Morton Feldman: Conversation with Austin Clarkson about Stefan Wolpe
13 November 1980

[Transcription, notes and introduction by Austin Clarkson]

Introduction

On May 24, 1980 I wrote to Morton Feldman at the University of Buffalo to introduce myself as a musicologist who was editing Wolpe's music and writings and interviewing people who knew him. I enclosed a copy of the article on Wolpe I had written for the New Grove and said I would appreciate the opportunity of interviewing him. Feldman replied on June 1 with a note that read: "Dear Austin Clarkson,/ Any time./ Best wishes,/ Morton Feldman. "We arranged a date in the fall. On November 13 I drove from Toronto, arrived at 703 West Ferry Street, and knocked on the door of Apartment A7 at the appointed hour. No answer. After a few minutes I knocked again. No answer. I could hear someone playing chords on a piano. After several more minutes I knocked once more, louder. Someone was moving about in the apartment, but no one came to the door. Another long wait. At last the door opened and Feldman invited me. He had been composing and talked about the piece he was working on. He asked what I had been doing, and I set up the cassette recorder, a Sony TCD5. The interview lasted for about eighty minutes.

The transcript can't convey the richness of Feldman's Brooklyn diction and the range of his expressive voice – from very soft to very robust, very fast to very slow, words strongly articulated to words rapidly elided. But it can indicate the emphases, pauses, and hearty laughter. It retains most repetitions of words and phrases as he prepares his next thought. This interview is exceptionally valuable, for in it Feldman paints a unique portrait of Wolpe as composer, teacher, and friend. He had a profound understanding of Wolpe's personality, his music, his unique gifts as a teacher, and his place in the panorama of twentieth century music. The interview is particularly important for Feldman's assessment of Wolpe's influence on his formation as a composer and his practice as a teacher. An abbreviated version of the interview appears in Recollections of Stefan Wolpe, a collection of over seventy interviews posted on the website, http://www.wolpe.org.

Austin Clarkson, Toronto

MF The first things that came to mind was a remark that John Cage made. John Cage once just in passing mentioned to me – we were talking about Black Mountain College – and John felt that it was such a lively place only because [Josef] Albers was so authoritarian. So you had this contradiction, you see, of a sort of authoritarian figure probably stepping back and allowing all these other potential authoritarian figures a field day. Stefan was never authoritarian in his teaching. [long pause]

Never once did he . . . You see, as you know, when you teach there are two ways of doing it. There are only two ways to teach. Either you help the student do what they are doing better, or you try to lead them into something else. And what's interesting about the years I was with Stefan is that, [laughs] he didn't employ any one of those approaches. He didn't help me make what I was doing better, and he never led me into something else, which has become a model for my own teaching, that particular attitude. You know, it's not like someone once said to me when I once went to Yale to give a lecture, and a friend of mine that picked me up – I ask him what's going on here – he said, "Well, if they're heavy into twelve-tone, we lead them out of it. If they're not involved with twelve-tone, we lead them into it." Which is essentially his teaching philosophy, that particular era at Yale. But with Stefan, it was always that confrontation actually with the piece at hand. And that's some overriding point of view of what you're going to have a piece. That was a very singular lesson for me, how he focused into the piece at hand. Which a lot of teachers don't, you know. They have definite points of view and work within that point of view. That became a very important model for me. [long pause]

I think if there was one aspect of my music that seemed to provoke essentially a Socratic dialogue – I would say that even more than me he certainly allows his student for Socratic dialogue – loved the conversation, loved the questions and the answers, and the questions and the answers, and the questions and trying to find the answers, which, as I talk to you, is almost like the basis of the antecedent-consequent aspect of his own music [laughs] – was the fragmentary element in my music, the fact that it wasn't organic, worked from seeds, worked with that strong variational approach which was part of his generation. I think that was the one thing. He didn't understand why or how my music was so fragmentary, that is, stop-and-go, stop-and-go. That was essentially,

that was essentially, I would say, the whole core of both our problem as student and teacher. That was essentially the basic confrontation, and never resolved.

AC That's interesting, because his early pieces are full of fragmentation.

MF He was never hostile when I met John Cage. He was very, very open. He was certainly more open, outside of someone like Henry Cowell, who was professionally open, and outside of Virgil Thomson, who was open in relation to his own personal friendship with Cage. I would say that Stefan was [pause] excited (by excited I mean in a negative sense), taking it all very seriously, and again wanting always to talk about it, while other people felt they had all the answers about what was happening. And I remember some very lively conversations with Cage about a lot of things, because they went beyond just the technical devices used.

AC Was this about pieces that Cage had performed and that Stefan had heard?

MF This is circa 1951, and it wasn't just a question of Cage, it was just the whole circle now of Cage. And of course, I was his [Wolpe's] student not too long before. David Tudor became our crown prince, and his terrific involvement with Stefan and with Irma – so he was very close – and his great fondness for Cage as a person. It was the first time I ever saw Cage, before actually meeting him, was at a music . . . Irma and Stefan out at Cathedral Parkway had these soirees, which was very exciting for me, a young composer across the river.[1] Whoever was in town will come up. [Leon] Kirchner was in from the West Coast, played two or three of his pieces. I remember [René] Leibowitz was in from Paris with Helen. There's a great story that I witnessed, a hilarious story there. Leibowitz and Helen were there, and who else was there? Was Claus Adam there? Maybe Claus and his wife were there. Wasn't too many people there. The anecdote is hilarious, is that Irma played the Battle Piece for Leibowitz, who didn't react.[2] And he said to Stefan, "Well, perhaps some other time I could hear it again." You heard Stefan yell out, "Irma, noch einmal!" [laughs] Which was wonderful!

AC She didn't do it, did she? Did she play it again?

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[1] David Tudor began studies with Irma Wolpe in piano and Stefan Wolpe in composition some time in 1944. In the fall of 1949 he met Cage and invited him to attend the musicales the Wolpes had at their apartment on West 110th Street (Cathedral Parkway). See my essay, "Stefan Wolpe and Abstract Expressionism," in *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts*, ed. Steven Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 80-85.

