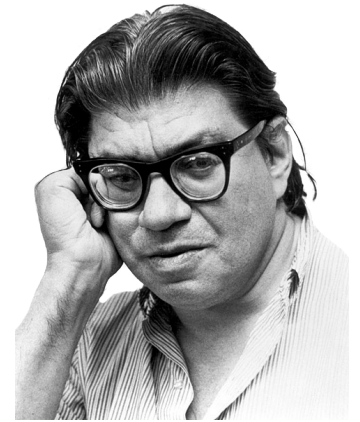


Softly - A GIANT STEP

An Interview with Zahra Partovi



Chris Villars. Zahra, your new short film “*Softly* - A GIANT STEP” about Morton Feldman has just been released. So this seemed a good time to interview you about that film and its place amongst your other works. Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I hope it will encourage readers to seek out your film and other artistic works and come to appreciate what an important body of work it is.

Zahra Partovi. Thank you Chris! It is the greatest honour for me to be interviewed by you, and on a platform none less than the Morton Feldman website!

C.V. How did you first become interested in the music of Morton Feldman? What is it that particularly attracts you to his music?

Z.P. I like to call it ‘Love at first C#’!

When I heard Feldman’s music for the first time, I experienced various feelings and sensations. At first I experienced a déjà vu. It was as if I had known and experienced these sounds before. At the same time I had a strong questioning feeling as if to say: What are these sounds? Where do they come from? How is this possible?!

We always speak of how a piece of music affects us intellectually and emotionally, but there was something else there. I was feeling this music viscerally.

C.V. Your film about Feldman, *Softly* – A GIANT STEP has just been released. What made you decide to make Feldman the subject of your latest film?

Z.P. Well, after listening to Feldman's music more and more and reading about his music, I became obsessed! I felt I needed to express all these feelings about his music in some way. It was October of last year when I decided to make a film focusing on Feldman's music.

I must add Chris that your encouragement and support helped me along through all the stages of making *Softly*!

C.V. The filming for *Softly* must have been very exciting – visiting all those places in New York and Buffalo that Feldman would have known so well! Does the filming at any particular location stand out in your memory for any reason?

Z.P. There are three specific locations in *Softly*: Far Rockaway in Queens, the area of Washington Square and 8th Street in Manhattan and the city of Buffalo in upstate New York. All these locations have their own significance in Morton Feldman's life and work, as the place where he was born, the place he loved so much and the last place where he created his seminal late masterpieces.

I must confess though that walking up and down the staircases of his last residence in Buffalo was a very strong emotional experience for me.

C.V. *Softly* uses music from just two of Feldman's works: "For John Cage" and "Neither". What led you to select just those two?

Z.P. Feldman's later works are often quite long. For a 30-minute film I couldn't have many pieces of music. As it is I could only use selections from "For John Cage" and very short fragments of "Neither". I had always loved "For John Cage" and so that was a good choice. I also wanted the element of human voice and "Neither" was perfect for its immense power and ambiguity.

At the time I had no idea we would be so lucky one shooting night at Washington Square to see these shadow-like figures going 'to and fro' against the bright background of the Triumph Arch, matching Beckett's words perfectly!

In a sense, *Softly* is an elixir. It's an elixir of "For John Cage" and "Neither", Feldman's words and hours and hours of film footage.

C.V. How did you select the excerpts from Feldman's writings and conversations that are used in voice overs in the film?

Z.P. That took some time, but I knew which of his words I loved. Marrying the music, the words and images was magical. They all wanted to go together.

C.V. The film's title aptly summarises a major element of its message. Which came first, the title or the scenario?

Z.P. The title. That was the first thing that came to my head and stayed there. Everything else followed "*Softly* - A GIANT STEP".

C.V. Whilst originally filmed, I believe, in colour, you decided to create *Softly* in black and white. What lay behind your decision to do this?

Z.P. I knew from the beginning that *Softly* will be in black and white. However it is best to shoot in colour and then in postproduction turn it to black and white. This is because in setting the camera to shoot in black and white you lose quality and detail.

