Morton Feldman: Darmstadt Lecture 1984

Feldman's String Quartet No. 2 *was given its European premiere by the Kronos Quartet at the Darmstadt International Summer Course for New Music on 25 July 1984. The morning after the performance, Feldman gave the following lecture. The text was originally transcribed by Ken Muller and Hanfried Blume. It has been annotated by Chris Villars, and also altered in several places, where the meaning seemed unclear, by reference to the alternative, unattributed, transcription published by Kevin Volans in his book,* Summer Gardeners: Conversations with Composers *(Durban: Newer Music Edition, 1985) pp 107-121. This lecture is reproduced here by kind permission of the Estate of Morton Feldman. (Last revision date: 19/1/2016)*

If you talk in as many classrooms as I do, it has less of an educational aspect and becomes more like Las Vegas, so you'll have to forgive me if I appear comfortable.

An interesting friend of mine defines tragedy as when two people are right. So you all can relax and enjoy your tragic position. And don't take it out on me. And growing up with that particular problem, it will either break you or make you. When I was a kid, there was a big controversy in America between Nicholas Nabokov (Stravinsky) and René Leibowitz (Schoenberg), and it was an awful situation.[1] I was like an orphaned child with divorced and separated parents. I loved both of them. I didn't take Schoenberg's position that both of us can't be right; one of us has to be right. They were both right.

And I think it's a tragic situation, perhaps in this part of the world – and I told [Heinz-Klaus] Metzger that it was his teacher's fault, Adorno, with the hatchet job he did on Stravinsky[2] – and speaking to a lot of students, not only here (remember, I go from one classroom and blackboard to another), their lack of familiarity and interest in Stravinsky is very, very sad. And I would tell every young composer in this room that without Stravinsky in your life, you're living in a peculiar type of exile. Without Stravinsky in your life, you have no feeling for instruments.

OK, let's get specifically to the piece, the second *String Quartet* last night. And I want to tell you the way I work and the way I think, a little bit about it. And my own confusion, linguistically, and in every other sense of the word, between terminology and what things really mean.

Is the young woman who was unhappy about not getting a more precise answer about tonality in the room?

From the audience: She isn't here.

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[1] Composer Nicholas Nabokov, a close friend and compatriot of Igor Stravinsky, was an opponent of Schoenbergian serialism. In the late 1940s he engaged in a vitriolic dispute with René Leibowitz on the relative merits of the two composers.

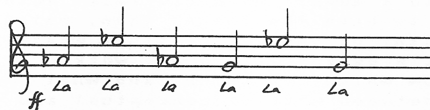
[2] In his book, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1949), Theodor W. Adorno launched a violent attack on Stravinsky and his music.

Is she here? (She'll never admit it if she is.) Oh, there you are! [*laughter*] It would be more interesting if you're here. [*laughter*]

I want to quote two people. Lord Byron: 'And who is to define the definition.'[3] And then my friend the painter Willem de Kooning, who was a very interesting person. He said: 'History does not influence me: I influence history.'[4]

So in talking about something like tonality now, things have changed so much, you see. It was like talking about airplanes. Now in Lindbergh's time, one of the most exciting things you could ever see was going down to Washington and seeing the *Spirit of St Louis,* with only a few little gauges on the dashboard.[5] It was an incredible thing to see. So at that time you could talk about airplanes.

Very important for all my younger colleagues is to find out how people work because many times you're living in a fantasy. For example, you think I'm loose. I might have been stricter than the people you thought were strict. The people who you think are radicals might really be conservatives. The people who you think are conservative might really be radical. I remember some young man working in Salabert[6] some years ago wanted to get Takemitsu and myself together. And so he had this nice dinner, and he had a radio on, very quietly, and then it got louder and louder, and then we heard [Feldman sings the tune]:



and he wanted to turn it off, and Takemitsu and I jumped up, 'Leave it on! Leave it on!' He looked at us, it was Sibelius. At the *cheapest moment*, we got excited! It wasn't the opening of the *Fourth Symphony ...*[7]

I remember a graduate student of mine – I'm raving about the *Fourth Symphony* of Sibelius, and he says, 'You really like that?'

I remember once we had Aaron Copland talk, and all the students were surprised at his radical mind. They couldn't put it together with what they thought his music was. You see? And things like that.

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[3] This quotation is more usually given – including elsewhere by Feldman himself – as: 'Who will explain the explanation?'
[4] Willem de Kooning: 'The past does not influence me; I influence it.' Quoted by John Cage in his essay 'History of experimental music in the United States', collected in *Silence*, p. 67.
[5] Single-engined monoplane used by Charles Lindbergh for his historic first non-stop flight between New York and Paris in 1927. Lindbergh later donated it to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, where it was put on display.
[6] Éditions Salabert: French music publishing house.
[7] The transcription of what Feldman sang at this point, reproduced here from Kevin Volan's *Summer Gardeners* (1985), suggests that it was from the last movement of Sibelius's *Fifth Symphony*.

