Morton Feldman: Remarks from an interview by Steve Cellum, 1984

Transcribed by Charles Amirkhanian

On 24 September 1984, Steve Cellum interviewed Morton Feldman in connection with a program to be broadcast on WNYC-FM radio which would focus in particular on Feldman's recent long pieces Three Voices (1982) *and* String Quartet 2 (1983). *Charles Amirkhanian subsequently used excerpts from the recording of the interview to create his Feldman homage piece,* Loudspeakers(1988-1990). *As part of the preparation for creating this piece, Amirkhanian made a transcript of Feldman's responses to Cellum's questions. The remarks below, edited by Chris Villars, are taken from Amirkhanian's transcript, and are published here by kind permission of Charles Amirkhanian and Steve Cellum.*

On memory forms

I might be wrong, but there is a possibility that music might not be an art form, that it might just happen to be involved with memory forms. We don't really know what it could do as an art form. We just don't. I think the whole business of a short piece and a long piece has to do with the fact that for years music was thought of as a memory form. I feel that the construction and all the priorities that were made of a modern music language as we know it – I'm not talking about Bali going off for hours and hours in some kind of ritual, but western civilization –I think it was made very much to parallel the memory form since the Greeks.

There's a very interesting book by an English historian, a woman that died recently, a woman by the name of [Frances] Yates, wrote *The Art of Memory*, and it's absolutely a marvelous book. And it was very influential in a lot of my thinking about it. She's just giving you the history of memory forms. She's not making any kind of critique about it. But I did apply it to what are some of the great things about Western music and also one of the things that's kept it from being an art form, really. Now how I mean that I can't explain it now, but I feel that music essentially has pre-opted memory forms to keep its intellectuality and its concentration going, rather than thinking of hierarchal pitch structures, form structures, you see. If there's a memory form even in a long Wagner opera there's a story line, you see. And so your memory is involved with the unfolding and the telling of a story.

On Three Voices

What prompted me to write it was that Joan La Barbara asked for a piece. There's nothing like someone asking for your piece as a kind of motivation! But it took some time for me to decide what to do though. I went through all gamuts of possibility. And with me it's the orchestration of the idea which determines the piece. John Cage thinks of notation before he writes a piece. Other people think of other ideas. For me, it's the instrumentation or the orchestration. […] I wanted to find a vehicle just for Joan, so I figured that, with knowing her repertoire, some kind of electronic, and by electronic I mean some kind of multi-channel situation, which I never did before actually and I didn't particularly like it. And then of course the words, a very interesting aspect of the piece is that the words don't appear until about a half an hour or so into the piece.

The poetry that I use was from a poem Frank O'Hara actually dedicated to me called *Wind*. I use about two lines of it. And the image of Frank being dead but everything sounds live, that kind of strange metaphor, started to take over the whole, almost technical, construction of the piece. By that I mean that you have a live singer and two dead mikes, you know. And it became pretty macabre as the thing started to unfold. For example, the similarity between loudspeakers and tombstones, just the shape of it somewhat, especially with my bad vision on the stage. So you could carry on this whole hallucination further, and it was to some degree a kind of minor hallucination, and it did play a very important part. That is, the fact that you have a blending but there's something a little bit off. The live against the dead, I think, is what makes the thing interesting for me.

On short pieces and long pieces

If you're writing a little bit of a longer piece your considerations and your choices of moves changes considerably. I think it was actually the fact that, you know, I'm up here at the University of Buffalo, State University of Buffalo, and with Jan Williams and others ran an organization here that gave concerts all the time. And I think that I was a kind of amateur entrepreneur, which made me realize that most every piece that I wanted to program was 20 minutes. Actually if you ever saw that film *Elliott Carter in Buffalo* there's a segment that was done in my home. We were having a little supper for Elliott Carter and you see me on camera saying, "What the world doesn't need is another 25 minute piece." At which Elliott Carter bristles and says, "Well, that's the length of all my pieces you're doing." Actually, the humorous element about this is that I did speak to Steve Reich and Charles Wuorinen later, telling them about my faux pas about the 25 minute piece, and then with both of them there was a silence there, saying "Well, that's our length too." You know, they're reminding me. And then

it was topped off with Ralph Shapey, being invited here and he called up to make a substitution. And I said, "Ralph, before we finish, it's fine you can make the substitution but how long is it? Is it about 23, 24 minutes?" And I heard on the other end, you know, I heard this gasp, "How did you know?" So with that behind me, and upset that I couldn't for example program a Xenakis piece because it was only 11 minutes and too expensive, and worrying about that and wondering about that, I started to rethink the function of public radio so to speak!