[2] Wolpe began *Battle Piece for Piano* in 1943 and completed the last three parts in 1947. On the occasion of this musicale Irma would have played the first four parts. David Tudor gave the premiere of the completed work in 1950.

MF Ask her if she remembers.

AC I will. This was after they had broken up, wasn't it?

MF Just before, at the same time.[3]

AC 1948?

MF A little later. Just before, just before, just before. . .

AC How often did you see Stefan?

MF I saw him a few times a week socially. Once a week to work. You know a lot about Stefan. Is his brother still alive?[4]

AC No. He died of a gall bladder operation.

MF About how long ago?

AC About '56 or '57.

MF That long ago? because one of my closest friends in life . . . evidently, I don't know if it was because of the left-wing politics, or whatever, but there was a kind of, everybody seemed to have known each other. Her husband had an affair with (my friend's husband) had an affair with Hilda, and she had a big, very important affair with Stefan's brother in Paris. And peripherally, always knew Stefan, a certain way.

AC I would love to get in contact with his brother's widow. She must still be in Paris.

MF I don't know anything about it, except that...

AC And he had a son who was a nightclub singer.

MF That I don't know. I do know he spelled his name with a V.

AC Well, as a cartoonist he called himself Woop.

MF Right. Apparently he was quite a singular person himself.

AC Yes, an amazing man. He was in England during the War. He asked to be parachuted into Yugoslavia so he could work as a spy.

MF Missing an eye wasn't he?

AC Yes, he lost it to the Gestapo.

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[3] Irma and Stefan Wolpe divorced in 1949. Irma married the mathematician Hans Rademacher, and Stefan lived with Hilda Morley. They married in 1952.

[4] William Bär Wolpe (1899-1956) studied at the Bauhaus. He escaped from Nazi Germany and went to England. After the war, during which he saw active service, he became a political cartoonist in Paris.

But back to those early years and especially Stefan as a teacher. I thought he was actually incredible. I mean, what can I say? I'm not trying to eulogize him because he's dead. It's just the energy. And I don't think it was just to me. Just waiting for him to finish up with Ralph [Shapey], or with someone else. The energy that he extended to his teaching was I thought perhaps a little too much in that respect.

AC There are very few pieces from those years, 1946 to 1950. I wonder why. Were you conscious of what he himself was writing? Would you go hear his music in concerts?

MF Yes, yes. When was the Violin Sonata played?

AC 1949. That's the main piece from that time, but that's about all. He was also writing all those studies on seconds, on thirds, on sixths, on tenths.[5]

MF During the doctorate processes here, between their writtens and their orals, which is a week, they have to write a piece. And what I've given for a number of years is the passacaglia, that on a twelve-tone bass go through a trip of intervals.[6] I don't tell them it's the Wolpe structure. I just tell them in a sense, on a kind of twelve-tone passacaglia go through all the intervals. There is a little bit of that kind of idea in the Violin Sonata, sections of interval exposure, if you like.

AC But do you play them the Passacaglia after they've done this exercise?

MF No.

AC Do they ever see it or know about it?

MF No. I used to. No I don't. But, I do use it. I have – and it's the best one yet, and it's called The Wolpe Variations.[7]

I don't know. I think one can get in a bind about that. I think it's an awful book, Beethoven and His Nephew, by those couple psychologists.[8] When they condescend, try to say what happened to Beethoven in his late period, what happened to Beethoven, his productivity decreased. His productivity decreased! I think it was understandable. I think he was smart not to

[5] The compositional studies are collected as *Music for Any Instruments* (1944-1949).
[6] Wolpe's *Passacaglia* is the last of *Four Studies on Basic Rows* (1935-36).
[7] This refers to a composition by one of his students.
[8] Editha and Richard Sterba, *Beethoven and His Nephew: A Psychoanalytic Study of Their Relationship* (New York: Schocken, 1971).

write. Those were the times. Stefan identified with the young generation, and he didn't identity with . . . First of all, who was around in his generation? Stefan didn't have a strong generation.

AC Did he ever talk about people like Eisler or Dessau?

MF No. I think he took some lessons with Webern. Never even discussed his lessons with Webern.

AC He was only involved in the moment, in what was going on right then.

MF That's what I told you, to focus in on the student's piece at that moment. Fantastic concentration! I know what kind of concentration when you have a lot students during the day, to get into that student. I know what it takes.

AC What I'm interested in is getting a little more context for his work at that time. And especially with his concepts of space and of proportion, which he was going into very deeply then. He was going to bring Enactments out of these ideas of organic modes that he evolved so much in his lecture on "Thinking Twice."[9] Do you recall ideas like that?

MF He never really discussed them.

AC He didn't expose his own music to his own students? He was involved in your music, right?

MF I don't know how in the hell he didn't do it, 'cause I think I'm a damned good teacher, and I still have to pick up a piece of mine sometimes and show them an example of something.

AC But he didn't do that?

MF Only rarely, only rarely! And it had a lot to do with, it had a lot to do with . . . I'll tell you what I always felt that he was more involved with and not bringing it into a kind of . . . the formulations of formulas one can discover from insights and just bring it again into the moment of what I just feel that he's involved with, without even discussing it on any classy intellectual level. He was involved with something, and talked about something, and what he talked about all the time was shape. Interesting, you could pun with Shapey on that. The problem with Shapey is that he had one letter too much for his music. That element of shape instilled me, and he'll look at me, you could just see his quizzical look, when I would say that it's essentially what influenced my

[9] *Enactments for Three Pianos* (1950-53); "Thinking Twice," in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, 2nd. edition, ed.Elliot Schwartz and Barney Childs (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 274-307.

music. Stefan's big influence. It's a big influence when a teacher talks about shape, in so far as that consciousness of just that word could go into any style. That I could bring a shape into a simultaneous chord, I could shape a chord, so to speak. I don't have to mean shape in terms of asymmetrical units working with each other on a chain.