Well, my favourite story that Takemitsu told me was about Xenakis doing an electronic piece in a Tokyo studio. After it was all over, they were in a room, and they were playing it there, and Xenakis, was walking back and forth in his marvellous fitted jacket, and he said: 'I'll take this; I'll take that; I want to put this with that; I want this here with that piece there.' That's the way he put the piece together, as an assemblage, you see. There immediately we get involved with a certain interesting terminology, assemblage, as opposed to a word like composition. And there I mentioned it, words. You must believe me that I try not to give anything a name.

Many years ago, I met a very young pianist, Frederic Rzewski, and he said, 'Was a piece of mine available?' He said, 'You know that canon for two pianos?' Canon, me, write a canon!? Oh yes, that free-durational piece. It's a canon! To tell you the truth, if I'd thought it was a canon, I would have committed suicide![8] [*laughter*]

I don't call a thing by a name. For example, if I'm repeating something, I don't say I'm repeating something. In fact, I don't let my students use repeat signs. I say something might happen right at the end of the measure.

What is my music? What is the piece last night? The piece last night is involved with two aspects which I feel are less conceptual and more realistic. I'm interested in realistic things, actually. We'll talk about concepts.

So I try not to give something a name. That's very, very, very important for me.

Actually, I'm really addressing myself to the younger, less experienced composers, and I'm trying to convey that for those who are using models – and how can you not use models – you have to understand that since two Greek characters many, many years ago would have an argument together about those two points of view – it was the conceptual and the perceptual – and the whole history of our thinking and our understanding has to do with either a fight against the both, or the amalgamation of the both, and is both, or some stand-off, whatever.

But if we take Henri Bergson seriously, he reminds us that there are essentially only two ways of expressing ourselves; one is conceptually, and the other by way of images.[9] Einstein would always need an image. The DNA formula came out of an image. And the character in the sense that made that image talked about his students trying to arrive at problems mathematically, and they get into a mess. He talked about how important to him it is to have the image, and then – being that he's a great mathematician, of course – he describes what it is mathematically.[10]

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[8] Feldman's *Two Pianos* (1957) consists of a single score to be played simultaneously on two pianos. The pitches and their sequence are fixed, but their durations are free. The two pianists start off together and then gradually diverge as they make individual decisions about the durations of notes.

[9] See, for example, the opening pages of Bergson's *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), where he contrasts images and concepts, and highlights the failure of both to express the nature of our inner life.

[10] The 'character' referred to here was probably James Watson, one of the four co-discoverers of the molecular structure of DNA, who wrote a popular account of the discovery in his book, *The Double Helix* (1968).

So that's essentially how I work. I don't know which is which, and what is what. There's a confusion between the conceptual and the images.

What's interesting about images is that you can't say, 'I'm going to make an image', unless it's programmatic, and that's why eighty-five per cent of the world's music is programmatic. You just can't say, 'I'm going to make an image, an instrumental image.' Try and think of the history of contemporary music. At the beginning of the twentieth century, how many instrumental images do you find? Do we ever get together what an instrumental image is? Say the opening of the Stravinsky *Violin Concerto*, the slow movement. Try and locate it. Think of the high tessitura registers. You remember the low flute cutting in at the bottom? If you don't remember, and if you don't know what an image is, you've got a problem.

Now how I work is this way, especially for the past twelve years, and it's not original. There are many, many people who work this way, but in other fields. Samuel Beckett, not in everything he does, but in a lot of things he does. He would write something in English, translate it into French, then translate that thought back into the English that conveys that thought. And I know he keeps on doing it. He wrote something for me in 1977,[11] and I got it. I'm reading it. There's something peculiar. I can't catch it. Finally I see that every line is really the same thought said in another way. And yet the continuity acts as if something else is happening. Nothing else is happening. What you're doing in an almost Proustian way is getting deeper and deeper saturated into the thought.

What I do then is, I translate, say something, into a pitchy situation. And then I do it where it's more intervallic, and I take the suggestions of that back into another kind of pitchiness – not the original pitchiness, and so forth, and so on. Always retranslating and then saying, now let's do it with another kind of focus.

The word here is focus. Under suggestion, through another kind of – I don't like the word – variation. But I have to say something. The thought said in another way. And many times another language. The language of another register, the language of another colour. And I want to use 'differentiation' for those things, you see.

Then after all, you can't take instruments seriously enough. To me they're an accommodation. I mean, Moses didn't give us instruments. Oh, I said something very funny. I was talking about Moses the other night, and instead of saying the Ten Commandments, I said the Twelve Commandments. [*laughter*] You can't tell jokes. I lost my thought.