C.V. As in Feldman's music, the role of silence is very important in your films. How did you determine where and how to use silence in *Softly*?

Z.P. Yes, there are some moments of total silence in *Softly*. They were just right in those moments to heighten the anticipation of what sound would follow. Sound design is a very important element in any film and a particularly crucial

and fun part for me. We live in a visual culture, but it is the sound that affects the inner chambers of our brains much more deeply.

C.V. *Softly* ends by reprising an excerpt from the soundtrack of your earlier film “Feldman Sings”. Do you see the two films as having a particular affinity? If so, could you elaborate on that, and would you therefore advocate screening the two films in the same show?

Z.P. Yes, absolutely. “Feldman Sings”, which was the first collaboration between you and me is closely related to *Softly* because of the touching audio of Morton Feldman singing. I think “Feldman Sings” can come first followed by *Softly* in public screenings.

I am immensely grateful to you, Mr. Skempton and Mr. Werdenberg for allowing me to use this audio again in *Softly*. The last 2 minutes of *Softly* is a sound montage of various music elements heard earlier in the film mixed with Feldman’s voice. At the very end it is just Morty singing himself out of the film!

C.V. If you were to introduce *Softly* to a new audience, perhaps unfamiliar with Feldman’s music, what would you say to them?

Z.P. I would say exactly what Feldman would say: Just watch and listen! In its pure abstraction, *Softly* embraces certain qualities which can be appreciated by anyone and I hope the various levels of the film will be recognised by various audiences.

C.V. You have described *Softly* as an “abstract/experimental” film. Could you elaborate on that? In what way is it abstract, and in what way experimental?

Z.P. Well, *I* didn’t come up with those terms. At some point in mid 20th Century someone coined these terminologies to distinguish certain art films from narrative or documentary films. Short/Experimental films are not ‘popular’ films. They are seen and appreciated by much smaller audiences who like this genre of filmmaking.

These films certainly have an element of abstraction and they do experiment with new and unusual approaches. I always use the term Short/Experimental as a warning so that the viewers won’t expect realism or documentation.

C.V. Does *Softly* have, on any level, what you might call a ‘storyline’? Is there in any sense a plot, or developmental structure?

Z.P. Well, after my big warning that my films are Short/Experimental, I have to confess that in every one of them there is a hidden storyline, albeit an illusive one!

When Feldman says: “*Eventually everything becomes melody*”, we understand that as human beings we need to hold on to some comforting element like a story or melody.

Therefore yes. There is storyline in *Softly* evident ever so illusively through the music, but clearer in the narration of Feldman’s words and the images of the specific locations. *Softly* attempts to give a feeling that, in a dreamlike state, we follow Feldman as we hear his music while he speaks with us and takes us along to different spaces.

C.V. Feldman once famously said, “Everything is a metaphor,” indicating that he viewed the configurations of sounds and the structures of his pieces in that way, as metaphors. I feel the same is true of your film works. The images, their movement and structure are often being used as metaphors. Am I correct?

Z.P. Yes. Metaphors permeate our entire surroundings, our entire experiences, our entire lives. But we don’t pay attention to them. We can’t pay attention to them. It will be too much for us to handle. That’s why we gravitate towards expressions in art because composers and painters and filmmakers don’t fear metaphors. They embrace them.

C.V. What are the principal symbols and metaphors in *Softly*? Should we consciously try to follow them?

Z.P. There are myriads of symbols and metaphors hidden in *Softly*. We should just watch and listen!

C.V. Are you conscious of any external influences on *Softly*? Has the work of any other filmmaker, poet or other artist been a particular influence?

Z.P. In *Softly*, the one and only is Morton Feldman!

C.V. Feldman died before his reputation had reached the level it has today. What do you imagine his reaction would have been to the idea that, 30 years on, you would be making a film like *Softly* about him and his music?

Z.P. I have been talking to him all along for a whole year while making *Softly*! Hey Morty! What do you think of this?

Feldman wasn't shy about giving his opinions and I am sure he would have lots to say. But my biggest hope is that in the end he would say: Not bad Zahra!

