

# **A musical work emerges and disappears – Morton Feldman’s *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar***

by Peter Söderberg<sup>1</sup>

*The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar* is a work by Morton Feldman that does not exist. Or maybe it does, after all! There was certainly something resembling a work for one year, between 1966 and 1967, after which all traces seemed to disappear. But can an existing musical work really cease to be, and if so, under what conditions? Can a work reappear after many years, in spite of the fact that the original, the composer’s manuscript, is lost?

Morton Feldman composed *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar* in early 1966, at the request of his colleague Christian Wolff. Feldman and Wolff were since the early 1950’s part of the circle around John Cage in New York, and they both belong amongst the most the prominent American composers of the second half of the 20th century. Less well-known is the fact that, around that time, Christian Wolff performed as an electric guitar player. He played the instrument without any real training and with an idiosyncratic technique, often with the guitar lying on the floor or on a table.

Wolff has testified that the music emerged on a single occasion, when he and Feldman got together. Feldman sat at the piano, playing sounds that Wolff would try to transfer to the guitar. The result of the investigation was notated by Feldman, and in that way the work took shape. On the same occasion, Feldman handed over the sheet music to Wolff, and accordingly the work was established in the form that would be the ultimate – at least from the composer’s pen. There are statements from both Feldman and Wolff from the same time that suggest that the work was not really finished when Wolff got it in his hand.

The uncertain destiny that the work would face seems to be foreshadowed already in the work title, “*The Possibility of...*”, even if this designation were to turn out to be only a temporary one. Feldman addressed the issue in one of his conversations with John Cage that were recorded for the radio station WBAI in New York around the same time: [...] *when they asked me for a piece for the program, I said, ‘Well, there might be a possibility of a piece for electric guitar’, and that’s what they wrote down in the program, “A Possibility of a Piece for Electric Guitar.”*<sup>2</sup>

Feldman composed the music to be performed at a concert in New York, probably without any intention that it would become a definitive and published work, or anything that would be included in his oeuvre. Around this time, the electric guitar was still a rare instrument in classical music (Feldman was one of the few composers who had used it in some ensemble works) let alone an instrument that had any tradition of being played solo. This may have contributed to the fact that Feldman never saw the possibility of a solo work for electric guitar having any potential distribution.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first published in Swedish in *Nutida Musik* (No. 259-260, 2016) pp 6-15. This English translation is by the author and Chris Villars.

<sup>2</sup> Morton Feldman/John Cage: *Radio Happenings*. Edition MusikTexte, Köln, 1993. A new edition was published in 2016 by MusikTexte/Mode Records, including an audio only DVD with the original radio programmes.

Christian Wolff performed *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar* on three occasions:

Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, New York (July 1966)

Radio KPFA, San Francisco (29. July 1966)

Harvard University, Cambridge (14. May 1967)

At the second concert there was also a recording made, something that would prove decisive for the work's future.

Christian Wolff kept the only copy of the Feldman score in his guitar case. During a break-in to his car after the third performance, the guitar was stolen and with it also the original score of Feldman's work. Shortly before this incident, Feldman mentions in one of his radio talks with Cage, that he intends to have the original score back from Wolff. He wants to look the music through once again and make a copy, so that not only Wolff will have it. However, this never happened, and with the disappearance of the manuscript, the short story of Feldman's composition for electric guitar seemed to come to an end. For several decades, the work existed only as a fading memory among a few people; those who had seen the written down music; those who had heard it in concert or on the radio; and Christian Wolff, the only one who had played it.

In the late 1990's, the Norwegian guitarist and musicologist Jørgim Erland went to the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, where the *Morton Feldman Collection* – the major part of the estate of the composer – is kept. Erland's purpose was to study Feldman's orchestral music, but he also happened to lay eyes on a single sheet of a sketch, something that turned out to have a connection with the long forgotten work for electric guitar. Erland made a transcript of the sketch and returned to Cologne, where he was studying with guitarist Seth Josel. A copy of the transcript was given to Josel, and became the incentive for a long-lasting project trying to find traces of the missing work by Feldman. A decisive piece in the puzzle would come to light a few years later.

The surviving sketch page contains merely three types of sound material: broken chords, isolated low tones with a descending glissando – Wolff's electric guitar was supplied with a whammy bar – and an ascending melodic phrase. There are also sparse notes about dynamics – a recurring crescendo to *ppp* – plus a note about which sound should be played first. There are a number of fermatas between the notated sounds, something that would seem to indicate that these were conceived as independent elements, without any set order. No sounds have a note value, and are thus free of any rhythmic determination.

