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"Between Categories": Hearing *Palais de Mari*

Morton Feldman's music is striking for the regularity with which he doesn't decide between two paths. While much 20th century music is characterized by the composer's compulsion to account for every last note, Feldman opted for intuitive freedom. He did not, however, go completely down the path of John Cage, who decided to deign everything and anything as art. This, in fact, was his sole criticism of Cage:

> Just as there is an implied decision in a precise and selective art, there is an equally implied decision in allowing everything to be art. There is a Zen riddle that replies to its own question. "Does a dog have the Buddha nature?" the riddle asks. "Answer either way and you lose your own Buddha nature."
>
> Faced with a mystery about divinity, according to the riddle, we must always hover, uncertain, between the two possible answers. Never, on pain of losing our own divinity, are we allowed to decide. My quarrel with Cage is that he decided. A brilliant student of Zen, he has somehow missed this subtle point.[1]

Throughout his career, Feldman's music holds between these two poles. It aspires towards a very traditional motivic economy as readily as it embraces the beauty in banality espoused by Cage. He frequently highlighted the importance of indecision in both his music (providing suggestive titles like *Between Categories* and *Neither*) and writings.

Taking a dogmatic approach to the interpretation of his music leads one into a minefield of potential problems. Focusing only on the sensuousness of his sound world doesn't take one very far, but drawing up tables of set classes misses the point. Successful analysis of Feldman's music depends on being alert to both its rational and irrational components.

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1 B. H. Friedman, ed., *Give My Regards to Eighth Street*. (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2000), 29-30.

Palais de Mari comes from the so-called late period in Feldman's career. Starting in the early '80s, his music featured the repetition of fragmentary materials, varied slightly throughout the piece. Scale also became an important factor at this time. Pieces like *For Philip Guston* and *String Quartet II* reach unassumingly towards Wagnerian durations.

Knowing his penchant for extreme lengths, his student Bunita Marcus asked him to apply the techniques of his expansive late music to a smaller work. While *Palais de Mari* is considerably long in terms of the single movement piano repertoire, its half hour duration makes it fairly brief in Feldman's terms. Its title is taken from a photograph at the Louvre of a ruined East Asian palace.

A feeling of static decay permeates the piece. It seems to be caught in one long, extended moment, yet the repetitions implicitly reference earlier instances of themselves. As a listener, one can take two tacks: either follow the piece as an example of "vertical" time or attempt to connect related moments.[2] Following Feldman's own desire to create a music that exists "between categories," however, it is best to listen to his late music in both of these modes. By choosing only one, the listener becomes ignorant of the ramifications of the other path. Being conscious of both allows one to appreciate the music in its entire conception.

Hearing *Palais de Mari* in a completely vertical mode can be an overwhelming experience. Just as the abstract expressionists sought to cover every inch of their canvas with "all-over" painting, Feldman seems to seek a similar effect in sound. The continuous use of the sustain pedal creates a wash of sound that quickly becomes

2 "Vertical" time, as defined by Jonathan Kramer in *The Time of Music*, is the state where any sense of linear progress is eradicated. Often connected with minimalism, music fitting this categorization disbands development for one long moment. This music constructs one continuous present that often comes in stark relief to the linear time imposed by the outside world.

inescapable. The impact of music events is intensified by the extremely soft dynamic level. Since one must pay particularly close attention to hear the very soft sounds, new motives and registral changes become unexpectedly dramatic.

This music is very meditative, but not because of any facile monotony. The heightened attention demanded by Feldman's music draws one out of the real world into its sound world. It presents itself as an alternative to the real world. Whereas much art readily presents itself as vicarious experience, a real life substitute, Feldman's music tries to exist entirely apart from the real world. The large durations of his late works exist as preventive measures for any attempts to turn them into disposable experiences.

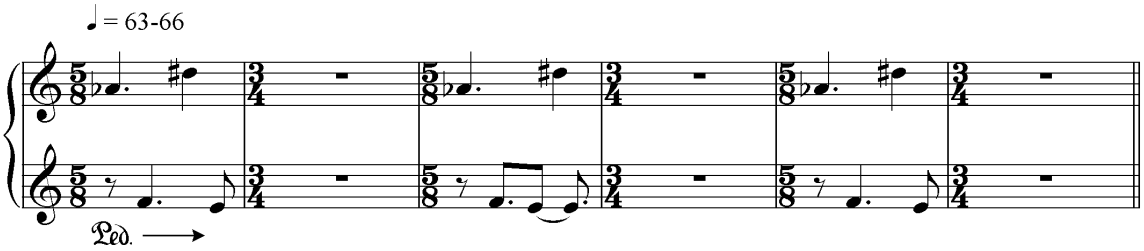
In this respect, his attitude towards composition is not too distant from the archmodernist "Who Cares if You Listen?" point of view. Feldman may not shy from writing unabashedly sensual music or discussing his extramusical inspirations, but he sees art as essentially divorced from the quotidian.