He also being a dialectical materialist, he also liked opposites. The world of opposites also in the sense that he brought to me – and I never think of my thinking about that – helped me tremendously – but what I would consider opposites, you see. [laughs] But that's what a teacher does. He brings you—that's what coaches do – they bring in things which you feel are either used wrongly or misunderstood. But that's what civilization is based on, is it not? My early civilization was based on so many concepts of Stefan's which I took and I put . . . The consciousness that these terms existed. I mean, the young students don't know the various key words, the vocabulary, the baggage you take. They don't know that you have to take a toothbrush, or something like that, you see what I mean? Words like 'shape' is a toothbrush, 'opposites' is the underwear, you know what I mean? And I grabbed onto those terms, 'cause those are the only terms you know. Those were real terms. Other words like 'continuity' doesn't mean anything; 'continuity' doesn't help you like 'shape.' [laughs] And so forth and so on, not to labor the point. Shape was a very, very important thing, and he would many times play or sing something that he wrote, and he loved the shape. The biggest compliments that I ever got from him for certain pieces, when he got excited about a certain passage where he felt that the shape was just terrific.

AC What pieces were those that you were writing at the time?

MF I think that one of the most important pieces that I wrote with Stefan—it's my most Wolpe piece – I wish I had a tape of it, I never had it, damned successful! If I ever recorded it, it would be a famous piece. It was called Journey to the End of the Night, and it's very Wolpeish.

AC And you were writing it at about that time?

MF That was my last piece with him. I made a collection of Céline. [plays theme on the piano] You know my subject matter: "You're going to die soldier boy, you're going to die, so hurry up and die." [sings the words and the melody from the third part] Fabulous piece, a tour de force, incredible piece. And then there's a last thing which is a love song to a prostitute, and there was

one passage that he played over and over again, and he kept on saying: "Oh, sehr schön, sehr schön!"[10] That was coming through, you see, the pieces that I was writing before that were more fragmented than the pieces I was writing after was, you see. But I came through, and I came through via Wolpe. But I came through actually because the text wrote the piece, see. But anything I learned from him in terms of what he thought maybe I should have learned came through in that piece. And his teachings made that piece possible. Without the words I never would have gotten into that world with those shapes that he liked so much. So be as it may, I was very into the Violin Sonata. I became friends with Frances Magnes.[11] Where is she now?

AC She lives in Westchester.

MF Is she still married to the same guy?

AC I think so. She had a family, but she hasn't played much violin.

MF No, she played a piece of mine at the time, I remember.[12] She was generous with her time. Oh, it was like a commune that Violin Sonata. We'd go different places to hear it. We were really in business with the Violin Sonata.[13] I think that Charlie Wuorinen and Ben Hudson are putting it together.[14] Always trying to get people to do the Violin Sonata, because essentially that was goodbye to an era, that piece, goodbye to everything. Goodbye to all his aspirations of some kind of synthesis of street music and the kind of quasi-twelve-tone tradition. Typically German in that respect, I'll tell you that. The whole business of trying to make a synthesis of, you know, like Adler and socialism and Freud and Reich and that kind of business. Always this kind of politics

[10] The texts for *Journey to the End of the Night* (1947) are drawn from Céline's novel of the same name. The third part has the text "You're going to die." The last piece he wrote while studying with Wolpe was probably the unpublished *Episode for Orchestra*, dated November 1, 1949, and dedicated "To Stefan Wolpe with love from both Arlyne and myself." The holograph score is in the Paul Sacher Foundation. The first performance was given by the West Deutscher Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester Köln, November 23, 2002.

[11] Frances Magnes and David Tudor gave the New York premiere in Carnegie Recital Hall, November 16, 1949.

[12] Probably *Piece for Violin and Piano*, dated December 17, 1950.

[13] Before the New York premiere, Frances Magnes and David Tudor played the *Violin Sonata* at the Musical Club of Hartford, Connecticut (November 3, 1949) and Adelphi College, Garden City, New York (November 10, 1949). After the premiere they played the Sonata for the Juilliard School of Music, Town Hall Short Courses (November 22, 1950). In a letter dated January 17, 1950, Cage wrote to Boulez that he thought the Wolpe *Violin Sonata* tended more to Berg than to Webern. *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, ed. J.-J. Nattiez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 48.

[14] Ben Hudson, violin, played the *Violin Sonata* with Kenneth Bowen, piano, on a Group for Contemporary Music concert, April 2, 1985, in Kaufmann Concert Hall, New York City. Charles Wuorinen has not played the Sonata.

and orgasm. All this kind of synthesis element was very European, thinking that you're going to open the door magically by way of synthesis.

AC Did you feel his politics important at this time?

MF Nah, nah. They were real and they were successfully operative in his thinking. There's actually a great story that's too true, too pat. . . It was towards the end of my studying with Stefan, and I already started to know all the painters in New York.

AC Through him?

MF To some degree through him, but actually through Cage. But also he was very close with the same circle, with [Jack] Tworkov, with [Esteban] Vicente. . . It was the Artists' Club that brought us together at that time. I was there all the time, and Stefan came and enrolled.[15]

AC Pollock?

MF Pollock didn't come too much there. Pollock lived out in the country. De Kooning. The story about Pollock actually, about the politics thing, is that Stefan took a studio on Fourteenth Street, which a dancer friend of his had, Shirley Broughton, and his little room overlooked Fourteenth Street, and it was Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue, the west side of the street facing uptown actually. So Pollock and a guy was walking down the Village, and he [Stefan] starts talking about the man in the street, people in the street, people on the street, isn't it like that, the people of the street. And we looked out, it was only just two flights [up], and we see Jackson Pollock walking down to the Village, 'cause we're facing uptown, he's walking down Sixth Avenue. For many years I would tell the story of the time. It just seemed so symbolic of who could be also the man on the street. In other words, I identified with Pollock, he [Stefan] saw the Puerto Ricans. I saw Pollock.

