

The Story of Morton Feldman's
The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar

by Chris Villars

In 1966 Morton Feldman wrote a piece for electric guitar. He wrote it for his friend and fellow composer Christian Wolff, who gave the first performance later that year in a concert at the Library and Museum of the Performing Arts, New York. In July 1966, shortly after the premiere of the piece, Feldman and John Cage recorded the second of their famous radio conversations for radio WBAI, New York. In this conversation, Feldman spoke about the piece:

MF: [...] *I wrote a piece for electric guitar, and I tried to overcome the fact of an electric guitar. And so Christian came over to the house and I had him try various things, very strange things and strange registers, and when it didn't sound like an electric guitar, I wrote it down (laughs). I mean, it seemed too obvious just to write a piece for electric guitar. He plays it very beautifully, very hesitant.*

JC: *Merce Cunningham told me it was marvelously soft ...*

MF: *Yes.*

JC: *... and yet it was coming through an electric sound system.*

MF: *Yes.*

JC: *And it was still very soft?*

MF: *Yes. It was very difficult to do (laughs).*

JC: *I know it would be. It must have been magnificent.*

MF: *I have to recopy it. I gave him the only score. I wasn't sure about the piece. In fact, 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".*

JC: *But it has another title now?*

MF: *No, I think I have to get it back and look at it and ...*

JC: *Oh, I see.*

MF: *... go over it, and make, not a piece out of it, but copy it out.[1]*

On July 29, 1966, Christian Wolff performed the piece a second time as part of a concert given in the San Francisco studio of radio KPFA, Berkeley, California. Almost a year later, in May 1967, Wolff gave a third performance in a concert at Harvard University. Richard Bjorkman was at the Harvard event and has given the following account:

One performance from this period that I particularly recall occurred at Harvard University on May 14, 1967, when Christian Wolff played

Feldman's "The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar." What makes this piece unusual is that it is one of a small handful of Feldman pieces that have never been published. The piece, to the extent that I can recall it, was very soft, very slow, with fairly long silences. The concert took place outdoors in the courtyard of Eliot House, and this presented a bit of a problem for the Feldman piece. Eliot House is located near Memorial Drive, which is heavily traveled by high-speed traffic. This creates more than a little background noise - not an ideal location in which to perform a quiet piece by Feldman. I remember straining to hear every note of the quiet and sparse piece above the noise from Memorial Drive. I cannot remember whether Wolff performed the piece sitting or standing, but I believe he was sitting. There was something delightfully incongruous about seeing the soft-spoken Christian Wolff, conservatively-dressed in a suit, playing a very soft, very slow piece by Morton Feldman on an instrument associated almost exclusively (at least at that time) with rock music. The question, of course, remains why the piece was never published. I suspected for many years that Feldman had simply withdrawn the piece, but it has come to light in recent years that, in fact, the manuscript was in the Christian Wolff's guitar case, which was stolen from his automobile.[2]

<p>Eliot House Mayfest Fourth Concert</p> <p>A COURTYARD CONCERT OF NEW AND ELECTRIC MUSIC</p> <p>Sunday, 14 May 1967, 8:30 p. m.</p>		<p>The miracle of your liver bile John Nash (a film, 1967)*</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>with</u></p> <p>Variations IV (1964) John Cage</p> <p style="text-align: center;">* first performance</p> <p><u>Performers:</u> D. Behrman, cybersonic equipment & electric bass / G. Mumma, cybersonic equipment & French horn / A. Lucier, cybersonic equipment / J. Nash violin / C. Wolff, electric guitar.</p> <p>Players in Distance and Variations IV include: Mary Lucier, David Rome, Nicholas White, and other friends from Eliot House.</p> <p>We would like to thank the Sonic Arts Group, Gordon Hardy (of the "Hard Times"), Alvin Lucier, the Brandeis Univer- sity Studio for Electronic Music, and members of Eliot House for the loan of electric equipment.</p>
<p>Runthrough (1967) David Behrman cybersonic equipment & dulcimer</p> <p>Distance (1964) Toshi Ichihyanagi performers & instruments</p> <p>The possibility of a new work for electric guitar (1966) Morton Feldman</p> <p>Diastasis, as in beer (1967)* Gordon Mumma cybersonic equipment</p> <p>Flicker (a film, 1966) Tony Conrad</p>		
<u>intermission</u>		
<p>Electric Spring 4 (1967)* Christian Wolff violin, horn, electric guitar, bass</p> <p>First Annual Music Balloon Ascension Alvin Lucier (1967)*</p>		