Chris Villars, editor of the excellent website "The Morton Feldman Page", took an interest in Christian Wolff's mention of a radio recording having been made at one of the performances of Feldman's electric guitar piece. According to Wolff, the recording was made by radio WKFA in San Francisco, but that turned out to be a false clue; such a radio station never existed. Enquiries during 2006 lead to Charles Amirkhanian and Other Minds, the organisation that holds the archive of recordings from the radio station KPFA, based in Berkeley, California. As it turned out, a tape reel of the concert in San Francisco in July 1966 was found, filed away on a shelf, albeit in very poor condition.

If Seth Josel had initially established that the single sketch page was insufficient to build any picture of the lost original score, the unexpected complement of a recording now became the precondition for a possible reconstruction of the work. A project with this purpose was initiated by Other Minds and entrusted to Seth Josel, who as a guitarist specializing in new

music, and also an artistic researcher, had the best possible qualifications. This task occupied Josel for a long time and resulted in an actual revival of Feldman's composition. Since a few years ago, there have been two alternate versions resulting from Josel's reconstruction, both of which are included in an edition published in 2015 by Edition Peters.<sup>3</sup>

One of the new scores is a simple transcription of the preserved recording. What we have is barely five minutes of music that fits into a single page in the edition. No dynamics have been included by Josel – perhaps a consequence of the poor recording quality – but otherwise the notation displays great similarities with Feldman's own on the preserved sketch page. The musical material in the sketch also corresponds with the content of the recording; in this respect the sketch is representative of the music that Wolff performed.

The other version is a reconstructed score, also based on Wolff's recording, but also taking the sketch page into consideration. The latter displays some deviating details when compared to the recording, something that may have different explanations. Are we simply dealing with mistakes on Wolff's part? After all, Wolff had a rudimentary playing technique on the guitar, and also, from time to time, stage fright that could have affected him at the time of the recording. But what Wolff was reading at the performances was not the extant sketch but the later lost score, in which Feldman may have corrected details from the sketch page. Another possibility – with far reaching consequences for the view that this was indeed a work by Feldman that was performed – is that Wolff dealt relatively freely with the sound material that was delivered by Feldman. In that case, the performance should perhaps be designated as an improvisation on given sound material, rather than the performance of a composed work. Considering that Wolff throughout his career has often performed as an improvising musician, this speculation is not so far-fetched, particularly since Wolff later made statements that point in this direction.<sup>4</sup>

The Edition Peters edition also contains two informative texts that shed further light on *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar*. Chris Villars talks about the historical facts surrounding the birth of the work, up until the rediscovery of the sketch and the recording<sup>5</sup>, while Seth Josel gives an account of how he went about reconstructing the score<sup>6</sup>.

Seth Josel himself gave the first performance of the reconstructed Feldman work in March 2009, at Yale University, New Haven. This location happens to be the same place Christian Wolff was heading to 44 years earlier when his car was broken into and the work of Feldman disappeared...

### **Is this a work?**

When does a musical work actually become one? Is it when the author no longer interferes with it, when he leaves it behind? Does the work exist in the template that can be transformed into something that sounds, or does it emerge only *in* the sounding? Can the work exist already before it has been mediated in some form by the originator? Is the registering of the work something that merely *makes the work visible*, letting it thereby step out into the world? When the written down score disappears, does the music cease to exist, or does it still remain

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<sup>3</sup> Morton Feldman: *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar* (EP 68492). Edition Peters, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Email conversation between Seth Josel and Christian Wolff. MusikTexte No. 133, May 2012.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cnvill.net/mfpossibility.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Seth Josel, "Reconstructing Morton Feldman's *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar*". Soundboard: The Journal of the Guitar Foundation of America, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2012. Also in MusikTexte No. 133, May 2012.

in an immaterial form? Ontological questions about the work's nature come to the fore when we are dealing with *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar*, a work that seems to escape the usual criteria determining a musical work.

Something has been preserved from what has been a work, and something has been reconstructed. That which normally constitutes a condition for a work in the context of art music – the score of the composer – is in this case no longer extant. Successive re-readings and re-writings can seem to lead us away from the original work, not least when every new reading is based on the immediately preceding one (but not the earlier), and when the original text can no longer be related to. New interpretations may constitute a revision, a questioning of earlier ones. But they also shed new light on the work, adding an alternative to earlier understandings of it. With the approach of John Cage, a musical work is never completed until it has been realized in sounding form.

The single work has its own limitations regarding its possible readings, until the boundaries of the work have been reached, or transcended. In this way, the work receives its determination not only by the originator but also by its interpreters, in a long chain following its creation. With this approach, the work itself is never fixed, but changes every time it is interpreted. The originator has left the work behind, and has finally no longer any influence on its further existence.