He was marvelously generous, because I got into a little trouble. I became very well known in New York at that time. [laughs] Stefan was never bitter, never jealous. I don't know how I would feel seeing a young student of mine coming into a same party I'm invited, see that kid

[15] Stefan Wolpe and Hilda Morley first visited the Artists' Club in the fall of 1950. Wolpe, Feldman, and Tudor were inducted as members in 1951. See the Club Records of Philip Pavia (D176.pavia), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. See also recollections of the early days of the Artist's Club by Dore Ashton and Hilda Morley in *On the Music of Stefan Wolpe: Essays and Recollections*, ed. A. Clarkson (Hillsdale NY: Pendragon, 2003).

around all the time. I never had those vibes from Stefan. Never, ever, in any way. Except for one time he did say something to me which was bitter, but not about me, but about his own situation. In all the years I knew him, it was the only momentary bitter reflection that he thought about those things. It was in Varèse's house, where Varèse was having some young people, and Wolpe was there, and other people were there, and Stefan says to me, "I hear you have a publisher now and a recording is coming out." And then he says, "I have no publisher or recording." And that was the end of it. And that was the only moment.[16]

AC What do you put that down to that he didn't get a publisher.

MF I don't have the transcript here, and you'll read it when it comes out. I trip on Wolpe with some kids that came to interview me.[17] I talk about going to a concert, hearing a piece of Stefan's with [Luciano] Berio, Berio coming out saying to me, "How the hell do I get out of here?" Just annoyed to death with the piece. It wasn't an early piece. It was a kind of, let's say his New York-Darmstadt period.[18] [laughs] [long pause] One of the biggest problems I think that Stefan has is that, being that there is not a proliferation of wonderfully gifted composers, everybody seems to get a kind of hardening of the categories, as Norbert Wiener put it, and that things do have to sound like whether it's mainstream, or kinky mainstream. I mean, every movement has its mainstream, and unless the categories could harden, it's very difficult to place it. We're not involved with the flavor of certain type of music. We're just involved with just stylistic elements, where we could place it, and the technical usage which really places it. And many times (and I've done this all the time), is I say, well, you don't understand Stefan Wolpe because you don't understand the relationship of Léger to Picasso, you see. I said, Stefan Wolpe is our Léger. Now, I don't feel that I'm putting him down by saying that he's Léger. But if we had a lot of strong composers around out of a certain, say, cubism, out of twelve-tone, if they all didn't just go into that kind of international sound, like international architecture. You see, if we had a lot of strong people taking

[16] Wolpe's first record came out on the Esoteric label in 1955, with the *Passacaglia*, *Violin Sonata*, and *Quartet for Trumpet, Tenor Saxophone, Percussion and Piano* (1950-54).
[17] This interview has not yet been located.
[18] Wolpe attended the Darmstadt Summer Courses for New Music from 1956 to 1962. In 1956 he gave the lecture, "On New (and Not-so-New) Music in America," for which David Tudor performed examples by Feldman, Wolff, Cage, Wolpe and many other American composers. The lecture is published in *Journal of Music Theory* 28/1: 1-45 (1984).

the twelve-tone and going into various directions, he'll be in a stronger position. I'm convinced of it. Well, we just didn't have it, just didn't have it. And we're not going to have it, which is good for Stefan in a sense. I think the air will clear up. But his work is very singular. It is a synthesis, just as Léger was a synthesis. It wasn't synthetic, [laughs] it was a synthesis. And it's marvelously strong,wonderful music. It doesn't reach the kind of abstraction they did, not only because of the materials, but because, I think, the pressure of the materials is more phonetic. I mean, if I play my kids Erwartung, which I played six times, [laughs] they get very annoyed with the expressionist element of the piece. And they don't hear the piece. And it's the same thing with Wolpe. They get involved with the phoneticism of the piece. And essentially they're getting involved with the kind of phonetic shaping of the piece, and they don't really hear the piece. They hear stylistic elements which they can't really put together. But he's gonna have his day. And if he was a painter, if he was a painter, let's say about Stefan Wolpe, we wouldn't be able to afford to buy a Wolpe. Know what I mean?

AC And he almost could have been a painter. You know he went to the Bauhaus and took lessons with Itten and Klee. I talked to Ardon in Paris just last December.[19] Stefan did paintings and did the classes.[20] He was a musician, but the visual field was amazingly powerful to him, and in a less diagrammatic way than with Xenakis. To me his music sounds like the diagrams he makes. I feel that it's very two-dimensional. Stefan I think achieved without all that rationalization very similar contents. I don't know if you agree, but he was trying to achieve the same kind of multiplicity and this amazing drenching of imagery, but he does it in a space which to me is thoroughly three-dimensional, if not four-dimensional. Does that say anything to you?

MF [long pause] Ah, but there is such a generation gap, I can't compare. I know exactly what you're saying. I mean, I can't take away from one to support the other. I feel that Stefan was still part of a generation that was very much involved with significant material and the kind of mileage, the kind of didactic mileage one can get from material. And I think someone like Xenakis

[19] Mordechai Ardon (1896-1992), formerly Max Bronstein, was an Israeli artist of Polish birth. He studied at the Bauhaus from 1920 to 1925.
[20] A painting and a drawing that Wolpe made in 1920 are in the Bauhaus Archiv, Berlin.

is involved with a significant idea and then finds the material. Completely different. It's a completely different level of understanding the nature of abstraction.

AC I follow you there. Wolpe was not an intellectual in the ordinary sense. He thought in terms of aesthetic experience.

MF [pause] Yeah, but one of the problems of him arriving at stature, of him arriving at a certain degree of stature, is that his emphasis on the aesthetic experience ultimately does have to use a technical language. And I don't think that a listener's involved with aesthetic experience in that sense. He's very singular. I think what the listener's involved with is exactly what happens within the technical language without being burdened about the experience, no matter what the experience might be. I think that a lot of times whatever problem he had was that the experience would be a little too literary and personal in terms of its metaphoric adoption to musical language.