Programme of the concert in the courtyard of Eliot House, Harvard University, May 14, 1967 [3]

In some notes written in 1990, Christian Wolff describes the experience of working with Feldman on the piece and the subsequent theft of the score:

Sometime in, I think, 1966, when I had become interested in working with electric guitar, I asked Morty would he consider writing for it. I offered to come over with the guitar to show him what I thought it could do and how it sounded. He agreed, and when I came we immediately set to work, he at the piano, playing a chord: "can you do that?" I could. "How about this?" With some contortions (the guitar was laid flat so I could better see what I was doing – I'm not a guitar player, and this way I could finger and pluck with either hand), yes. "This?" Not quite. "Now" (with changed voicing, or a new chord)? Yes. And so on, until he had made the piece. Tempo was slow and dynamics soft, the structure dictated by the amount of time we were able to concentrate on the work. The sound, the chords or single notes, were reverberations set off by his (characteristic) piano playing, feeling for a resonance, then confidently transferred to the guitar within that instrument's capacities (sometimes adding one of its particular features, the ability to make small slides with a vibrato bar).

When we were finished he gave me the music he'd written. I played the piece – it was called The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar – three times in public, at Harvard University, at the studio of station WKFA in San Francisco, and at the Library and Museum of the Performing Arts in New York City. I kept the music – there was only the one copy – inside my guitar case. A few months later guitar and case were stolen out of our car.[4]

For many years that seemed to be the end of the story. The only copy of the score had disappeared for good when Wolff's guitar and case were stolen from his car in New York in 1967. The piece was lost, and that was the end of it.

Then in June 2007, Steve Dickison, Director of the Poetry Center at San Francisco State University and co-editor of *Shuffle Boil* (a magazine of music and poetry), contacted me to say that they were running a review of the recently published book of Feldman interviews and lectures, *Morton Feldman Says*, in their next issue, and asking whether I had any other Feldman-related material they could also include. I suggested that they publish the short talk, "Morton Feldman in My Life", that I had given at Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in November 2006. In that talk, I said:

I think it is not impossible that The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar might one day come to light. Not the score, but a recording. Christian Wolff says that he once played the piece in the studios of radio WKFA in San Francisco. It's not impossible that buried somewhere in the archives of that radio station a recording may still exist.[5]

Reading this, Steve Dickson commented that there was no such radio station as “WKFA in San Francisco” as Wolff had written and I had repeated. He suggested that it would almost certainly have actually been “KPFA in Berkeley”. Following this lead, I contacted Charles Amirkhanian, Director of *Other Minds*, the organisation that maintains the archives of KPFA radio. He immediately forwarded my message to Charles Shere, Music Director of KPFA from 1964-67, the period during which the performance had taken place. Amazingly, Shere immediately recalled seeing a tape in the archive labelled with the title of Feldman’s piece, which he had thought was a piece by Christian Wolff. Shortly thereafter, Charles Amirkhanian forwarded me the following message from *Other Minds* cataloguer, Stephen Upjohn, along with the photo below of the tape reel box containing the recording:

