



Creating the sound of Rothko

by
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"I have to orchestrate the piece for the space. We'll set the whole thing before the interview is over."

Last Monday may have been the first time any composer let a critic be his Boswell in the actual process of creative planning, but Morton Feldman found the grey light that filtered through the Rothko Chapel skylight ideally suited to his purposes that rainy morning and seemed eager to share his ideas. The 45-year old apostle of free-floating music, liberated from predetermined structures of time-duration and form, was planning the first stages of a work commissioned from the Menil Foundation in memory of the late Mark Rothko, whose giant auburn and black canvases adorn the octagon-shaped chapel dedicated the preceding week end. The painter was among the famous New York circle of Feldman's associates that includes the names of John Cage, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, Mel Powell, William[sic] De Kooning and Jackson Pollock.

Feldman stands well over six feet, has a tough Brooklyn accent that you could cut with a knife and squints through the very heavy lenses of his glasses with fierce urgency. But, like his music, his voice is remarkably gentle and soft-spoken, his eyes and ears are sensitive to the softest nuance of color, light and sound and the mind that directs his creative activities is of the highest intelligence. His thinking refines itself into an almost transparent, weightless clarity, but only through a gradual empirical, inductive process, rather analogous to the nature of the music he composes.

Early on, he joked about his own absentmindedness, "You know, when I got the commission from the de Menils, it seemed natural. In fact, it seemed so natural I forgot to call up and thank them."

Its naturalness derived from the fact that painter and composer were longtime buddies and pioneers in the field of abstraction. “I first met Rothko when I was a kid,” Feldman said, “I asked him: ‘Who’s your favorite composer?’ He said: ‘Mendelssohn’ – which seemed very incongruous. So when I gave a concert and he said he’d like to hear my music, I warned him: ‘It’s not like Mendelssohn!’

“He was a retiring person. People used to call him a brooding rabbi figure of New York.”

Feldman spoke of watching Rothko actually at work on the 14 austere panels in his New York loft and spending time with the painter, studying the changing play of light that caused minute changes in the carefully graduated intensities of their nearly single-color surfaces. “One time, he said to me: ‘Do you think it’s there what I think is there?’

“I said ... ‘it’s there.’”

About Rothko’s reported suicide after completing the panels, Feldman volunteered news of a heart condition with almost fierce loyalty: “As far as his death is concerned, he had a bad heart. The sheets of his bed were gripped in such a way that it was obvious that he had some terrible heart seizure ...”

“He’s left a foundation, of which I’m one of the executors. A very interesting foundation. It specifies that money be given to older artists, composers and critics who may have been successful early in their careers, but whose work changed and they were having a difficult time.” Among those who have been outrun by newer artistic fads and trends, Feldman mentioned recommending a well-known U.S. composer and a now-forgotten film critic as beneficiaries of the Rothko fund.

Standing directly under the opaque skylight, Feldman inspected the spatial dimensions of the chapel rotunda; he sang a note, whistled and threw a penny on the stone floor to test its acoustics (“not too much echo ... it’s nice”); he decided what kind of performers he wanted for “the Rothko thing” and where to place them so that they wouldn’t obstruct the view of the panels.

“I cast all my pieces,” he began, almost in the manner of a theatrical director. “All of my piano pieces were written for David Tudor. Now, I have found the viola ...”

Specifically, he seems to have found a violist of superior talent. “Her name is Karen Phillips and she is from Dallas ... so I am even going to bring Texas into it.”

“She has that reverential way of playing which is so very, very rare. I hope she doesn’t become too famous,” he interjected, “because when she plays, she really MEANS it.”

Digressing momentarily from his train of thought, he spoke of the need for a certain amount of time to write the work, “so I won’t feel it’s a commissioned piece. I gotta get

over the feeling that it's an 'occasion piece.'" He later promised to have it finished within a year.

Feldman elaborated on his choice of instrument, with reference to the surrounding reddish-brown hues: "I didn't want the sound to be too dark or too bright. I wanted a middle color. There's just something about the viola ... the color blends. Remember that the viola is a middle instrument. I felt that it would blend beautifully in the middle of the audience."

But he was skeptical about employing other players: "I feel that, esthetically, the look of instruments in this hall would be out of place." But next to the main triptych there was a bare corner, which, for lack of a more tasteful solution, might come to hold up a potted palm someday. "You know what might look very beautiful here – a percussion setup. So, why don't we have a percussion setup here ... and" (there being another bare corner opposite) "a percussion setup here.

"Very quiet percussion."

Feldman was bothered by the fact that the view of the triptych itself was obstructed by a small and low-lying, but heavy, set of chorus risers. After an unsuccessful attempt to move it, he tried the rational approach: "We could use a chorus. I want to use this space ... we could have a chamber chorus.

"You know, you have to have an ecological attitude about heavy things that are already placed."

After further speculation about the placement of the percussion, a conductor and whether the chorus would sit down occasionally during the piece, Feldman got to the matter of a title.

"All right, is it a memorial to Mark? Or do I write a piece that has transcended Mark into the Rothko thing? That's not a bad idea: 'The Rothko Chapel in Houston.' Now, I have to see what that looks like on paper, because I'm very visually oriented about these things. Let me borrow your pen," he asked, bending low over a bench to squint as he as he lettered out the title:

'The Rothko Murals in Houston'

But, he immediately drew a line through it, writing a second title with the word, "Chapel" instead of Murals. Then he juggled with the words "chamber chorus," "perc," "solo viola" underneath, trying to decide which order he liked best.

"So that's the title. If they want to play it once a year ... or every two years," he mused. Then he took up another problem.

"What would be the length of this piece?" Surveying his imagined musical forces, the panels and the audience that would come, he began to plan. "We could have pauses, just

to direct them visually to the paintings ... so they could have the psychological feeling of just being in a chapel.”

At this point, Feldman got to the core of the music he was planning and to the essential relationship between the subtle abstractions of his own creative medium and that of the 14 somber panels that had obviously been stimulating his compositional imagination for the preceding half-hour. He backtracked momentarily to get to the point:

“It’s changed,” he said very quietly, noting a barely perceptible alteration in the amount of grey light coming through the skylight above. “When we came in, there was a little glare. Now the glare is off.

“If there’s such a thing as a religious heart to this, I think that it is the fact that you accept change with the change of light. Sometimes, there’s a little bit of glare, sometimes you see the surface, sometimes the surface recedes.

“That’s the whole expression, which you call the Emperor’s New Clothes” (he had drawn the analogy to Andersen’s fairytale earlier). “The whole slow process of changing light. The revealing influence which makes it closer to life.”

“Now all I have to do is go back and write the piece.”

After further thought about relating the structure of the piece to the number of panels (“14 different stages – they wouldn’t be movements or sections, but they will be structural points”), he finished casting, staging and orchestrating by deciding on a time for its performance.

“I would like to have the concert in the ... the late afternoon,” he determined. “That’s when the light begins to change. You know, the Jews have a tradition that they never travel on the sabbath and they’re always conscious of what time sundown is. They’re always asking you, ‘What time is it?’

“I think I would like to find out when is sundown on that day and gear the piece to end when the sun goes down in actuality, you’ll have a built-in light show.”

“I think that will be a beautiful time ... That’s going to be definite!”