C.V. "Pacing" is a particular characteristic of Feldman's music. It moves at a particular pace, sometimes similar to the pace of breathing, or of heartbeats, but also often over much longer time spans. I feel that your films also have this characteristic of a beautiful, finely controlled, pacing of movement of the imagery within scenes and of the transitions between them. In *Softly*, did you consciously strive to coordinate the pacing of the film with that of the music?

Z.P. Yes. I began by creating scenes and designating a particular section of the music and a particular quotation to it. I cut these scenes myself in FinalCut Pro. I had over 30 scenes made. Then I began to create the sequence and remove some scenes so that film would be under 30 minutes.

Here was when the 'pacing' was extremely important. In each scene the moving image had to honour the music and Feldman's words had to fit into this combination. This was no small task! The responsibility was grave and humbling. But somehow the three elements in the scenes seemed to meld together. I was very lucky!

In postproduction the final *Softly* combine I had made were edited and finalised in Adobe Premier by an editor.

C.V. How long did it take to make *Softly*? Were there ever times when it felt as if the huge effort involved was just too daunting! Did you ever despair of completing it?

Z.P. The initial decision to make *Softly* was October of 2016. Being such a complex and challenging film, it is astonishing that *Softly* took only a year to complete. And yes of course, there were a few bumps on the road. And yes, there were a

couple of times I feared that the film wouldn't get off the ground. But trust and perseverance brought it back to life. In contrast to the obstacles, I had countless instances of pure luck and beautiful collaborations and support to make *Softly* a reality.

C.V. Filmmaking is a team effort. Could you tell us a little about the others that worked with you on *Softly*?

Z.P. Even with earlier films when I seemed to be a 'one-man band' operating the camera and doing all the sound recordings myself, I always had many collaborators. In the film "The Bus" I recorded 39 voices representing the 39 passengers on the bus. In another installation project "A Poet Speaks" I recorded 60 people!

In contrast to those films, *Softly* has very few and carefully selected collaborators. For the performance of "For John Cage" I invited two musicians, Myra Hinrichs and Shi-An Costello to come to New York to be filmed and recorded in the studio. Soprano Tiffany DuMouchelle was filmed and recorded in Buffalo.

I interviewed a few professional actors for the voiceover and decided to use Vincent FitzGerald who is not an actor to speak Feldman's words for the narration.

Softly was shot by three cinematographers. The recording of sounds were done by two audio engineers in New York and Buffalo and we engaged a picture editor and a sound designers for postproduction.

C.V. You have been making films for many years now, what was your first film and how did it come about?

Z.P. In 1996 I was going to Turkey to do research on the poetry of 13th Century Persian poet J.M. Rumi at his library. Shooting a film was not part of this research trip. But I decided to take along a borrowed video camera with me. I shot

“Footsteps” quite amateurishly myself and it was later edited quite primitively. However to my surprise this film has turned out to be a good location document combined with narrated words of the poet.

C.V. Your films have a very distinctive visual style. Are you conscious of that? How would you yourself describe it?

Z.P. I don't make documentary films. My films are abstract without a specific narrative component. They are like tonal poems. As we spoke earlier, there are many labels attached to such films: short/experimental, Avant-Garde, art-films. Most Avant-Garde filmmakers are looking for a poetic expression rather than telling a story.

C.V. The role of black and white in your films is very important. Would you like to talk a little about that?

Z.P. “REM” and *Softly* are in black and white. The role of black and white is to enhance the quality of abstraction even further. These films are not at all about realism. *Softly* in particular evokes a sense of memory. It is as if we had an experience in the past and now we are remembering it. This sensation creates an intimate relationship between the viewer and the subject of the film who is Morton Feldman.

C.V. Your films feel to me like visual poems. I think this is because your images can be seen as metaphors. Does that make sense to you?

Z.P. Yes indeed. Every element in these films represent a metaphor for something else, something deeper. If there is one word to describe my films, it would be ‘ambiguity’.

C.V. You are a composer yourself. What led you to start composing? How did you go about acquiring the skills required to do it?