Another great story, perhaps the best one, is that Cage, myself, and Stefan were all walking along somewhere, and Stefan, I don't know how it came up, was mentioning his Battle Piece, and he says, "You know, John, one of the movements, the subtitle is that there is 'Too Much Suffering in the World.'" And Cage answered, "Well, Stefan, don't you think that there's precisely just the right amount?" [laughs] Typical Cage remark.[21] And which of course explains those two people. But the fact that Wolpe could mention to John, or have the need to mention to John, that the subtitle of a piece of his is there's too much suffering in the world – to Cage, where one doesn't feel that there's any kind of relation to these kind of humanistic things – show in a sense the fact that one could speak to Cage, and the fact that he had to get John's reaction on that. That kind of humanistic—let's not forget, let's not forget that as we write, you and I, or something. . .

AC He had that populism that came out of his experience in the thirties and the twenties when he was for four years a soldier for the Party.

MC But the populism. . . . I think that the best pieces reflecting the populism was the Palestinian Songs, if you can call that populism.

[21] The concert was a solo recital by David Tudor at Town Hall on March 20, 1951, and the piece in question was Wolpe's *Toccata in Three Parts* (1941), of which the second part is the "Adagio. Too Much Suffering in the World." Cage remembered the occasion this way: "After the concert I was walking along with the composer and he was telling me how the performances had not been quite up to snuff. So I said, 'Well, I enjoyed the music, but I didn't agree with that program note about there being too much pain in the world.' He said, 'What? Don't you think there's enough?' I said, 'I think there's just the right amount.'" *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 93.

AC What about the Saxophone Quartet?

MF Well, I think that on any terms, technical – I think that "If this be my fate"[22] is one of the great proto-Beatle tunes [laughs] written in the twentieth century, if only because of . . . . Well, he had his cake and eat it. He did everything he ever wanted to do in that song. The opposites of the piano accompaniment in relation to that song. Outstandingly beautiful, everything about this song is outstandingly beautiful on every level, on every level whatsoever. It's not a kind of—it's not just a Schubert—it's not just a good song with a good accompaniment. And I think that was it. I think that he did it in that one song, and everything else became, not superfluous, but I think that everything else in a sense could point out that it is a kind of very literary, vocal, words-and-music kind of direction. I'm not making any judgement whether he can bring that populism, the fact that he would use a sax, or that he'd bring in the material in that kind of wonderful, broad kind of material of the Violin Sonata. I don't know. I'm actually much more interested in the later period.

AC Including Enactments?

MF Including Enactments. I'm interested in the two-movement form that he developed. I think that he developed a very interesting two-movement form that works fantastically for him. I don't think anybody could work it as well as he did it. And I'm interested in music In Two Parts, and I'm interested in . . . the String Quartet is a masterpiece. [23] And so my interest tends so to speak to the Palestinian Songs and the best of that particular world then juxtaposed with the later work. And the other work is wonderful stuff. Remember, we wouldn't be able to afford to buy it. [laughs] It's wonderful stuff. It competes beautifully in his whole career without a doubt, but where it will stand in the historical arena is another fight, you know, is another fight.

AC What do you think of his symphony writing? If he had had the time and the money, he would have written a lot more for orchestra, I think. He had so many plans it seems for writing orchestral music. Or do you doubt that?

MF Oh, that's not what I doubt. I think that he did the right thing. His instrumental style, in a sense, would be worth a chapter in the book, because it's . . . One of the things I say in my own

[22] "If it be my fate" was composed in 1938 to a Hebrew poem by the poet Rachel. Wolpe wrote several songs to Hebrew texts while living in Jerusalem (1934-38), which he collected as *Palestinian Songs*.
[23] *In Two Parts for Six Players* (1962), *Piece in Two Parts for Flute and Piano* (1960), *Trio in Two Parts* (1964), and *String Quartet* (1969) are among Wolpe's two-part compositions.

interview in this thing that's coming out, I said, is the only one I could think of that wrote beautiful music, and, when you stop to think of it, hardly any of his music is really beautiful. [laughs] I mean that certainly was not a forte in his music, that kind of thing, that whatever we think of as beautiful. It's absolutely the whole feeling is you go away, the whole feeling is it's absolutely beautiful, and yet there was nothing beautiful about it. Which is another aspect of hearing his music that we don't . . . you know, we hear Alban Berg, we know it's beautiful.

AC But there's a barrier against that kind of instant beauty in Wolpe. He didn't want that.

MF No, and he didn't get it. . .

AC There was something antagonistic in a way about the surface. You had to get through that. It's his fierceness, fierce challenge to the ear.

MF Well, I don't like to make a virtue about anything anybody does, including anything I might ever do. To Ives beautiful music was for sissies or something. So he had a problem, whatever it was. I think what explains his . . . being involved so much in the real world, in the real political world of his times.

AC You think he was.

MF Definitely was! It's not the way a local New York intellectual would be, like I was, or someone like Cage – remote. I think if you want to make a claim for his lack of poetry, then you have to quote T. W. Adorno and that remark of his is, "no more poetry after Auschwitz," if it was Auschwitz, or maybe one of the other camps. But he does have this quote, that it's impossible to write poetry after [24]. . . And I think the fact that Auschwitz for him was in a sense, and the Nazism, and the social ills that was going on even just before the Nazis, their schtick, was that he was at the centre of it.

AC But he wasn't fighting those old battles with you, or with the people around him in the late forties?

MF He wasn't fighting any of the old battle, and I think that he did have to come to terms, I think he did have to come to terms. If your father is dead, you can get him off your back, but you

[24] In his 1949 essay "Cultural Criticism and Society", Theodor Adorno wrote: "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposes intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely."

can't get off your back a younger brother, in terms of sibling rivalry. And I think what happened was that Stefan and who else is there of his generation – actually, who is there of his generation? A very important fact. Who is there of his generation?

