

# **On Morton Feldman's *Flute and Orchestra***

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**(English translation by Francesco Sani)**

*The following text was originally published in Italian as a programme note for the first Italian performance of Feldman's Flute and Orchestra. The performance took place on 10th September 1999 in the Chiesa di Santo Stefano, Venice, with Roberto Fabbriciani, flute, and the Orchestra del Teatro La Fenice di Venezia, conducted by Arturo Tamayo.*

Morton Feldman's music is generally associated with a few, distinctive characteristics: attention to sound itself rather than to the relationship between sounds; formal disconnection between musical events; slowed-down musical development; dynamics ranging from *piano* to the barely audible; and, especially in his works from the 1980s, minute variations on modules through endless time processes. Easily identified in most of Feldman's oeuvre, these characteristics merely outline an environment which can be inhabited by many different styles – a “darkness”, as Cornelius Cardew suggested, in which the ear can only distinguish objects once it has acclimatised to it. The diverse approaches shown in Feldman's 154 works, written over a forty year span (from 1947 to 1987), attempt to solve the basic problem of reconciling the idea of the objectivity of sound with its organisation through time into a kind of narrative.

In the 1950s Feldman's debut as a composer came mostly through short, non-formalistic piano/chamber works, worlds apart from the complex relationships of John Cage's chance operations and of Serialism, albeit sharing the former's urgency to free sound from the customary rhetoric of preordained structuring. This need for a physical immediacy, never before attempted in music but already found fully-fledged in Abstract Expressionist painting – De Kooning's and Kline's static dynamism, Pollock's precise dripping, Rothko's restrained surfacing – was something the potential of which Feldman had already understood listening to Edgard Varèse, and that he attempted to emulate in his own works.

Of the aesthetic ambiguities present in Feldman's work the most important one must be his swinging between an ideal of pure music and a need to translate this via a cross-fertilisation of basic categories and states of being, as explained in his seminal article “Between Categories”: *Between Time and Space. Between painting and music. Between the music's construction, and its surface.* [1]

Thus, composing sounds in a logical sequence became for Feldman less interesting than spreading them on “the canvas of time”. Furthermore, his music, although born of the “abstract experience”, was in reality woven from a range of heterogeneous sources. For example, while one of Rauschenberg’s paintings – an all white, empty canvas ready to capture any shadow or reflection – had inspired one of Cage’s most extreme works, *4'33"* (of silence, or rather of whichever sound may chance to happen during that time), another of his paintings – an all black canvas incorporating a sheet of newspaper – had taught Feldman, by practical example, not only the freedom to assimilate diverse materials but also a different sense of the artwork itself; namely, not the dry alternative “between art and life, but a middle way”. Hence a new always open possibility of the unexpected surfacing of figurative elements, which may even turn out to be anecdotes (recall the single gesture of a shot – the piercing *fff* drum roll in the otherwise impassive surface of *For Frank O’Hara* – an attempt to relate the irreversible moment of death).

*Fifteen years ago [...] I did try to embrace that which would cast a shadow on my work. [...] I remember once, I even wrote a piece just trying to capture the pulsating of the tires going in the rain on the drive. But it was all still distant, it was on the outer edges, so to speak, of the piece. And now what is happening is that the focus is different. I find myself right on top of all of the things which in the past I found unaesthetical. Now, I still find that unaesthetical, but I’m on top of it. So a journey was made. I certainly don’t want to then make the leap – wherever this leap will be – into a situation not unlike a car ride I was in with Larry Rivers, and we passed a garbage dump and he said, “You know, a little grapefruit on the left would just give it a nice color.” [2]*

At the beginning of the 1970s, Feldman was a well-established composer on both sides of the Atlantic. However, the proliferation of opportunities to write for larger ensembles was not the only reason he focussed on his interest in the colours of a full orchestra and the concerto form. The eight “concertos”, written between 1971 and 1979 (with whose titles – *Cello and Orchestra*, *Piano and Orchestra*, etc – Feldman associated the character of a “still life”) constitute a completely new phase of his oeuvre, where not only does he attempt to go beyond the intention of sustaining a surface with minimum contrast in favour of a new, experimental way of painting on the “canvas of time”, but he also tries to develop a dialectic between foreground and background through a non-descriptive idiom. The results are very different from each other, with a journey unfolding through *The Viola in My Life IV* (1971), the cello concerto (1972), string quartet concerto (1973), piano concerto (1975), oboe concerto (1976), and the “opera” *Neither* (1977, on a text by Beckett and scored for solo voice and orchestra). The flute concerto is the first to show the new stylistic solutions which would become the hallmark of late Feldman.

Already we see how *Piano* (1977), written shortly before *Flute and Orchestra* (at twenty five minutes the longest piece Feldman had hitherto written for his favourite instrument) presented several new and important characteristics. The occasional

repetitions, or persistences, which had already appeared in his works in the 1950s, had now been applied to embryonic shapes, outlines incorporated in a substantially informal process. The notation of this score – a constantly problematic approximation to adequately representing an approach to time stripped of any apparent rhythmicity – is loosened now into a complex alternation of time modules with frequent use of “irrational” subdivisions.