Z.P. I began as translator of Medieval Persian poetry and Persian poetry is pure music. From early adulthood I have always heard music in my sleep. Later on as I paid more attention to these illusive sounds, I would even be able to remember fragments of them when I would wake. That is why I decided to study music composition. It is never easy to begin studying music later in life. The hardest parts were the technical aspects of correct notation and I worked very hard at that. Everything else, particularly melodies, came to me easily.

C.V. I know your recent, moving and beautifully constructed suite for solo piano called “Astrolabe”, and your beautiful recent song, “I Died as Matter”, which uses your own translation of a text by Rumi. And there is also the earlier, more conventional but also beautifully made, collection of pieces called, “Suddenly the Moon”. Has your encounter with Feldman’s music influenced the direction your own music is taking?

Z.P. The music in “Suddenly the Moon” dates back to 2010 through 2012. “Astrolabe” on the other hand was the turning point. I was not liking what I was composing and the short movement called ‘Daybreak’ broke the camel’s back! After revising that movement 12 times, I threw it away, only to come back to its melody months later as the closing section of a much more abstract piece.

The influence of Feldman might be better felt in the song cycle “Love Lines” composed in late 2016 early 2017. This composition has yet to be performed.

C.V. Have you made any films that use your own music? If so, did you find it made it easier or harder to make the film?

Z.P. For the film “REM” I composed a short piece for the violin solo. Last year I composed a song for soprano vocalise, bells and spoken words recording. This song has been made into a short film entitled “Seek Water”, using outtakes from my earlier film “Noise”. Using one’s own music doesn’t necessarily make the process of filmmaking any easier or harder. But honestly I would rather make films with music of Morton Feldman forever!

C.V. Filmmaking and composing seem to have come to dominate your creative work. They emerged from your earlier work translating Persian poetry and creating beautiful hand-made books. What prompted you to make this transition? Do you still continue your translating and book making activities?

Z.P. Yes. I started translating from a very young age and I still do that. However music composition and filmmaking are now the dominant activities for me. And yes, I am also a bookbinder of handmade limited edition tomes. I studied this craft for my day job. It has paid the rent for 30 years!

C.V. Have your translations of Rumi’s poetry been collected together in a single anthology? If not, are there plans to do so? Is that something you would like to see?

Z.P. My publisher Vincent FitzGerald & Co. publishes only limited edition artist books and has published 14 editions of my translations. A collection of all the translations would have to be a commercial book in much larger multiples. I hope one day another publisher will publish the whole collection.

C.V. Translating Rumi's poetry, making hand-made books, filmmaking, composing – this is a diverse range of creative activities! Is there, in your case, anything like a common thread, underlying and running through them all?

Z.P. Absolutely! For any Persian speaking person poetry is music. This is in our DNA! And for me making a film is like writing a poem. Just as Morton Feldman so strongly believed, there are common threads between all artistic disciplines. Feldman was even inspired by the physical threads in Near-Eastern rugs! Poetry, music and abstract films are woven together even more closely.

C.V. I know you have new musical compositions in progress and planned. Do you have any new film projects in mind?

Z.P. Well, after making a serious film such as *Softly*, one needs a break. This is the best time to make a funny short short! I have been wanting to make a humorous social commentary about our age of electronic devices entitled “Dawn of Civilisation”. As soon as *Softly* is on its way, I would like to embark on this short.

Translator, filmmaker and composer *Zahra Partovi* was born in Tehran and now lives and works in New York City. Zahra has authored 14 publications of poetry in translation published by Vincent FitzGerald & Co. which are in permanent collection at major museums and libraries throughout the United States and Europe.

Zahra's most recent film "*Softly - A GIANT STEP*", focusing on the music of American modernist composer Morton Feldman, has just been released.



Photo: Irene Ikner Haupt

"Suddenly the Moon" a book and CD of her compositions was published by Weil Books in 2013 and "Astrolabe" and "I Died as Matter" song in 2017. Zahra's song and short film "Seek Water" was commissioned by A Musical Feast and performed by soprano Tiffany DuMouchelle in October 2017 in Buffalo, New York. A song cycle entitled "Love Lines" for the treble voices of soprano, alto and violin is Zahra's forthcoming project in 2018.

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