

## **Morton Feldman – Triadic Memories** **An Introduction by Stephen Whittington**

More than quarter of a century ago I was fortunate to play on the piano – a small, beautifully maintained Steinway model ‘A’ – at which Morton Feldman composed *Triadic Memories*. More remarkable than the piano were the surroundings – every square inch, it seemed of the floors and walls was covered with Persian rugs – not the sort you will find in your local rug store, but antique, museum-quality rugs of exquisite beauty and seemingly endless inventiveness of design. Naturally you had to take your shoes off to enter the room. Over a period of several decades Feldman had assembled one of the finest collections of such rugs in private hands. The congruence of aesthetic between the rugs and Feldman’s music was unmistakable. It is music of great subtlety and refinement – the very antithesis of “in-your-face” vulgarity and cheap “effectiveness.” Like the rugs, it yields up its beauty slowly, but the impression it leaves in the memory is indelible.

*“Almost all of Feldman’s music is slow and soft. Only at first sight is this a limitation. I see it rather as a narrow door, to whose dimensions one has to adapt oneself (as in Alice in Wonderland) before one can pass through it into a state of being that is expressed in Feldman’s music. Only when one has become accustomed to the dimness of the light can one begin to perceive the richness and variety which is the material of the music...Feldman sees sounds as reverberating endlessly, never getting lost, changing their resonances as they die away, or rather not die away, but recede from our ears, and soft because softness is compelling, because an insidious invasion of our senses is more effective than a frontal attack.”*

*Cornelius Cardew*

**Morton Feldman** was a larger-than-life character: heavily built, with a mop of greasy hair, thick-rimmed glasses, a hard-drinking, chain-smoking, womanizing New York Jew who could talk for hours, with an endless stream of anecdotes and opinions. Feldman was born into a prosperous Jewish family in New York City in 1926. His interest in music led him to study with Wallingford Riegger – the first American twelve-tone composer – and the émigré German composer Stefan Wolpe, a committed Marxist who had studied with Paul Klee at the Bauhaus and with Anton Webern. In the early 1950s Feldman joined the circle of composers and artists who developed under the liberating influence of John Cage. (“He gave us permission,” Feldman said.) Musically Feldman remained distinct from Cage, never employing chance procedures and only briefly using graphic scores (though he was the first to do so.) Instead Feldman worked intuitively, developing a personal style notable for its extreme softness and slowness. During the fifties, Feldman was friendly with Abstract Expressionist artists, notably Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Philip Guston. After years supporting himself by working in the family garment business, Feldman was appointed

Professor of Composition at the State University of New York in Buffalo, where he remained for 15 years until his death.

During the last decade of his life, Feldman composed a remarkable series of works for various instrumentations – including works that stretch to five or six hours. In spite of – or perhaps because of – infrequent performances, these late works have achieved an almost legendary status in contemporary music.

### **Feldman and the piano**

Feldman was, as he acknowledged, an intellectual in the European tradition. (*“I’m a European intellectual, not an American iconoclast!”*) He was not interested in using exotic instrumentation, nor in electronic music – not even in “preparing” a piano. The instruments of the European tradition were things to be treasured, containing beauties that the composer could reveal.

*“You have no idea of the work that has gone in before you even write. That’s part of our assemblage in Western civilization. Things are handed to us on a silver platter. We don’t even know it. We think it’s raw materials. I’d stop writing music unless I had a beautiful piano.”*

Feldman’s piano works demand a special kind of ‘virtuosity’, as far removed from what Roland Barthes called “the petty digital scramble” as can be imagined. Because of the extremely soft dynamics (*Triadic Memories* ranges from *ppp* to *ppppp*), each key must be struck and released with the utmost care to minimize any percussive or mechanical sound – which means, since loudness is dependent on velocity, as slowly as possible. But the music often contains large leaps during which the hand must travel rapidly – a technical conundrum for the pianist to solve. The sense of touch is critical – the sensation in the finger-pad is the pianist’s only guide. Because of the inherent limitations of the human performer and the piano’s mechanism, there is that danger that some notes will sound too loud, or not at all. The ‘Feldman touch’ shifts the emphasis away from the attack of the sound towards the decay:

*“That is perhaps why in my own music I am so involved in the decay of each sound, and try to make its attack sourceless...Decay...this departing landscape, this expresses where the sound exists in our hearing – leaving us rather than coming towards us.”*

Feldman’s fascination with the touch of the piano stems from his youth, and from his Russian piano teacher, Madame Press, whom Feldman commemorated in one of his loveliest chamber works, *Madame Press Died Last Week at Ninety* (1970).