Then another aspect will come in. The parameters are always floating. The focus is always floating. It's like a light here, then a light here, then a light there. Because you can't have everything, unless you're writing a work in a sense with that focus, and then you might have something terrific. Another colourful friend of mine, the late, wonderful American painter, Barnett Newman, once said, 'If you want everything in a work of art, what you're left with is everything.' If you don't have a friend who's a painter, you're in trouble.

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[11] The short text *Neither*, which Feldman used as the libretto for his opera of the same name.

For example, I could think of a term 'voice leading', could become a focus. Voice leading. Then I would say, do without voice leading. Or I would set up my own obstacle course.

I have ideas that I throw away in two minutes that the poorest one in this room would give me at least ten thousand Marks for. And the reason I do that is because I don't want to be influenced with my own thought. That might divert me from the focus of that moment. But I don't think that that moment is essentially a kind of a one-night stand with an idea. I wouldn't say that it's a short-term commitment. I just have to be focused and doing my best at that particular moment because it's a very serious operation.

There are a lot of questions to ask, and some of the most important questions are: your attitude as a composer. Schoenberg once wrote in a letter that some days he gets up in the morning, and he can't even do a simple little exercise. Composing is so difficult. To write something lousy is so difficult. And a lot of the difficulty is not so much whether your idea is right or wrong. It doesn't make a difference what the idea is. Chekhov once said that even a lie leads to salvation.[12] Anything – it doesn't make a difference what you do. Number one, you have to believe in it. Number two, you have to be absolutely focused on it.

So I don't like to talk about concepts, and I don't like to talk about ideas. Twelve-tone is not a concept. It's a method of working with twelve tones. And something always goes wrong in understanding how you're going to work with those twelve tones.

Webern came for a lesson. The minute he left the lesson and got on a trolley car to go from one part of Vienna to another, everything was all screwed up. [*laughter*] Schoenberg writes how naive Webern is, in his concept of the twelve tones. That he uses it like a lead. But the minute he got on a trolley car, and Vienna is small, it goes wrong.

In that sense, everything you do, and everything I do, I feel is essentially not mine. Everything is a found object. I mean, I didn't invent the major 6th. I didn't invent a minor 7th. When I hear these things going, how I use them. Watching these found objects. Everything is a found object. Even something that I invent is a found object. You're dealing with found objects. You're all amateur Duchamps, and you don't know it. And in realizing that, you must lose your vested interest in ideas.

I'm a European intellectual. I'm not an American iconoclast! And it's very, very interesting. Look at my background. When I was a young boy, who was my teacher? My teacher was a fantastic woman. She went to school with Scriabin's second wife. She was her girlfriend. She studied with Busoni in Berlin. That was my piano teacher.[13] She taught the Czar's children. I had a piano teacher that taught the Czar's children! [*laughter*] She'd tell me everything about Busoni. Certain

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[12] For example, in his short story 'The lady with the dog', Chekhov develops the idea that lies – in this case, a husband deceiving a wife and a wife deceiving a husband – can be the basis of truer relationships, leading to a kind of salvation for the characters involved.
[13] Madame Vera Maurina Press.

attitudes. That was history for me. Certain attitudes people had.

Who was my first teacher? Wallingford Riegger studied in Leipzig. And he would go over the Beethoven. He loved the variation movement in the 'Eroica'. He would always forget that he was raving to me about it because it's as if he developed a senility about the variation movement. And he'd take out that bounded volume from Leipzig with that marvellous paper, and I remember I didn't believe it, where the clef went the other way, you know.[14] [*laughter*] Incredible. The other way. I thought this was the way it was really done.

And sometimes when I'm really depressed and I'm working fifteen or twenty hours and falling asleep, I make that, and I have a little laugh, and I wake up, and then I put in my bass clef the wrong way. That was my teacher. The first twelve-tone composer in America. Never talked to me about twelve-tones.

I wrote a modal little piece when I was 14 years old I wrote a modal little melody and an elegant piano accompaniment, and I put it in my little briefcase, and Riegger says, 'Morty, could you leave it here? I'd like to show it to Henry Cowell.' He wasn't interested in the fact whether my music was chromatic or not.

But before I forget it, there's a charming little story about Stravinsky and John Cage. John Cage got very friendly with Stravinsky in Stravinsky's last days, and Stravinsky didn't know his background, and he asked John who he had liked as a young man, and John said, 'Schoenberg'. And Stravinsky said, 'Why?' And John said, 'Because he's chromatic.' And Stravinsky said 'But I am too!' And of course he was chromatic for those days.

Living a life without Stravinsky. His half-step modulation. I still use it. No one could go into a half-step like Stravinsky. It's sensational.