This concept of the evolving work can also play a role in our view of already canonized music. We may continuously take part of new interpretations of the classical standard works. They present new angles of approach as to how the music can be interpreted, but we assume that the work itself is the same, ever since its creation. The idea that the work may change in retrospect may appear controversial and contradictory. But the view of a historical work changes with the music, and the interpretation traditions, of the following epochs. From our own perspective then, not only Bach has an influence on Beethoven, but also the other way around.

### **Notation in Feldman's music – a way to liberate the sounds**

Morton Feldman experimented in different periods since the early 1950's with entirely different forms of notation in his music, something that, among other things, led to different degrees of liberty in the interpretation of the music. Here we find graphical scores – works that only specify density (number of sounds) and register (high-middle-low) within a time frame – scores with specified sounds but in indeterminate order, and also traditionally notated music. The two new versions of the electric guitar work surely match the original in so far as this music was using traditional notation with specified pitches.

The fact that both alternative scores – transcription and reconstruction – display such a correspondence with one another, seems to suggest that the lost original score would also have had a very similar look. But that may be a hasty conclusion. The new edition presents the kind of score which is intended to be read the usual way; from beginning to end. The music is thereby already established with the sounds ordered in a linear succession. But this traditional and closed form is far from self-evident in new music, and is also not the case in some of Morton Feldman's compositions.

To re-create a musical work mainly by transcribing a recording can prove to be deceptive, not the least when dealing with form and the fixation of sound occurrences. If the same method were used for Feldman's piano work *Intermission 6* (1953), for example, a reconstruction

would result in a notation image that indeed contain the same sounds that in fact are specified in the existing score, but in an *established order* – the way the music was rendered in the recording used for transcription. However, this would completely overlook a central idea behind *Intermission 6*, namely that the specified sounds could be played in *any order*, thereby giving the music a slightly different shape at each interpretation. (The open form presented in *Intermission 6* also has a correspondence in works such as the third piano sonata by Boulez, or Stockhausen's *Klavierstück XI* from the same period.)

But the opposite can also be found in Feldman's music; in several works for more than one instrument, the notation is fixed, and the sounds are to be played in an established order, from beginning to end, in each part. But as the parts are not synchronized, but played independently of each other, here also the sounds do not appear in a predetermined order *between* the parts. In the preserved recording of the electric guitar piece, there are some indications that the work may have had an open form, without a determined beginning or end. Several of the sounds reoccur in Wolff's performance, either identical or in slightly varied form. This could indicate that the sounds should be played not only in a free order, but also that they could be repeated, as in several other Feldman works.

We can not be sure to what extent Josel's reconstructed score actually reflects Feldman's original. Maybe the lost score was nothing much more than an elaboration of the sketch page, a catalogue of independent sounds, but not a precise composition.

### **Interpretation of an interpretation**

In the alternative scores that Seth Josel has prepared, we are dealing with a succession of interpretations, a transfer between the written down and the sounding, in both directions; from Wolff's interpretation of sign to sound, and from Josel's interpretation of sound in the recording back to the notated score. Already in Feldman's original score there is a transmission, and thus an interpretation, of the sounds that Wolff played during their meeting, which in turn were an interpretation of the sounds that Feldman first presented.

As the result of this long series of interpretations, which have preceded the new version of the Feldman work, future interpreters are faced with unexpected questions. What should a new realization of the music try to achieve? Should it put an emphasis on restoration, where the music is brought back to what sounds in the old recording? Given Wolff's unconventional playing technique, a new interpretation respecting his performance practice would have a huge impact on the result. Seth Josel has indeed tested this approach, playing the simple transcription with the guitar lying on the floor, in Wolff's manner. (Josel plays the reconstructed score with the instrument in a normal position.)<sup>7</sup>

Of course, one can question if there is any point at all in aiming at performing the music in the same way as Wolff did. That would preserve the work in a form as historical music, where a recording, instead of a score, constitutes the bench-mark. In this case, the interpretation would to a high degree be restricted to reproduction.

As a result of Feldman having composed the music to be performed by Christian Wolff, his realization can be said to constitute an authorized interpretation; one that the originator has

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<sup>7</sup> Seth Josel's recording of the reconstructed score is available for download; Mode Records, Mode 280 (2015). <http://www.moderecords.com/>

agreed upon, or has himself taken part in. But is Wolff's realization then also a part of the work itself? Should his way of playing the music have a greater legitimacy than other, subsequent interpretations?

