

Morton Feldman in conversation with Christopher Gough and Roger Woodward
Edinburgh, August 1980

The following short conversation was broadcast from Edinburgh on BBC Radio 3 on 28th August 1980¹. It was the introduction to a "Music in Our Time" programme that featured the first UK performances of Feldman's String Quartet and Orchestra and Piano and Orchestra. Christopher Gough was cellist with the Edinburgh String Quartet in String Quartet and Orchestra and Roger Woodward was the pianist in Piano and Orchestra. The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Henry Lewis.

MF: In writing a whole series of these pieces for string quartet and orchestra, piano and orchestra, oboe and orchestra, violin and orchestra, flute and orchestra, and so forth - I was very interested in a kind of anti-hero stance. There's just something that became very disconcerting - to define just what virtuosity is. And I feel that, if I want my music to define anything, [it would be] to define the kind of virtuosity that's needed to play my music.

CG: Is it the virtuosity that you associate with the soft things which are so difficult to do in music, to do something gently?

MF: Just the control...

CG: The control, this is what I mean.

MF: The control of one's... the *closeness* the performer has to one's instruments. That they don't play it from a distance. That they have... that they are not frightened of their own instrument. Actually it's amazing... it's amazing how many professionals are actually frightened by the instruments they themselves, allegedly, have mastered.

CG: Oh yes, especially when you've got to make it speak pianissimo somewhere. When you're suddenly left on your own, you know, expected to play this pianissimo note on an instrument that you don't know is talking to you that day. That's what I mean. It's that kind of virtuosity, rather than fireworks.

MF: It's this hardness means that a lot of the performers become disenheartened because they don't have the *role playing*, of *spieling*, of *playing*, and it becomes very disenheartening. They feel that it's... it's... it takes away from the human element, and I thought the human element would be the *love* of that *sound that they're playing*, you know.

CG: Mind you, it's easier to appreciate that when you're sitting well away from the orchestra and you hear what it is that you're trying to say. When you're right in the middle of the orchestra, it must be much harder because you can hear, you know, yourself and the things immediately around you. You don't get the whole picture.

MF: Well, one of the problems that I have with performers and with the audience, is that *we* might feel that what's happening is interesting, but what they're playing doesn't appear to be interesting. In other words, what they're doing to make this overall interest is not interesting!
[Laughs]

CG: I know exactly what you mean. [Laughs too]

RW: But Chris, when you were playing in *String Quartet and Orchestra*, there were string sounds I've just never heard before! I thought the repertoire was exhausted, but I was sitting there listening to sounds that I've never heard before, thinking, 'God, isn't that beautiful!' And I was looking at the score and I was realising that these are quite conventional methods of notating the sounds, but it's a matter of how they are put together. And then I realised that the acoustical problems in placing a string quartet with an orchestra for a concerto just must be enormous!

CG: Yes, I think that one of the fundamental things that Morton has grasped on is that the string quartet is not four string players playing four different lines. It's four string players that play together. Therefore they make a different kind of sound, and that's what comes out. You can hear the different sort of texture of these four players because they play together all the time. Whereas, if you try to put four – doesn't matter how distinguished – string players together, and say, 'Play those four lines', it just doesn't sound the same.

MF: Right.

RW: You remember in Germany, Morty, when we did the *Piano and Orchestra*² first, I came on, and they're all waiting for this tremendous gesture, you know? And they got one note, and a chord, and then another sound, and then there was a long wait - and they're still waiting for the piano concerto! And twenty minutes later they're wondering what's going on, we still haven't got to it, you know, it was over!

MF: I think it's really interesting that what we expect from a long piece... First of all, the whole idea of a long piece appears to be *portentous*. And in about seventy minutes into my *String Quartet*³, I felt that I wanted to relax the material. And at the same time one would feel that, as the piece is accumulating, the material should like *gel*, or become more *dramatic*. And here it was like petering out into nothing. And then I picked it up again and I went on.

CG: How many sections, in such a long piece?

MF: It's really one section... it's really one section. It's like a movie. How many sections are a movie? Unless you want to feel it's a beginning, middle and end.

RW: The problem's the montage! [Laughter] I don't know about Chris, but as far as I'm concerned, I like very much to play new pieces of music that I can't easily predict. And it's very nice going to see old-fashioned movies that I still love, like the Beethoven *Ninth Symphony* or the *Emperor Piano Concerto*, that I'm involved in in some of the acting roles, and so forth - where I can predict the events that are going to happen, and, sure enough, they happen. We have the happy ending or the sad ending or whatever. We know the events and we can predict them in advance. But it's very nice with new music to have a series of events that you can't necessarily predict. And this is one of the reasons I'm attracted to your music.

MF: This is... This is something that a lot of composers don't really talk about, and perhaps we should more, before we start talking to performers, and then the audience. And I had a wonderful conversation in Buffalo recently with Harrison Birtwistle, that visited us⁴. We did something together in Toronto and Harry came back to give a lecture at my university in Buffalo. And we heard some recent pieces of Harry. One, quite long - I think it was about

thirty, thirty-five minutes⁵. And when it was finished, he said, ‘It’s really just a fragment’. [Laughs] You know, I grew up with this thing is: ‘There’s not enough *material*. He doesn’t have enough material for a six and a half minute work there’. [Laughs] You know. Or there’s: ‘I mean for a twelve minute work, that’s a *lot of material* for a twelve and a half minute work!’ It seems to be that everybody has insight into what the material is for a certain type of piece or everything, and... and you just wonder what a short piece is, and what a long piece is. I did a little seminar on the short piece. And they became hilarious! You know, it’s like Chopin *Preludes* – are they *really* short pieces? I don’t know. But the *Bagatelles* of Beethoven... the *Bagatelles*... are among the funniest things to play and really listen to in a seminar with a whole bunch of people listening to it. Because it’s really like Houdini⁶. It’s like that guy at Portobello Road⁷ that puts himself in *chains* and tries to get out. The whole idea of the Beethoven *Bagatelles* is not to have an idea. And the minute it gets an idea, it gets out of it. Never mind what a long piece is. Never mind what a short piece is. I think we have to even really... like to really talk about, ‘What is a *piece*?’

RW: The end of *Piano and Orchestra* seems not to want to end. I mean it’s a piece where time takes over. You know, there’s a kind of endless perspective, where that kind of intimacy is, as the idea of [the Italian word] “concertos” [implies] surely, in the genuine sense.

MF: Well, I can’t thank you both enough.

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Notes

1. Transcribed and annotated by Chris Villars from a tape recording of the broadcast made by Tudor Wright.
2. The first performance of *Piano and Orchestra* took place in Metz, Germany, on 21 November 1975. Roger Woodward was the soloist with the Saarbrücken Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Hans Zender.
3. Feldman’s first *String Quartet* was premiered by the Columbia String Quartet on 4 May 1980, just a few months before this conversation.
4. Feldman’s conversation with Birtwistle took place at the State University of New York at Buffalo on 23 March 1975. A tape recording of the conversation is held in the University’s Feldman archive:
<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/music/spcoll/feldman/mflectures.html>
5. A tape recording of Birtwistle’s *The Triumph of Time* was played at the end of the conversation.
6. Harry Houdini, American escapologist, 1874-1926.
7. London street market where, over the years, street entertainers have regularly performed Houdini-like escapes to amuse the crowd. Feldman may have seen such a performance there during one of his visits to London.