AC Very few. And they're mostly over in Europe. There's Krenek.

MF Well, you see, what Krenek didn't do, what Stefan did was that he was a competitor. Krenek felt the fact that he had a success when he was young, and he was married to Schoenberg's daughter, that he was given a crown and he could go and fall asleep with his own ideas for the rest of his life. Wolpe was in the midst of a musical revolution in New York. He was in the midst of the rising young, fabulously talented people coming up in Europe, and he knew it. Krenek never knew it. There's not an ounce in Krenek's music, in things that I've heard of his late style. . . . But nothing existed, nothing happened. It's music where nothing happened. It's the kind of music somebody might write some place in Adelaide, Australia. Nothing happened. But Wolpe is caught up in world events, musical events, and things happened.

AC There was Hindemith too who he was very close to . . .

MF To show you his identification with the avant garde, he once balled me out, very strongly, for never playing him in our concerts in the early fifties. The Cage concerts. He balled me out. He was sore. But he did identify with the younger people, [pause] which certainly most of his students didn't. Ralph [Shapey] didn't, none of his students around him. I don't know what they identified with. They identified not with Wolpe so much, but the tradition which Wolpe came out of. They never identified with his attitudes, and his intellectual openness, and his involvement with other . . . with literature, painting. They heard the Germanic tradition. They heard certain types of processes. They picked up a corner of Stefan's work and they made a life out of it.

AC What was his feeling about Varèse in those days?

MF I think it's a very important relationship. And I talk about it in my interview just briefly. I think it was a very, very important relationship. [very long pause] Actually, in a sense, what I really should do is my homework. I really should analyze the String Quartet. [pause] Oh, they admired each other. They were very fond of each other.

AC But right the way along, right when you knew them in the late forties also?

MF I'm trying to remember time spans here. [long pause] I met Varèse as a kid with Wolpe. I met Varèse at Wolpe's. I always thought that maybe I'd call him [Varèse] up cold and ask him if I could come over and see him. I met him at Wolpe's, no question about it. They were very similar. Stefan didn't have a big sense of humor. I don't know if anybody talks about his humor. He liked Spaß and so did Varèse. They liked a good laugh. And they were both hearty men in Robin Hood's camp. [pause]

You see, Wolpe's going to survive, because I think that America . . . I gave the seminar the other day, a blackboard, we were just tripping in terms of – the kids never know where they want to go. So I said, "Where do you think you can go?" So about every year I get a blackboard and I give a kind of weather report and they feed me information. And it was very interesting, because everybody they gave, I have the establishment over here, and everything was the establishment. The establishment is bigger now. They don't know that the establishment is bigger, you see. But there was a category that we couldn't find for Europe, unless you want to take someone like – there was a marvelous piano concert by Aki Takahashi the other night of all Satie and things they never heard. And they were so impressed, and they wanted to know what happened to Satie.

AC Did Wolpe ever talk about Satie?

MF No.

AC He liked him a lot when he was younger.

MF And that brought on, I'll tell you what happened to Satie and the whole idea that independents couldn't survive in Europe, just couldn't survive the way they survive here. That some of our strongest people today are independents, where do you put them? Like George Crumb. He was a big influence, and yet he is independent really. George Crumb couldn't happen in Europe, essentially. With all the European cliques it couldn't happen. And so Wolpe added to the whole category of very strong independent composers in America. I think that the best think is to push him as an American rather than as a European. That way you'll get a little more mileage, because if you're going to push him as a European, they're going to say, well, what is this in relation to . . . we have this over here, which is what they say.

AC Did Varèse and Wolpe feel at that time that they were really marginal on the outside of the establishment, that they had no sense of belonging? Did you get that sense from Wolpe?

MF Xenakis once said to me, he says, "You and I are one of the few marginal people." But Xenakis is in business for himself over there. He has his own little duchy, so to speak. So you don't have to worry about Xenakis. He takes care of himself over there. Xenakis might be the beginning of a big tradition of independents in Europe, actually, come to think of it. Because unless your country wants to extol you and take you up and make a big thing about you . . . I'm very close to Harrison Birtwistle, he's one of my closest friends. But I always felt that one of the reasons they took Harry up was because he was their equivalent of Berio. We got our own, you know.

AC Did you have the feeling that Stefan was looking on himself as somebody marginal, that he was never going to get recognition. He couldn't have talked about that much, because you said that there was only one remark where he said he didn't have a record or a publisher. But that was the situation. It took him ten applications to get a Guggenheim. He had very little support from his colleagues, it seems.

MF I cannot understand it! New York, New York, my stummus. I'm a New Yorker. It's Philistine city. I mean, New York was never a music town.

AC I don't mean music town, I mean the sort of music community that he would have mattered to.

MF That's what I mean by a music town. I mean how the hell is he going to expect it? Who's going to give it to him? They would give him a few things. They'll give him what he . . . who could give him anything? I mean the people that could give him a few little crumbs, did give it to him, whatever little money to have something copied. Otto Luening did give it to him, or Copland would make a phone call about certain things, and that's all you're going to get in New York. No one cared, no one cared. I studied with Wallingford Riegger in a lousy little apartment he had teaching at the Metropolitan. And we know Bartók. Forget about New York in relation to a concerned constituency. If he was living in London, that never would have happened.

AC But how did he survive? Did he survive on these lessons?

MF Yes, he survived on the lessons and the . . .

AC Because he didn't have a school at this time. He didn't have his Contemporary Music School.[25]

MF I don't think anything really financially materialized in that school. At that time in New York, it wasn't that expensive. In relation to what they knew, it was expensive. Irma was teaching, and he was teaching, and no commissions. Now that I really think about it, what the hell could he have been making? [laughs]

AC It was nothing.

MF So it was a joint income.

