# Morton Feldman: Remarks on *Piano*

Transcribed by Robert Krupnick and Chris Villars

*On his sixtieth birthday on 12 January 1986, Feldman attended a salon gathering hosted by Betty Freeman at her home in Los Angeles. At the event, which included works by other composers, Feldman's piece,* Piano*, from 1977, was performed by Robert Krupnick. Feldman's introductory remarks, and his responses to questions about the piece after the performance, are transcribed below from an audio recording of the event.*

Morton Feldman: I had a morning to reflect on *Piano*. You notice that the title is kind of Beckettese. And it's part of a trilogy – I didn't realise it until this morning – of three pieces which capture the Beckett mood, if only because he wrote the text for one of them. I was very fortunate that Beckett wrote something called *Neither*. And then there was a flute and orchestra piece, and then there was this piece. And they're very involved, not only with the same atmosphere, but with the same compositional strategy, if I may use that term.

This piece, metaphorically, is a fugue. I'd rather think of it that way rather than just saying that I'm layering, in some kind of collage effect, superimpositions on top of each other as the piece goes along. I actually thought of it as a fugue. And I was interested, being as I'm so nuts about the Stravinsky fugue in *Symphony of Psalms*, which I think was the last great fugue written in this century. And I always wondered, is it possible still to write a fugue, in some way or another, not formally, but maybe just expressively in some way? And all three pieces, including this, are involved with that particular idea. I think it was the only idea in the piece.

[long silence]

That's not a silence, that's a cadence! [laughter]
Thank you very much.

[Robert Krupnick plays *Piano*[1]]

[applause]

MF: I wanna thank Robert for such an elegant, beautiful performance. Beautiful!

[1] The recording of Robert Krupnick's performance on this occasion can be found here: https://soundcloud.com/rkrupnick/morton-feldman-piano-1977

Question from the audience: You talked about this as a fugue, and yet...

MF: Metaphorically.

Q: Metaphorically, OK. So much of the actual sonority is chordal, is this a fugue that one follows the lines of in listening, or is it a fugue for the eye?

MF: You mean as opposed to, say, Beethoven's 101?

Q: Or Stravinsky.

MF: Well, that's another story.

Q: You hear lines moving in that.

MF: Yes. Actually I don't want to appear to be pretentious, but I thought of the fugue in this metaphorically having expressive elements that you find in a late Beethoven fugue. It was done for expressive elements, not for architecture or something like that. I mean, it's not really a fugue. It's got the structure, metaphorically a fugue, obviously. But the layering of it, it seems quite interesting, and it brings back a different kind of fugue. Very difficult to hear it on [the first occasion]. You have to hear it a few times, then you will hear these things.

Q: In other words, these aren't chords like a Chopin polonaise?

MF: No, but they're chords like a Chopin ballad.

Q: OK.

MF: I think that one could be both chordal and linear at the same time.

Q: Oh, absolutely. You get that in fifteenth century polyphony all the time. I just wanted to make sure that's the way you did think it out.

Another questioner: How come it's never been recorded?

MF: Oh, there are thousands of my pieces that have never been recorded!

Q: Why?

MF: The record industry couldn't afford it! [laughter] Oh, I don't know... I don't know, you know!

Another questioner: When was this piece written?

MF: Er... '77 Robert?

Robert Krupnick: Yes.

MF: Yes, as I said, I wrote three pieces very much of the same character. It was really Beckett took over. I was in another body with this piece. To me there is that kind of didactic poetry that Beckett has, and I kinda had to shake it off. And I immediately went to something completely different, and something I never did before, just to get out of it. It was just that it took over.

Q: What was the year of *Neither*?

MF: The same year. They were all the same year. They were all done in '77[2].

Another questioner: What's the connection between *Piano* and *Neither*?

MF: They're constructed very much the same. And so is the flute and orchestra piece, very much the same.

Q: In what way?

MF: Well, just in terms of superimposing things. I just brought more furniture into my work than I usually ever had before. I was just very interested in seeing if an extensive copying job would pay off to some degree. The piece was more a copying job than a composition really, especially in *Neither*. It just took me, say, four days to copy a page. I was just very interested in doing it. And also there was another element that I never did before. I never wrote a piece with beginning, middle and end. And I thought, being that I didn't do it when I was sixteen or twenty-six or thirty-six, or forty-six, I should do it late in life. And that was exciting, to approach beginning, middle and end for the first time. And that's why the ending is so long on this. I had a feeling that endings were always too brief in most music, and that it takes a long time to get off the mountain, so to speak.