We have a tape “An Avant-Garde Concert, July 29, 1966” that I recently catalogued that lists The possibility of a new work for electric guitar by Morton Feldman and performed by Christian Wolff as one of the musical selections.[6]

kpfa FM 94.1 MC <small>PACIFICA LISTENER SUPPORTED RADIO 2307 SHATTUCK AVE. BERKELEY 4, CALIF. THORNWALL 5-5767</small>		Time: Part: <u>1 of 3</u> Speed: 15 Disposition: Hold for: Return to: Music Archive:
Total (with continuity) 1 hr 10 min		
THE JULY 29 CONCERT, 1966: an avant garde concert given at KPFA's San Francisco studio, organized by Christian Wolff and Robert Moran.		
John Cage ensemble Nam June Paik	Cartridge music Playable music no. 1500198769 <u>40377762456 for Robert Moran</u> <u>or a la recherche de Freud</u> <u>perdu</u>	
Robert Moran, piano Morton Feldman Christian Wolff, guitar Christian Wolff ensemble	The possibility of a new work for electric guitar For five or ten players	
Originator: Approved for broadcast by: _____ in series of _____		
Master by: _____ Technical comments:	Dubbed by: _____ Dub for: WBAI <u>KPFA</u> Other: <u>Mus-March</u>	KPFA Broadcasts Day Date Time <u>10/8/66 4:15 pm</u> <u>7/29/68 pm</u> <u>3/27/72 9 pm</u>
Recording Information (Master) Date: Location: Studio _____ Recorder: _____ or outside at: Sound Quality: Excellent _____ Broadcastable _____		

Box of the tape reel holding the recording of Feldman’s “lost” piece

a CONCERT	
at 321 Divisadero, San Francisco	July 29, 1966
Cartridge Music	John Cage
Playable music no. 150019876940377762456 for robert moran or à la recherche de freud perdu	Nam June Paik
The possibility of a new work for electric guitar	Morton Feldman
For 5 or 10 players	Christian Wolff
Katarakt I (prepared piano, horn, cello, trombone)	Anestis Logothetis
intermission	
L'après-midi du Dracoula for numerous instruments*	Robert Moran
Electric Spring 3*	Christian Wolff
Paper piece	Benjamin Patterson
*premieres	
Performers: Robert Moran	Keyboard(s)
Stuart Dempster	Bass trombone, garden hose
John Nash	Violin, recorders
Holly Wolff	Bass guitar
Christian Wolff	Electric guitar

Programme of the KPFA concert at which the recording was made [7]

Following the discovery of the tape, *Other Minds* decided to initiate a project to reconstruct a score for the piece from the recording. They entrusted this task to the guitarist Seth Josel. Josel created two scores: The first a (near) literal transcription of the music as heard in the 1966 recording, and the second an attempt to reconstruct the original score using the 1966 recording and the single page sketch for the piece which is held in the Morton Feldman Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation archive in Basel.[8] In creating the reconstruction, Josel attempted to “reconcile the discrepancies between the recorded live version and the materials on the sketch page”. [9, 10]

The first performances of Josel’s scores were given by him on March 7, 2009, as part of *Guitar Extravaganza VI* presented by The Yale School of Music in the Morse Recital Hall on the campus of Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. He commented:

There is a poetry here which cannot be overlooked: Christian Wolff’s car was broken into and the guitar case [containing the score of Possibility] stolen as he was on his way to New Haven for a concert. Thus, “the piece” will be presented there some 42 years late...! [11]

The following day, March 8, 2009, Josel played the two versions again at the Diapason Gallery, New York. Meghann Wilhoite was at the New York concert and gave a short account of the performances:

Following the first harrowing piece [Peter Ablinger's Exercitium 1-6] was The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar by the super-chill composer Morton Feldman, Josel playing an electric guitar from above as it lay on the floor, in a replication of a recording made by Christian Wolff back in 1966. The piece, like so many Feldman pieces, drew the audience into its quasi-ambient, nicely proportioned world [...] The set ended with Josel's slightly altered version (based on some sketches of Feldman's) of the Feldman piece, in which he held the guitar in the normal position and used a pedal to create some effective swells.[12]

At the time of writing (September 2009), it is understood that Edition Peters intend to publish Josel's reconstructed score in a critical edition.[13] Mode Records have recorded performances by Josel of both versions of the piece and intend to release these along with an interview with Christian Wolff and the original radio recording from July 1966 on a forthcoming DVD.[14]

Over the years during which Feldman's piece was believed to be completely lost, at least three other pieces were written for solo electric guitar inspired by the legend of the piece. These were:

Larry Polansky – *34 Chords: Christian Wolff in Hanover and Royalton* (1995). Polansky describes this as: “An ‘orchestration’ of Feldman's choral work *Christian Wolff in Cambridge* (1963), inspired by the guitar piece that Feldman wrote for Christian Wolff which was lost. It was written for Christian as a ‘replacement’ piece for a private concert celebrating his 25th year at Dartmouth College”.[15]

Marco Cappelli – *After “The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar”* (2004). A transcription of Feldman's *Piano Piece 1964*.