AC But who were the other main students at your time? Was it Shapey still, Claus Adam?

MF Yes, Shapey. Claus I don't know. Claus was kind of phasing himself out of composition. It was the beginning of the marvelous success of the [Juilliard] Quartet. And both Bobby Mann and Claus were studying at the same time. And I think Bobby Mann was, in a sense, I don't know to what degree he was committed to writing. There were other people. There was that very nice guy who became a very big Hollywood composer, Kenyon Hopkins, who was there at the time.

AC Elmer Bernstein, was he still there?

MF No, Elmer Bernstein was already successful. So he must have made it from the earlier forties, 'cause I remember that Elmer Bernstein was already doing big movies.

AC How about [Stanley] Applebaum? Did you know him?

MF I knew him. Also knew him from some rock-and-roll giant friends of mine, Leiber and Stoller. He was their arranger for the Coasters. Mike Stoller was studying with Wolpe, and I became friendly with Mike.

AC And Laderman, Ezra Laderman? He was studying there at some point.

MF I didn't know that, believe it or not, I didn't know that. I don't know why. I'll tell you how I heard about Wolpe. I was just a kid out in Queens.[26] I didn't know anybody. A friend of mind—I'm not going to mention his name, because his name is known to some degree – thought very highly of himself and sent a score of his to [Dmitri] Mitropoulos. Mitropoulos saw essentially

[25] Wolpe was director of The Contemporary Music School, which lasted from 1948 to 1952.
[26] Feldman said elsewhere that he began studying with Wolpe when he was seventeen, that is, in 1943 or 1944.

that he was still a student, even though the young man didn't think he was a student, and suggested that he work with Wolpe.[27] I lost my friend, and I was very close to this friend, because he came back and he told me about a visit he had with Wolpe where they just didn't get along at all, anything that Wolpe had to say. And I listened to this conversation very clinically, and I listened to the things that Wolpe said to my friend, and I gave it a little thought, and three days later I called up Wolpe and asked him if I could come and see him. I mean, he sounded to me like a terrific teacher, and I lost a friendship of a young colleague at the time for betraying him. "How could you go to Wolpe after telling how Wolpe insulted me?" But he sounded like a good teacher to me. [laughs] And that was the smartest thing I ever did was to lose that friend and not have that sense of loyalty.

AC Mitropoulos must have respected Wolpe a lot, because they were apparently quite close. He got Mitropoulos to be honorary president of his Contemporary Music School. And then Mitropoulos did The Man from Midian.[28] There must have been something between them that was fairly strong.

MF Stefan was courtin' the wheels. Do you know what two or three years would do, for example, if he was writing, say, elements of his String Quartet at the time he had . . . Look at Varèse's career was based on already a kind of form-style, and Stokowski made Varèse. Stefan had many styles, and in that way he is like a painter. You can't say that the Violin Sonata . . . you can't say that it's not high style. If one didn't know anything about this rug [one of the Anatolian rugs in Feldman's apartment] and just take a little fragment of it, and I would see just a little fragment of it, I would say, hey, that's a long tradition of carpet weaving to make this kind of a rug. I don't have to see the whole rug. You know the tradition by the way it's made. And certainly the earlier pieces, the Violin Sonata of Wolpe, if we just found a fragment of it, you'll know in a sense that it was a kind of a high style of a certain thing. Like a painter, he doesn't incorporate one style into another. He goes, and then there is a change, and then there's a change, and then there's a change. Even Stravinsky, in a sense, always liked to take a little bit from this, a little bit from that – always liked to balance out the different kind of tendencies. I don't think Stefan ever did that. I think what he did was that the work would evolve to a kind of high style, and then it would start from another

[27] Wolpe and Mitropoulos knew each other from Berlin in the early twenties, when both were in the Busoni circle.
[28] Mitropoulos conducted the New York Philharmonic in *The Man From Midian* in November, 1951.

level, then would work to a high style, and then it would start again with new problems and new . . .

AC I have a feeling that his imagery wants to be more and more inclusive, that he wanted to explore the more radical contrasts of imagery and bring them closer in relationship in a given movement. And that he tried to do this more and more economically in the later pieces when he simply couldn't write,[29] so that by those little solo pieces that he makes his shapes so tellingly with so little material.

MF I think essentially because they were more focused on [pause] on more clinical problems.

AC Not with the great social conditions.

MF No. No. I mean Zen didn't make Cage's music. Cage's innovation made Zen. Cage still had to focus on notation and how you're going to present the situation, what question do I ask myself at this particular situation. And has to go ahead and solve a problem. He's not solving philosophy, he's solving a crucial problem.

AC Your own experience of Wolpe and then your experience with Cage in the early fifties, how did that seem, looking back on it, as a very natural progression, or as a big change, as a radical move?

MF Well, my whole situation with Cage is not the same. Cage was not my teacher. If anything, I think I influenced Cage. In fact, a lot of Cage's friends stopped talking to me, because they thought I was a bad influence. When I met Cage, in a sense he was the Cage of the Sonatas-and-Interludes Cage. Or the String Quartet would be perhaps the most important piece of that particular period, when I first met Cage. Cage is another story. Cage is another synthesis of two young people that he met at that time, Boulez and me. That's what the Cage synthesis was – a kind of getting involved with all the parameters. He was kind of proto-Xenakis too, more than proto-serialism. It was like information theory in a way. And then he had to find a way, to find a certain overriding, if not process, how to do things, but at least a little crack in the door how to do it. And all those cracks opened up at one time. A letter from Boulez with – I still have that letter

[29] In 1963 Wolpe was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, which made it very difficult to write down music.

Xeroxed with all the charts – and then John made his own chart of vignettes of material for Music of Changes, and then added other elements to the parameter, like noise, slamming the piano lid, things like that. And then I started my early graph music, which had certain type of implications in terms of not caring too much in terms of where A is in relation to D, essentially, in that it's all the furniture that's left in the room. [. . .]