This metric grid would soon become fully functional in terms of the principle of subtly varied repetitions. In Feldman’s works after 1979 (from *Why Patterns* on) such grids would be consistently populated, so to speak, with compositional materials made of sound objects such as a simple interval in the same register or a more defined figuration/motif. These never change as such. From the very beginning of the piece where they are characterised variations applied to the materials only affect their durational sphere and do not alter their identity. Listening to the piece suggests rather the development of the metric grid in the background. Bar lines no longer measure time in equal units, and motion through time becomes less evident. Given that such a procedure only works over longer timespans, its total duration (up to five hours, as in *For Christian Wolff*) will end up altering the actual psychological effect on the listener. Then it becomes difficult to establish whether subjective perception, rather than actual musical material, has been “altered”.

It could be said that *Flute and Orchestra* is the turning point for such developments. The principle of the sound object and its subtle alterations is affirmed here as a catalogue of possibilities. Here repetitive processes become the norm, albeit never filling more than one or two pages, leaving space for new figurations that are introduced in new repetitive processes, and giving rise to an interconnected series of relatively static canvases. It could be argued that this formal solution marks a transition from a truly pictorial model to one that has similarities with the traditional art of rug-making – to which Feldman had started referring in those years – meaning that the materials begin to be structured as modules or patterns, organised in an idiomatic and intuitive way rather than in a mechanical or deductive one (this being, substantially, the difference with Minimalism). Therefore, the principle of the abstract experience and of the potential identity of material and form was not absent.

In *Flute and Orchestra* the mutually contrasted sound-panels create a first level of ‘development’, as each of them places the soloist in a perspective which differs from that of the orchestra, often playing on the role-swapping between foreground and background and, in so doing, exploiting the orchestra to create sketches, blobs of colour, which seldom amalgamate into a “tutti”. It is therefore legitimate to discuss the orchestra in this piece in terms of a palette, even though the image may seem a little obvious. For example, when the soloist is accompanied in the background, this is formed from time to time as an isolated instrumental group, for example three clarinets, three timpani, three glockenspiels, harp and celesta; or, three glockenspiels, three tam-tams, and orchestral flute (not as an echo of the soloist but with a tremolo that merges

with the percussion); or even, the entire double-bass contingent playing harmonics; while the only possible “cadenza” is set against a murmuring tam-tam.

Further contrast between formal “panels” is given by the soloist, who has a dual role; namely, playing isolated notes with durations lasting as long as a comfortable breath, and playing truly melismatic sequences. The latter is rather rare in Feldman, although it corresponds perfectly to the principles of his instrumental writing, which was rigorously idiomatic, wholly non-experimental, and never intending to force the timbre, range, and mechanics of instruments beyond customary usage.

But it is in the play of illusions that is the interaction between stasis and movement that Feldman’s orchestrating skills are best displayed. For example, we can already witness from the first page a sequence of individual notes, in the solo part, that are laid out over a constantly changing time-signature (3/8, 3/4, 7/8, 2/4 etc.) which never matches that of the orchestra (always 5/16 except for the 3/4 in the three glockenspiels featuring an independent background of tremolos). At bar 10, with an immediate and lonely *sffz* (always within the prevailing *piano* dynamics), a group of lower woodwinds and brass cracks the “surface” only just established, thus introducing an unexpected element of humour, the role of which, in clear contrast with that of the other instruments, is intended to be one of change and, at times, disturbance, albeit a narrative one. (It could be said that Feldman’s sense of humour is in itself a school of composition!) Characteristically, at bar 290, the lower woodwinds and brass come to the fore with a rhythmic ostinato of septuplets and quintuplets, alternating within the same time-signature (6/16 + 4/16), which makes this too a foreign object, a humorous material that by bursting in and then disappearing creates a sense of mystery or even nonsensicality. The thread of this build up of colours and gestures seems to gather in a long even passage; a dramatic peroration by the flute accompanied by the whole orchestra with the lower woodwinds repeating the initial gesture insistently. However, this is a false conclusion, after which comes the quiet run of events that preceded it, as though nothing had happened, until the rarefied ending in a trio of solo flute, cello, and cor anglais.

Finally, one cannot rule out the possibility that such distinctive treatment of the solo flute, woodwinds, and percussion could be connected with the score’s dedication to Edgard Varèse; provided one does not seek literal references or hidden quotations.

#### Notes:

1. Morton Feldman, “Between Categories”, in *Give My Regard to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman* edited by B. H. Friedman, Cambridge MA, Exact Change, 2000, pp. 83-89: 88.
2. Morton Feldman, radio broadcast of conversation with John Cage, 9th July 1966, transcribed by L. Kuhn and published in M. Feldman, J. Cage, *Radio Happenings*, Cologne, Edition MusikTexte 1993, p. 21.