Christian Wolff – *Another Possibility* (2004). In memory of the lost solo electric guitar piece by Morton Feldman (written for the guitarist Wiek Hijmans).

So now, with the reconstruction of Feldman's original score, there are four *Possibilities!* Once generally available, Feldman's piece looks set to become an essential part of the electric guitar repertoire.

September 2009 (revised March 2015)

Notes:

1. “John Cage and Morton Feldman in Conversation: Radio Happening II” recorded at radio WBAI, New York City, July 1966. Transcribed by Laura Kuhn and published in Morton Feldman, John Cage, *Radio Happenings* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 1993) pp. 49 & 51.
2. Richard Bjorkman, “Coming Face to Face with Feldman”:
<http://www.cnvill.net/mfbjrkmn.htm>
3. Images from an original programme preserved by Richard Bjorkman. Looking at it again recently, Richard commented: “I should mention that the ‘First Annual Music Balloon Ascension’ [Alvin Lucier’s piece] didn’t happen. I can’t remember what the problem was – technical malfunction, lack of permits, violation of Harvard rules... I can’t remember.”
4. Christian Wolff, notes written for the program booklet of Hessischer Rundfunk, Forum Neue Musik, February 22 and 23, 1990. Collected in, *Cues: Writings & Conversations by Christian Wolff* (Cologne: MusikTexte, 1998) p. 364. Also available online at: <http://www.cnvill.net/mfwolff2.htm#wolff4>
5. Chris Villars, “Morton Feldman in My Life”, a talk given at Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, November 19, 2006:
<http://www.cnvill.net/mfinmylife.pdf>
6. Stephen Upjohn, email to Charles Amirkhanian, June 5, 2007.
7. Programme details provided by Seth Josel from an original programme copy preserved by Christian Wolff.
8. Seth Josel had been given a copy of Feldman’s sketch for the piece sometime earlier by his friend Jogrim Erland, who had come across it whilst doing postgraduate research in the Sacher archive. (Seth Josel, email to Chris Villars, September 9, 2009.)
9. Seth Josel, message to Feldman discussion list, *Vertical Thoughts*, December 5, 2008.
10. For a full account of how the reconstructed score was made, see, 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) pp 47-49 & 54. Also published in German in *MusikTexte* (No 133, May 2012) pp 45-49. [Note added March 2015.]
11. Seth Josel, message to Feldman discussion list, *Vertical Thoughts*, February 5, 2009.
12. Meghann Wilhoite, “Seth Josel at Diapason”, review of concert on March 8, 2009. Seth Josel comments: “Those ‘effective’ swells which Meg writes about in her review, are on the sketch page! I used a volume pedal for that purpose. (Christian Wolff couldn't do them, as he had played the piece [for the KPFA radio recording in 1966] sitting on the floor.)”
13. In April 2015, Edition Peters published, Morton Feldman: *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar* (EP 68492). The publication contains both the reconstructed work and a version of the score copied directly from

- Christian Wolff's original recording along with two essays detailing the history of the piece and its gradual rediscovery. [Note added April 2015.]
14. On March 17th 2015, Mode Records released their recording of Seth Josel playing his reconstructed version of the piece (Mode 280). This release was in digital download format only, available via the usual download outlets. A release on CD or DVD with recordings of both versions of the piece, plus the original 1966 recording by Christian Wolff, is promised for a later date. [Note added March 2015.]
 15. Larry Polansky, notes on *34 Chords*: www.cnvill.net/mflarryp.htm