*“If you have a feeling, a tactile feeling for the instrument, what you can do with just your finger – something I learned from my teacher...the way she would put*

*her finger down, in a Russian way, with just the finger - the liveliness of the finger – and produce a B flat, and you just wanted to faint.”*

Feldman wrote for the piano throughout his life. His love of the instrument culminated in four major works: *Piano* (1977), *Triadic Memories* (1981), *For Bunita Marcus* (1984), and *Palais de Mari* (1987). *Triadic Memories* was commissioned jointly by pianists Roger Woodward and Aki Takahashi.

### **Music and Painting**

During the 1950s Feldman was closely associated with the Abstract Expressionist artists, notably Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Philip Guston.

*“What I picked up from painting is what every art student knows...it’s called the picture plane. I substituted for my ears the aural plane, and it’s a kind of balance but it has nothing to do with foreground and background...I work very much like a painter, insofar as I’m watching the phenomena and I’m thickening and I’m thinning...it’s like Rothko, just a question of keeping that tension or that stasis...it’s frozen, and at the same time it’s vibrating.”*

Feldman wrote and spoke extensively about painting and music. Of particular interest to him was the quality of light that distinguishes Rembrandt or Rothko. Feldman found a distinctive ‘musical light’ in his favorite composers – Schubert, for example.

*“Music is not painting, but it can learn from this a more perspective temperament that waits and observes the inherent mystery of its materials, as opposed to the composer’s vested interest in his craft. Since music has never had a Rembrandt, we have remained nothing more than musicians.”*

### **Carpet Music**

Feldman became a collector of Central Asian tribal rugs by accident, having wandered into a London rug-dealer’s store while waiting to do a BBC interview. There he experienced a shock of recognition in this ancient and intricate art form, which however did not blind him to the differences between the rug-makers’ art and his own, notably in the rug-makers’ dependence on conventional motifs. But the repetition of motifs with subtle and apparently ‘random’ variations, the subtle gradation of colours resulting from different dye-batches, the “all-over” design – were analogous to Feldman’s music at that time. Increasingly, he became interested in what he termed “crippled symmetry” – a symmetry which is “never mechanical...but idiomatically drawn.”

*“Rugs have prompted me in my recent music to think of a disproportionate symmetry, in which a symmetrically staggered rhythmic series is used: 4:3, 6:5, 8:7 etc., as my point of departure...What I’m after is somewhat like Mondrian not wanting to paint “bouquets, but a single flower at a time.”*

Feldman also drew from his study of rugs the concept of scale:

*“Music and the designs or a repeated pattern in a rug have something in common. Even if it be asymmetrical in its placement, the proportion of one component to another is hardly ever substantially out of scale with the context of the whole. Most traditional rug patterns retain the same size when taken from a larger rug to a smaller one... The question of scale for me precludes any concept of symmetry or asymmetry from affecting the eventual length of my music. As a composer I am involved with the contradiction in not having the sum of the parts equal the whole. The scale of what is actually being represented, whether it be of the whole or of the part, is a phenomenon unto itself. The reciprocity inherent in scale has made me realize that musical forms and related processes are essentially only methods of arranging material and serve no other function than to aid one’s memory.”*



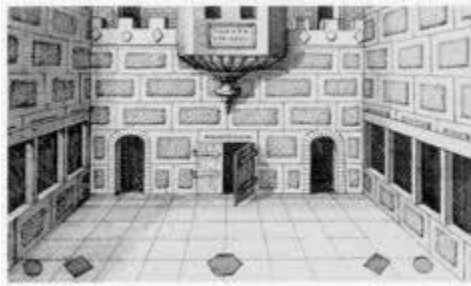
### **The Theatre of Memory**

In Feldman’s view, classical Western forms – binary, ternary, rondo, sonata – were essentially ‘memory forms’ – allowing the listener to recall patterns by placing them in essentially simple structures – like ‘ABA’ – in which motifs, phrases, even entire sections are repeated according to conventional formulae. Feldman was interested in much more complex memory phenomena. He became fascinated with the memory techniques of the Middle Ages and Renaissance (derived from the techniques of classical rhetoric), as described in Frances Yates’ book *The Art of Memory*, which documents the attempts of Giulio Camillo, Giordano Bruno, and Robert Fludd to organize knowledge – all possible knowledge – using a complex memory system modeled after the architecture of the theatre – literally making all the world a stage.