In Sylvano Bussotti's *Five Piano Pieces for David Tudor* (1959), the title is primarily understood as a dedication; the music is dedicated to the pianist David Tudor. But Bussotti has stressed that the title is rather to be understood as an expression mark: the music should be played *as David Tudor plays it*. In this case, the intended execution is to such a high degree a part of the work's identity that it is hardly possible to distinguish between the work itself and its interpretation – an ideal interpretation is already formulated in the work. This confronts new interpreters with the necessity of deciding how constraining this playing instruction should be, and what consequences it may have. In this case, interpretation involves relating not only to the musical text, but also to the playing style of a previous interpreter. A similar question arises with Feldman's piece for electric guitar, where Wolff's idiosyncratic way of executing the music is, as a result of the transcription being used, to a large degree inscribed in the work itself.

A guitarist today who plays the Feldman work from the transcription of Wolff's recording is strictly speaking not playing the actual work, but an interpretation of the work; he is making a reading of a previous reading. This may bring us closer to the original work, or farther away from it. It takes us close to a whole complex of problems that exists also in the music of Giacinto Scelsi, where the work left behind is basically a transcription of the recording of the music, in this case as played by the composer. With Scelsi, the music has no model in a score, but has been extemporized, possibly from a preconceived concept of the content and character of the music. That which as a general rule precedes an interpretation, and is the starting point for it – the actual score – emerges in the case of Scelsi only *after* the music has sounded. Klangforum Wien has recently realized a project with Scelsi's music, as well as new works by younger composers who have taken Scelsi's music as an inspiration. Here the sound world of Scelsi was approached directly by using his recordings, which have recently started to be made public, instead of the link via the transcriptions/scores, as a starting point to render his music.

### **Reception of the work**

Does it really matter if Feldman's electric guitar music is to be considered a genuine work or not? Well, the legal and economic aspects of the work immediately come into play. For example, the music is now published – as a Feldman work – by one of the big publishing houses. The iconic status that Morton Feldman has achieved was likely a condition for his catalogue to be supplemented with a reconstructed work. Here we also find the interests of interpreters, concert organizers, journals, record companies, and other players in the music business. That this particular work is also closely connected with Christian Wolff makes it all the more attractive in certain contexts.

When it comes to the work's reception, its status may be crucial for the way it is evaluated. When regarded as a genuine Feldman work, the music is placed in a context where it is part of Feldman's oeuvre, and set against other works by Feldman, as well as works by other composers. In this case, the composer comes first, while the role of the player is mainly viewed as being interpretative or reproductive. If instead a musician were to use the new edition as a starting point for a more independent performance – similar to how Wolff may have dealt with Feldman's model – the music should perhaps be labeled as an "Improvisation on sound material by Morton Feldman." Here, a shift in the view of the originator takes

place, and we are not dealing any more with a work by Feldman. It could even be questioned if an “improvisation” is to be considered a work at all, in the classical sense. The executant here plays a creative role, and can himself make claims to be the originator of the music. These differences imply that basically the same music receives a stronger or lesser attractiveness among different recipients, solely as a result of how it is designated.

Another crucial difference is that the improvised work emerges and ends in real time, precisely when the music sounds. It can only exist when it is played. It has no (external) interpreter as the composed work does, even when there is a model, as in the case of Feldman’s specified sound material. The improvised work can also not be repeated; even when a new improvisation takes place based on the same concept as a previous one, it is determined as a new work. One exception is apparently the recorded improvisation, that – paradoxically – after it has taken place can be rendered in the same form an unlimited number of times. As a result, improvised music that has been determined as a work indeed has a prolonged life, in a legal sense.

### **Epilogue**

Nearly forty years after his performances of Feldman’s original music, Christian Wolff himself composed a work for electric guitar – *Another Possibility* (2004) – with apparent allusions to the lost Feldman work. To a certain extent, it deals with reconstructing the ambience of the Feldman work, based on Wolff’s remembrance of the music, while at the same time bearing his own trademark. And *Another Possibility* is without doubt to be considered an entirely new work; when compared with the reconstructed Feldman work, the differences are more apparent than any similarities.

### **Postscript (added to the English translation 15/12/2016)**

Since this article was first published, Christian Wolff has stated: “The Feldman guitar piece was not indeterminate (and certainly not like *Intermission 6*), except for the “free”, i.e. not barred, notation of the rhythm, and even that, if one had any feeling for Feldman’s “floating” rhythms of that period, was not really indeterminate.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, had Feldman returned to the piece and developed it further, he might possibly have given it an indeterminate form similar to *Intermission 6*, as suggested here. However, Wolff’s remarks appear to establish that the piece as Feldman left it had a conventional, determinate form, as reflected in the now published edition.

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<sup>8</sup> Christian Wolff, email to Chris Villars 4 December 2016.