yorkers. The distant noises of life on the beach inspired Feldman to compose a soundscape using only percussion instruments.

In 1959 Stockhausen had composed "Zyklus for a percussionist". It was the first European work for a percussion soloist. Before that, in 1956, John Cage had composed the first work ever of this kind, his "27'10.554'' for a Percussionist". Stockhausen reacted to this pioneering work with his "Zyklus". The soloist places a great number of instruments in a circle enclosing him, according to a plan by Stockhausen. During the performance, the player slowly turns, clockwise or anticlockwise, as he chooses, and executes one of the possible cycles of the composition. It is a most impressive and virtuoso act, one could almost say "expressionistic".

Feldman knew this work, as it was performed in New York by the percussionist Max Neuhaus shortly after its completion. He called his own new percussion work "the American answer to 'Zyklus'".

As so often with Feldman, American visual art also played a significant role here. Around 1950 Jackson Pollock created a series of pictures of a new kind, including “Number 32”, “One” and “Autumn Rhythm”. His manner of creating them was new and unusual. Pollock removed the canvas from the easel (or from the wall which served him as an easel), and put it on the floor. Instead of applying the paint to the canvas with a brush, he squeezed it straight out of the tube onto the canvas, or he would let the paint drip onto the canvas from a stick, after having dipped it into a bucket of paint. During this action, seemingly almost dance-like, a dense net of gestures, lines, spots, splatters and complex formations slowly developed on the canvas lying on the floor, covering it completely. Some of Pollock’s “actions” were documented for future generations by the photographer and filmmaker Hans Namuth.

Feldman removed from the hands of the percussionist what had until then been the most important means of sound production – sticks and mallets – and had him produce the sounds with his fingers, hands or arms. This was in my opinion a revolutionary musical act. The invariably soft sounds now produced had a completely different quality. Feldman called it “silent resistance”, both in relation to Stockhausen’s expressivity (and here it should be mentioned that Feldman admired Stockhausen’s first eleven “Klavierstücke”) as well as in relation to all the noisy music of the world.

Feldman chose the title of his work with great care: During the German occupation of Denmark in the Second World War, the Danish King wore the yellow Star of David on his coat, as Danish Jews were forced to do by the Nazis. It was this above all that Feldman interpreted as “silent resistance”. In this way, his work “The King of Denmark” acquires a political dimension never articulated as clearly in any of his other works.

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Notes:

1. A recording of “The King of Denmark”, performed by Jan Williams, is included on the CD, “The New York School 2” (HatART CD 6146). “Zyklus for a percussionist” is performed by the Swedish percussionist Jonny Axelsson on a CD of works by Stockhausen (Caprice, CAP 21642). Adam Weisman has so far not made a recording of these works.
2. A reproduction of the original, handwritten German version of the essay/artwork that included the above text, along with graphic works by the author, is available here: www.cnvill.net/mfblumking.pdf

March 2008

Additional note added at the author's request, July 2008:

In fact the yellow Star of David badge was never introduced in Denmark during the Nazi occupation, nor did the king, Christian X, threaten to wear it himself if they tried to. It is a beautiful story, and historians today believe it comes from the streets: "If they try to enforce the yellow star here, be sure the king will be the very first to wear it!" Official photos show he was fond of decorations!
[Ole Buck, Vertical Thoughts (Morton Feldman discussion list) 13 May 2008.]
A full account of this myth can be found here:
www.nybooks.com/articles/3687