*“...I went out of my head with this book. It’s fantastic...for example Giordano Bruno, he was burned at the stake after a 17-year Inquisition. His heresy was that he brought in other forms than the Holy Trinity. As a memory form he brought in the Kabbala, Egyptian, he was very eclectic...And then I felt that the memory*

*forms [of Western music] were very primitive, that they were based on a small attention [span.] They were based on a convention.”*

*“But memory could operate otherwise as well. In Triadic Memories, a new piano work of mine, there is a section of different types of chords where each chord is slowly repeated. One chord might be repeated three times, another seven or eight – depending on how long I felt it should go on. Quite soon into a new chord I would forget the reiterated chord before it. I then reconstructed the entire section: rearranging its earlier progression and changing the number or times a particular chord was repeated. This way of working was a conscious attempt at “formalizing” a disorientation of memory...a bit like walking in the streets of Berlin – where all the buildings look alike, even if they’re not.”*



### **The Art of Illumination**

Feldman’s interest in the art memory, and in the work of Frances Yates, leads to consideration of his relationship to mysticism and esoteric philosophy. Frances Yates was one of the few historians to consider seriously the contribution of occult and hermetic philosophies to the European intellectual tradition. The central figures in *The Art of Memory* – Fludd, Bruno, Camillo – were at once philosophers, alchemists and mystics.

In this context, art must be viewed as an instrument of knowledge, invoking not just an aesthetic experience but an illuminating one. This fundamental point is common to most mystic systems from Tantrism, Sufism, and the Kabbalah to Surrealism. Barnett Newman (deeply interested by the Kabbalah) wrote that “[the painter’s] imagination is therefore attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets. To that extent his art is concerned with the sublime. It is a religious art which through its symbols will catch the basis truth of life which is its tragedy.” Rothko: “The picture must be, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.”

The central tradition of Jewish mysticism is the Kabbalah. Feldman’s music calls to mind the permutational letter technique of Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia, a 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic from Saragossa.

The ‘path of letters’ is a meditative practice based upon contemplating the letters of the Hebrew alphabet – meditation on a single letter was equivalent to meditation on the whole of Creation. By stripping a word of its denotive function in language, the Kabbalist could escape from the constrictions of thought. “Open your mouth in uttering the *aleph* and you extend your mind from the localized towards the boundless.” (Rabbi Nehuniah ben Hakana)

The essential elements of Abulafia’s technique were *tzeruf*, or letter permutation – systematic and ritual permutation of words, especially of the Tetragrammaton (the four letters of YHVH, Yahweh, Jehovah, the name of God) – and *dillug*, or skipping, observing the mind as it free-associated from one idea to the next: instead of forcing away distracting images, the Kabbalist followed them, constructing them into sentences, breaking down those sentences into words, the words into letters, and the letters into light.

There is an analogy with Feldman’s compositional methods, in which permutations of small amounts of material – as small as two notes – alternate with “free-associated” moves to other material. The dialectic between method and intuition seems to be at the core both of Feldman’s music and of Abulafia’s mysticism.

*“Maybe it’s because I’m Jewish: actually the Christian point of view is that there was God and then there was the world, and the Jewish point of view is almost as if there was the Universe in order to have God. It’s a little different. In other words, I’m not creating music, it’s already there, and I have a conversation with my material, you see.”*

## **Revolution and Tragedy**

Feldman was music’s quiet revolutionary. By its nature his music distances itself far from popular culture, but also far from the values that currently dominate the culture of ‘serious’ music.

*“To some degree I do believe that after Hitler perhaps there should be no more art. Those thoughts are always on my mind. That it was hypocrisy, a delusion to continue, because those values...no longer have any moral basis. Our morality in music is 19<sup>th</sup> century German music, isn’t it?”*

The time span of Feldman’s music is not easily contained in a conventional concert format; it provides none of the ebb and flow of conflict, climax and resolution that audiences expect; even its beauty, which few can deny, becomes something else entirely when extended over several hours.

*“I’m involved in a revolutionary life. Any time I get up in the morning I’m making a revolution. I’m making a revolution against history by deciding to write a certain kind of music, or I’m making a revolution even against my own history. Many times I’ve put myself up against a wall and shot myself. I’m into a continual*

*perpetual revolution in my own personal response to my work, which means action, immediate action, immediate decision that only I can make, and that I have to be responsible for...when something is beautiful it is tragic. And I think the implication for me as I see it is that something beautiful has to be made in isolation. And tragedy in a sense is a kind of psychic flavour of this loneliness.”*

*Morton Feldman*

**Notes by Stephen Whittington 2008**