His desire to partition life and art in part explains *Palais de Mari's* duration. Turning away from his aesthetic stances and thinking in purely practical terms, a piece of vertical music could conceivably last for any duration. Five seconds would be the same as five minutes or as twenty-five minutes. Nevertheless, the piece is never without a sense of direction. Since the harmony is completely nonfunctional (this causes the sense of static time), other means must be used to sustain the piece over its significant duration. Feldman's use of register establishes a tension at the beginning which is ultimately resolved during the last few measures.

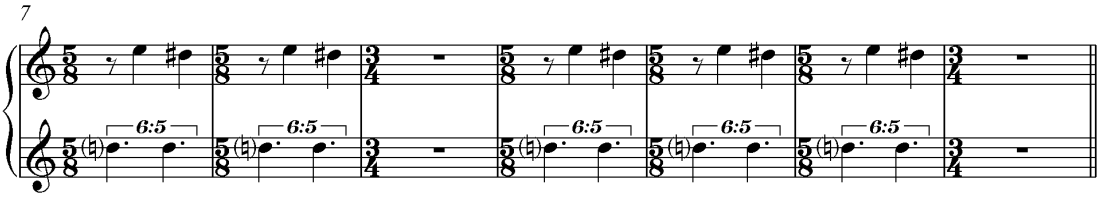
Feldman frequently stressed the importance of not "pushing the sounds around." Silences of specific durations are notated throughout, giving the sounds time to "breathe" before others arrive. Part of the piece's drama and tension exists in moments

when sounds feel forced next to each other.

The importance of register and sound density are established in the first section when the piece's basic language is outlined. Melodic fragments and chords (referred together from now on simply as fragments) exist as isolated units. Rather than being "played," they feel "projected" onto a surface. Their pitch content is rarely altered, but their rhythm, duration, and register frequently are.

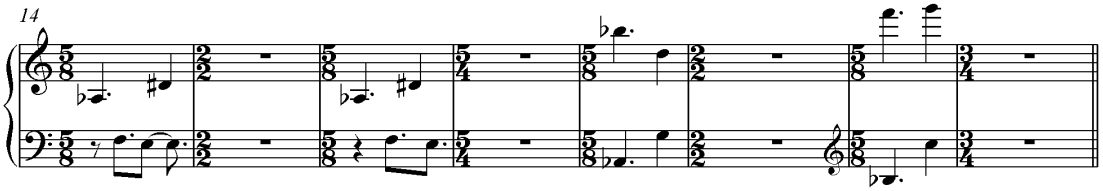


The length of silences are chosen very carefully based on the characteristics of the modern piano. They give the sounds enough time to decay so they don't step on the feet of any others. When the first fragment is transposed down an octave in m. 14, the silence that follows is a beat longer than the initial silences. The longer decay of instrument's thicker middle register prompts this. When fragments are stuffed together, the silences that follow them seem like a relief, as if the sounds were finally allowed to reenter their natural state:



The richer register and expanded silences which proceed this passage balance these anxious repetitions. When the five beat silence in m. 17 is reached (the longest yet), it is like a small cadence point. The measure which follows it is very unusual. Whereas all preceding silences answered the fragments they accompanied, the fragment

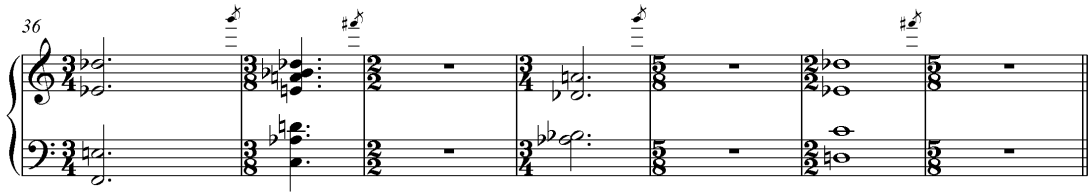
in m. 18 answers the silence. The m. 17 silence was almost too long for the sounds it cushioned; new sounds needed to be projected in order to sustain the piece's momentum.