Another questioner: But you set us up for the ending, we just don't get it. It's deceptive. You're very right, it was self sufficient.

MF: That's because of all the years that I didn't work with beginning, middle and end! [laughter] I could walk a little bit! Oh, but I do that, I do that in all my music. Maybe it's to aggravate composers I don't know. But I'm always interested in to what degree a cul-de-sac, so to speak, might help the piece rather than destroy it.

[2] The completion dates Feldman noted in the scores are, *Neither*: 30 January 77, *Piano*: 16 May 77, *Flute and Orchestra*: 1 February 78.

And I look for it in my music. It's one of the reasons my pieces are becoming so long, is that I find another place, and I go that way. But this piece is a very favourite piece of mine because it was very new for me to write, and where a lot of my music, you know, when I write, not something like it but in the same world perhaps five or six or seven years later, it's reminiscent. This piece when I hear it is not reminiscent. I think it's the one piece of mine that I actually refer to as more as an object, than the kind of music I usually write or that I'm interested in writing. Only because of the beginning, middle and end aspects of it!

I was also interested, and the reason I say a fugue, I was interested in writing a middle. After all, what is a middle in music? Usually some aspects of development, or this or that. I was very interested in how do you write a middle that doesn't sound like a middle? I mean, the problem with beginnings is that usually beginnings sound like beginnings. And endings sound like endings, and some composers are great with beginnings, and some composers are great with endings, and some composers are great with middles. It's marvellous to hear these pieces like Fred Astaire's *I Wouldn't Dance, Don't Make Me* – like, I wouldn't *begin*! I heard a percussion piece by Henze, it starts off, it's not like a beginning, he's not going to be conventional and write a beginning! And the whole piece is like that.

RK: Because the chords are such wonderful sounds, you get more interested in the sound than how it looks. And then, after a few times working over a bar, you don't look any more. But I don't know the whole thing yet from memory.

MF: Bob, it's very interesting that when I work I memorise, more or less, the piece, because my eyes are bad. And when I was a kid, the only way I could learn a piece was by memorising it. And I brought that into composition too. I always try to tell my students how they have to become familiar with the notes, that they should try and memorise. In other words, if you write a row, memorise it. From a kind of cabalistic way, you could move it around like this and that, you see. And I feel that part of the aspect of the piece is the kinda concentration that goes in at performance as well as in the composing of it, because for that memorisation, it's hard to play unless you really learn those suits! You just can't play it, you just can't fit it in!

RK: The layering sections can't be played by looking at it.

MF: No, the layering... It was very interesting when I originally... You have the old copy I hope?[3]

RK: Yes.

[3] "Old copy" refers to the scanned copies of Feldman's autograph manuscript that were first issued. "New copy" refers to the later printed edition.

MF: Oh no, the new copy is almost like the old copy, but being polished, you know, there's not so many on a page. But what happened is that – I was wondering when I was gonna insult Boulez! Boulez's copyist[4] copies it – she helped me out with this piece – and what happened was, when she copied it, she put it on one line. And it looked like a demented Ives! I didn't write it as visual aid, of course, but I wrote it so you could see the architecture, and the terracing, so to speak. And when she put it all on one line, it looked awful. And not only looked awful, but it's not the right idea of the piece.

Another questioner: Morty, is this piece published?

MF: Yes.

RK: The printed version is not as easy to play from as the scan. Much more difficult, because they tried to line it up so you could count it. They tried to count it and actually fixed some things that Feldman had done concurrently.

MF: Well, they're going in different metres, Bob, and it's very interesting. If it's going in different metres, it's polyrhythmic, obviously, though it's not that obvious. Or when you line it up, it's polyrhythmic. Actually, Harrison Birtwistle learned from this kind of copying when he heard Roger Woodward play this piece originally. And he decided that he wasn't going to line his up in a polyrhythmic way. That was for a clarinet quintet he wrote. And when the Arditti Quartet did it, he told them to schmear it up a little bit, that they should be exact, but not exact as they prefer to see the thing. And he learned that from watching the score of this piece. So it's very difficult that if you want to really be precise, you get into trouble too. And that's one of the problems I learned from Schoenberg about the whole generality and precision of going on at the same time in notation. It's very hard to know when to generalise and very hard to know when to be precise. You have to develop an instinct.

[4] The head copyist at Feldman's publisher, Universal Edition, who also published Boulez.