Actually, in Europe, Frankfurt Radio just did a shortened version of my new string quartet, which lasted four and a half hours. That's the shortened version! And then the Canadian broadcasting station had a program called *Two Hours* every week, which was extended for the first performance of the string quartet to four hours. […]

Everybody complains that there's something wrong with contemporary music. I don't know if you saw that supplement in *The Times* some months ago where there was a panel and I was getting pretty fed up. I mean, I'm not here to champion twentieth century music. But the point that I made there that except for someone like, uh, Wagner – Beethoven died early in the century, you know. I mean, the nineteenth century wasn't that fantastic. Of course there was some great people. Chopin. But still, what's all this excitement about the nineteenth century in relation to the twentieth century? I think the twentieth century's fantastic, the first half and the second half. I mean, I think Boulez is just as good as Berlioz. I think that Stockhausen is just as good as Meyerbeer! I really don't have any complaints about the twentieth century, you see. So my decision was, instead of getting rid of the music and having all these complaining about twentieth century music, let's get rid of the audience [by writing very long pieces]! I mean, it's simple enough. But I don't think it's gonna happen. Because my first string quartet – which I thought was very long, but which turns out to be just a shorty at an hour and forty minutes – got a standing ovation when it first was done in Venice. My new string quartet – which was a shortened version by the Kronos from San Francisco which lasted a little over four hours – got a standing ovation in Darmstadt. [An audience of] a few hundred people, and it was just an incredible social document, you see. To say that it could happen at a congress of professionals is not very apt because most of those kids and older people there are very gladiatorial in their responses to everybody else's music. But the fact that there is an audience for it now means that if I get rid of anybody I'm certainly not getting rid of an audience that wants to hear it and make up their own mind what they want to think about it. I mean, a lot of people of course say no! It's not that *everybody's* yelling and cheering for more.

On String Quartet 2

John Cage I feel makes the shrewdest observation about it. I don't think Cage is that happy with it, with the length of it. He says, "You don't write it that way. You certainly write it with pauses. So why should one sit and listen to it that way?" It's logical, but I don't agree with him on that one. I don't feel that that's too much time. I understand that the attention span is very poor. But I don't think you have to figure out what the audience could take. For example Puccini had it all figured out; two hours, and two intermissions. I think it's a big mistake. However, I never sat through *The Ring*. But Debussy did, and it changed his life.

Of course I have ideas. But the ideas come about with [the work's] unfolding. I would have an idea, for example, say for ten minutes about voice leading, where at one place I repeat something four times. You know, very much the way Beckett would write something in French, translate it into English, and then bring it back into French. I work somewhat similar. Or like Jasper Johns, that thing where you try to copy yourself but you don't copy yourself exactly. You just do it slightly different. But it's very very discreet the difference. But it changes, the discretion of the change changes the meaning. And if not the meaning, then at least the surface of the piece. If there is such a thing as a surface of a piece. So let's say I would do something where the voice leading is very smooth. And then I do it exactly the same way where the voice leading is more disparate. And then I do it a third way where the voice leading is very strange, if not dissonance within a consonant texture. And then I do the exact thing a fourth time where the whole thing is assembled in a way where there's no voice leading to speak of, you see. And this is all the same material. That's the way I work. In my home I refer to it as "short-term commitments to an idea". There is no long hierarchal commitment. If anything, I'm trying to break down any hierarchal assumptions that I feel that I need to write the piece. I feel that hierarchical assumptions are essentially an alibi to write the piece. I feel that, if my crisis is close to Beckett, I would say that my attitude, psychological attitude about writing a work is closer to Proust. That you have to find the experience in yourself as it unfolds rather than you're going to find the experience in the object. Now musical objects are very very beautiful, but they all have a flaw if, for example, you think you're going to find some kind of perfection in the object.

So now, the last thing – about the concentration. I feel that's the most important thing that keeps anything going, whether you're in a tennis match or you're jogging or anything. And I try to bring that kind of athletic discipline into the fact of just sitting down, concentrating, changing, exploring, rather than surrendering to some kind of student concept that the idea's going to write it for you. Which in a sense I would say is Elliott Carter. I think, if I may attack Elliott in a nice way, I feel he's a prototype of the of the college kid living a life of illusion.