Measure 18 does not merely shift in register, it expands the sound across several octaves. The left hand moves downward while the right hand moves upward. While the right hand's register isn't all that new, its contrast against the lower register and expanded silences of m. 14-17 make it feel new.

This moment provides the piece's primary "conflict." The wide registration of m. 18 seems at odds with the narrow registration that was used before. This move kept the music going, but it did so at a cost to the piece's established disposition. In order to provide a sense of closure, the expansive gesture of m. 18 must be reconciled with the narrow "noodling" that started the piece. By carefully controlling the desire for this resolution, Feldman sustains an extended piece of music, where by conventional standards, nothing happens.

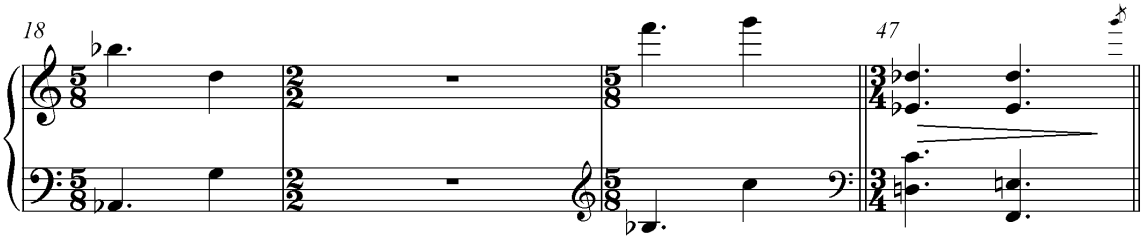
After the conclusion of the first section in m35, an important motive is introduced: the acciaccatura. They are used to balance masses of sound so they don't seem "pushed around":



Focusing a relatively large number of pitches in a narrow range creates tension in this sound world. One wants these sounds to disperse, but long durations aren't enough to

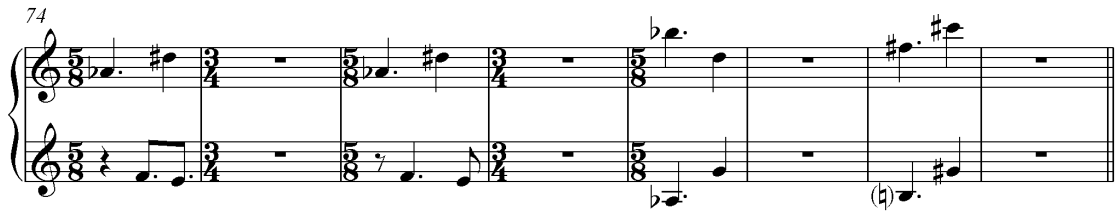
smooth out these semitone-heavy harmonies. Feldman's solution was to manually insert a kind of echo in a far-removed register. The grace notes balance out these thick, crunchy sonorities by adding something light and airy on top of them. The chords can exist which calling any more of the piece's characteristics into question (as the gesture in m. 18 did).

These accents help fixate the listener on that register, in particular on that G. This G was the highest pitch reached after m. 18 called attention to that part of the keyboard:

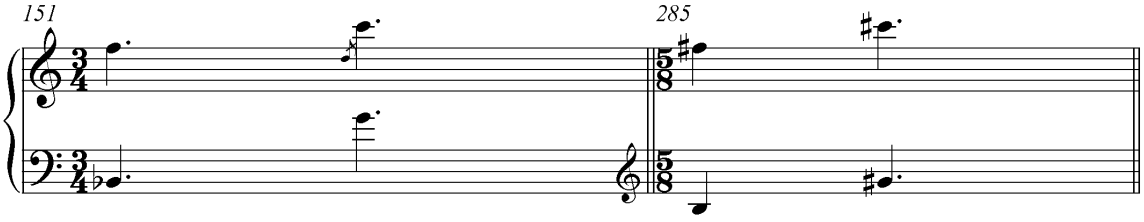


The note's structural significance is established by its continued and consistent use in each of its appearances. The use of F# and A grace notes as neighbor notes helps the particular pitch stand out. By associating that pitch in that register with the ability to resolve one kind of dissonance, Feldman sets up the pitch for later use in a more significant resolution.