I just want to say this in passing. Cage had three marvelous things that happened to him. He met two really interesting young men at one time, and then he met Christian Wolff, and Christian Wolff brought him a copy of the I Ching, which Christian's father published. Christian's father was Pantheon. And the combination of Boulez, me, and the I Ching, plus his own thinking, plus everything, plus being Cage, took off. And John quoted at the time, said these remarks, "Show me a new idea and I'll stop everything and start over." And that's exactly what Cage did. I'm not trying to imply . . . influence is one thing, and a slightest little shove is another. All he did was get a little slight little shove. Knowing Cage, I think he would have come to what he did without the I Ching. He's a survivor. Without me, without Boulez, you know. But there was all that shock of recognition and circumstance at that particular time. And he certainly took off.

AC And with Merce Cunningham too, of course, because that was about the same time too.

MF Yes. It was lucky moment for everyone there.

AC Can you shed any light on that so-called happening at Black Mountain College in 1952, when Stefan got so upset about the thing which Cage organized?

MF That's already an historic moment, you know, that's the first happening.

AC Except that Stefan was doing things like this with the Dadas in Berlin in 1920.

MF I doubt it. No, they don't. They always talk about that. They think they did it, but they did its equivalent at the time, whatever its equivalent was. Jesus, I know someone in Italy for the Venice Biennale wanted to get all of the cast of characters and re-enact that first happening at Black Mountain College.

AC Were you there?

MF No. I was never down there. I don't know whose idea it was, and I don't know who was responsible for it, actually. It's documented.

AC Yeah, I know. I think Stefan felt somehow it just didn't have what that premise needed.

MF But the happening was not dada. If anything it was Artaud. John used to refer to theater as Barnum and Bailey, three-ring circus. I don't think they ever really thought of it as dada. It was collage, definitely collage, and it was definitely simultaneity. And of different events. Actually, in a sense, [laughs] it was probably a kind of extension of Schoenberg's idea of independent counterpoint really. Allan Kaprow once told me that his idea for happenings came by way of seeing a roomful of Jackson Pollock's pictures. And now you have to remember, Allan Kaprow was a historian. He has a doctorate. The whole idea, in a sense, that the palette of Pollock is up front . . .

AC But Stefan was so open to that.

MF He was open for it.

AC But he wasn't in that space at that time. There must have been some discontinuity.

MF Of course there was discontinuity.

AC He wasn't interested in that any more. He was trying to control the vision which he was only beginning to get at in Enactments. He was in the middle of Enactments. But you know he describes in his lecture on dada that he gave at Post College what he did in 1920 as a kid. He was eighteen and was chumming around with Hans Richter, Hugo Ball, and Johannes Baader, and these characters. He put on some sort of show which had eight phonographs playing pieces.[30] Did he ever talk to you about this?

MF No.

AC . . . playing marches, waltzes, and symphonies, all at different tempi, and at the same time they had a woman reciting Shakespeare, and she had a hose in her hand and it was dribbling water.

MF The whole point . . . the only difference was with Black Mountain is that there were interesting people doing these things, you see. I think that Stefan saw it as dada. I think that the more American-born people saw it really as collage. And I think that there's a difference. Because then that means that you have to notate it. John Cage was very much involved when he wrote his

[30] "Lecture on Dada (1962)," *The Musical Quarterly* 72/2: 202-215 (1986).

own theater piece in the early fifties, a few years after that, is that he has to decide what information does he want, then to be permissive with. Also, in a sense, he developed a kind of rhythmic structure where you have to do the action, say, within a minute or two minutes, I don't remember exactly the time. So, actually, in a sense, he's matting it, he's framing the situation. Even his silent piece was organized in terms of lengths, as symbolic time periods, because David [Tudor] will put the keyboard down and take it up during that.[31] And I don't think that was dada. I was at the first performance in Woodstock in New York in a beautiful theater. And it was beautiful. And even all the kinds of artists at that time in Woodstock were from another environment. They were representational artists. They didn't buy any avant-garde schtick. They liked the experience very much. It was like taking a photograph of something that they ordinarily wouldn't focus on, opening up a window to something. And what he really did for the first time, just framed in a formal way the environment. And it was not dada. It was collage. His multi-radio piece, which is dedicated to me actually, was not dada. It was a collage of various sound sources, beautifully notated in terms of possibilities of filigree of what thing could happen. And just in using the kind of fortuitous element of the known parameters, there's not unknown. In this kind of music you're going to hear jazz, you're going to hear this, you're going to hear static, you're going to hear the dial turn. This was all calculated into the orchestration of something like that. Stefan thought of these things as dada aspects, and they weren't that. Stefan was not the only one. Everyone thought of it as that. I never thought of it as dada. I might not have liked it. Collage is easier than actually just putting it on a painting. Any kind of collage. [Gets up and fetches an artwork.] Here's a collage out of a guy, out of a De Kooning, Esteban Vicente in the early fifties. It is a little De Kooningesque, but it is absolutely sensational. But he could never paint it.

AC I do collages too.

MF Well, try painting it, as you know.

AC I know. It's impossible. It's a different quality.

[31] The piece is, of course, Cage's 4'33". For a discussion of the implications of the silent piece for aesthetic experience, see my "The Intent of the Musical Moment: Cage and the Transpersonal," in *Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry & Art*, ed. David Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 62-112.

MF It's another thing. I think collage is easier and more effective for instant results. . . Pollock did maybe only one collage in his life, and then it was just on glass.

AC And Stefan was trying to do something much more difficult at that time. I guess that's why he just didn't feel that good. Stefan had those marvelous paintings which he had no insurance for. That was too bad.

MF How much music was lost in that [fire]?

AC Very little of consequence. It's taken us years to figure out, what with all the mess. It's amazing how little music was actually destroyed, but it has taken so long to figure out the fact.

MF Do you think he thought in German, or did he write it in English.

AC In English, no question. But when he wrote for Darmstadt, of course, he wrote it in German. [end of interview]