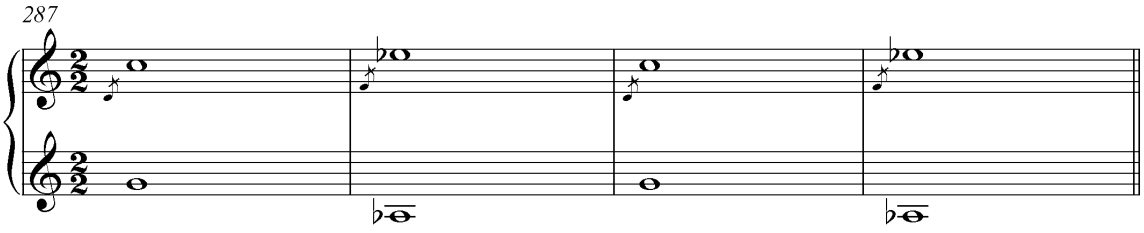
These grace notes are one of the few motives that remain unaltered across repetitions. Consistent use signifies importance. The frequent modifications made to fragments eliminates any feeling of cause and effect between them. The next repetition of the m. 18 gesture sees part of it transposed up a semitone. Its connection to the first reappearance of the opening fragment suggests it will make a similarly important appearance, but this change makes it as fickle and undependable as every other fragment. By drawing attention away from the gesture that introduced the main conflict, Feldman can pull listeners towards the gesture that will ultimately resolve it.



The majority of the fragments used are of a dyadic nature. Feldman often proceeds them with grace notes. This accent adds some variety to the eighth note pulse that otherwise dominates (see example). While these grace notes don't serve the same function as the ones previously discussed, their kinship is tangible. The grace notes-as-accents only appear once the other variety has been introduced.



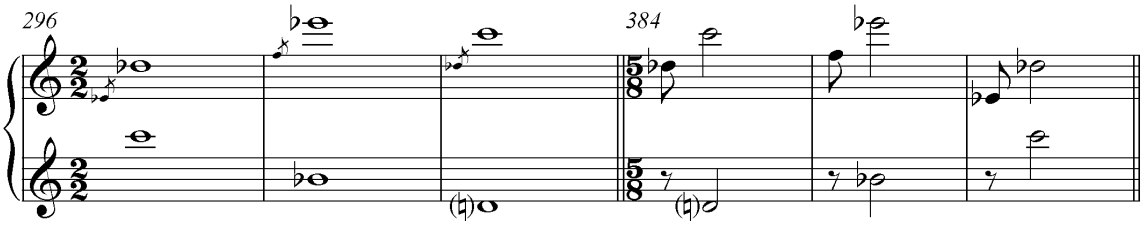
The accentual acciaccaturas are also used to draw the piece to its conclusion. Pop songs, another form of music that operates in a kind of vertical time, often use fade outs to gradually reduce the song's momentum so it can be concluded. *Palais de Mari* accomplishes a similar slowing down with a very gradual durational deceleration, beginning in m. 287 and proceeding through the end.



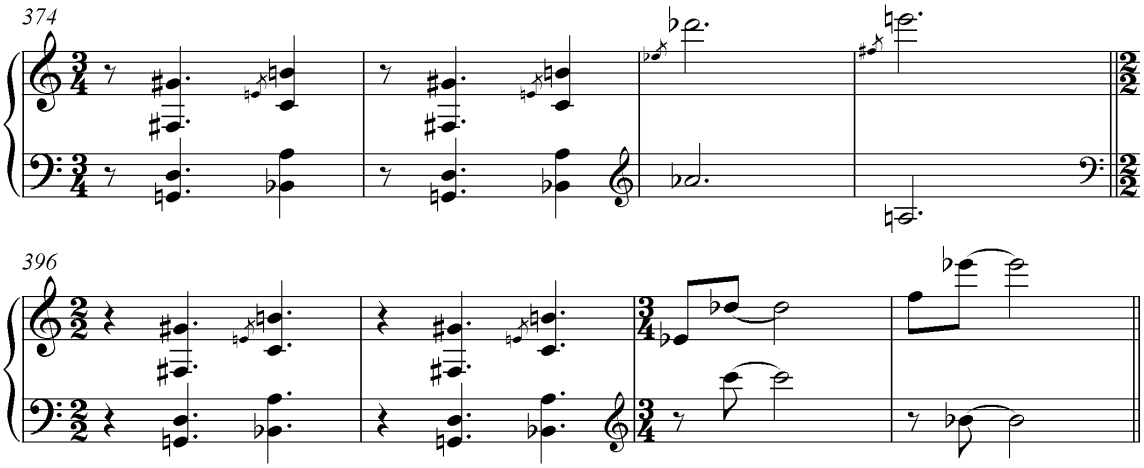
This section begins with a long series of accented dyads (m. 287-310). They all last for a whole note, the longest duration yet for these types of fragments. Previously, they lasted no longer than a dotted quarter note; whole notes were reserved for larger chords. This change is substantial and readily detectable. The length of the series is

also notable. Earlier arrangements of one dyad after another didn't go on for so long.

By immediately calling attention to the extended length of these fragments, Feldman calls attention to the other durational manipulations in the concluding section. A striking change is the transmutation of the accenting grace notes to fixed eighth notes. This is a very obvious slowing down, where a motive that previously stood out is worked into the piece's smooth fabric.



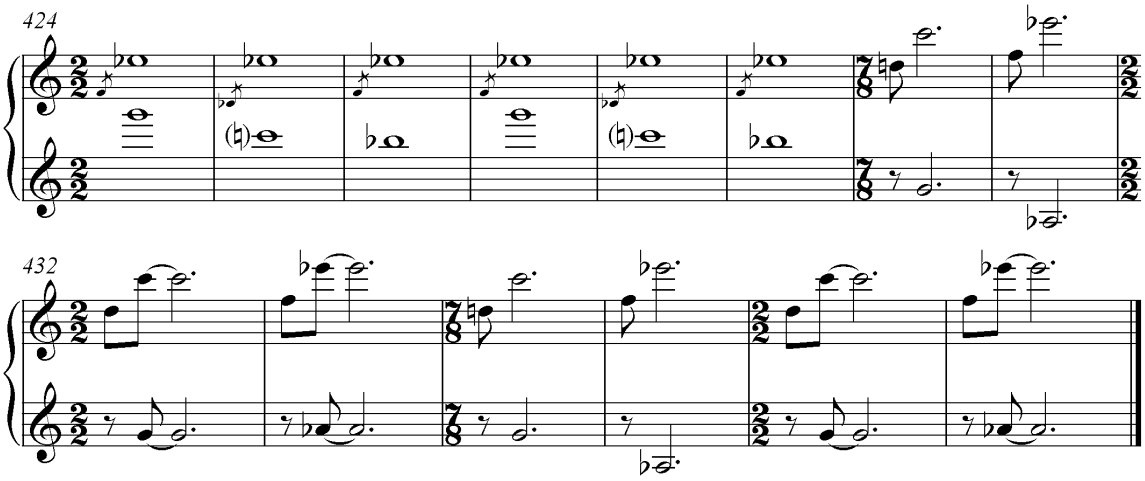
The deceleration is further highlighted by one repeated fragment:



Within the slowed context of this section, this part feels genuinely rushed. Both appearances lead into dyadic fragments. The differences between what follows them is brought out by the hurried feeling of the fragment (while the rushed fragment is slowed down slightly, it still sticks out in context). The first time the dyads are accented by grace notes, the second time they are preceded by eighth notes. This very local deceleration highlights the larger one taking place.

The end of the piece is also signaled by the return of high acciaccaturas in m. 369

(not seen yet in this section). Sounding on F# and A, they point towards the G that finally appears in m. 424. While it appears as part of a dyad, the registral distance from the other note in the set makes it stand out. In a live performance, the hand crossing would make the moment all the more dramatic. The left hand note is heard as part of the dyad, as well as a kind of airy accent on the lower pitch. The registral gesture of m. 18 is finally integrated with the static gestures it conflicted with, producing an extremely satisfying resolution. Following a repetition of this action, a brief coda summarizes the durational deceleration which helped conclude the piece.



The design of *Palais de Mari* complements two modes of listening: as a "vertical" form that produces a timeless expanse of sound and as a "moment" form that places a larger narrative against small scale stasis. Listening to it as music that exists "between categories" allows one to appreciate the piece's diverse virtues. The former approach has provided inspiration for many post-minimalist composers, while the latter demonstrates an adeptness at motivic development that rivals that of any composer in the Western canon.

Bibliography

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