OK, we're on John Cage and Schoenberg. Look at my background: John Cage. Did Boulez study with Schoenberg? No. Anybody in Paris study with Schoenberg at that time? Anybody teaching in Darmstadt studied with Schoenberg? ... John Cage *studied* with Schoenberg. And that's why his work is continual variation. His whole life is based on the teachings of Schoenberg, gone another way.

From the audience: What was Leibowitz's connection with Schoenberg? Was he a student or not? Was he –

He was a pain in the neck. [*laughter*] Even his son-in-law, Krenek, was a pain in the neck. Schoenberg was very annoyed with Krenek because of terms like linear counterpoint. What does he mean with linear counterpoint? There's no such thing. What does he mean, linear counterpoint?

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[14] There are two versions of the bass clef notation: the now ubiquitous version that curls clockwise, and an older version that curls anti-clockwise. It was apparently this older version that Feldman first came across in Riegger's luxury facsimile edition of Beethoven's 'Eroica' symphony.

Very annoyed with linear counterpoint.

OK, Schoenberg. So we had Riegger, my first teacher, right? Stefan Wolpe, a Berliner, studied with Webern. Since I was 18 years old I saw Varèse at least once a week. He was a friend of Romain Rolland, Debussy.

So what I'm really trying to say is how do you represent history? How close to a model do you move? How much is really needed? What are the leaps that you yourself could make? How have you used the model? What questions do you use about the model?

Jackson Pollock, he had this marvellous summer home, and I was invited there for a weekend, and all he had was books on Michelangelo. And what he liked about Michelangelo was the drawings, the unending rhythm. Like his *Autumn Rhythm* [1950], if you know that. That's a leap. That unending rhythm. That incessant, unending rhythm that you find. And that's a leap. I once went to the Metropolitan with Mark Rothko, and we'd look at a Rembrandt painting and the way Rembrandt bleeds to the edges. Take a look at Rothko, the way he bleeds to the edges. That's a leap.

Or mood. A certain type of mood that is transfixed on the canvas. Fixed onto the canvas, in the sense that one might get from Piero della Francesca. That's a mood. An historical mood. And so forth and so on. An atmosphere of Schubert. When we had the rehearsal in Toronto [for the premiere of the *String Quartet No. 2*], and I walked in, and I wanted to convey the mood of the piece to the musicians I said to the marvellous Kronos Quartet, 'Well', I said to them, 'play it like *Death and the Maiden*.'[15] And they played. That's it. That kind of hovering, as if you're in a register you'd never heard before. That's one of the magics of Schubert.

To give you something in a register you all tinkle with, and it sounds terrific, and you hit that register, you'll make an image of that register, you'll focus into that register; you hear the notes in that register, and it's some place. Where is it? You go to the piano and you can't find it. That sense of place. [*hums a tune*] Where is it? Fantastic composing.

Another very close friend of mine that I learned perhaps more about art and attitudes from than from anybody else was somebody connected with the Bauhaus as a young man. He went to the Bauhaus. He was quite a character. He was a visionary and architect, by the name of Freddy Kiesler.[16] And I met Kiesler on a Village street one day, I was about 25, 24, and he said, 'I'm just coming back from a big architectural department in Texas.' And he tells this story. He said, 'I went into this tremendous room, and on every desk there was an electric sharpener. So all the kids there were sharpening their pencils.' Kiesler went, and he sat down at a desk, and he took out his old Viennese penknife, and he started to sharpen a pencil. And he said to them, 'All you did was sharpen a pencil.' He said, 'I just had an idea for a building.' [*laughter*]

[15] Franz Schubert, *String Quartet No. 14* (1824), known as 'Death and the Maiden' after the set of variations on his song of the same name which make up the second movement.
[16] Frederick Kiesler, architect and designer (1890 - 1965).

I don't think I ever heard anything interesting from an American in New York. But you have to know what New York was like at that time. There were all these emigrants and refugees from Europe. Mondrian was there. He affected the whole climate. Max Ernst was there. Although not necessarily in New York. He was out West. Léger was living there. And then those really classy surrealists. Very important to the intellectual attitudes of New York in 1947, 1948, 1949. Very important was André Breton. And John Cage's connection as a young man coming from New York to the West Coast was in that particular world. Very, very interesting people.

The whole European intelligentsia dominated. Some of them felt that in the sense that they came from very autocratic backgrounds, like Albers, that created a kind of place somewhat like the Bauhaus – Black Mountain College. And you just think of this Bohemian place with this kind of very proper man, and he once told John Cage that he thought that he went too far. In other words, he was too permissive at Black Mountain College, because of the nonauthoritarian background, you see. And Yale University became a fantastic school for young painters. Many famous painters came out of Yale, only because Albers had such a marvellous attitude about a kind of laissez faire and not trying to be doctrinaire and make it like one school, a one-concept school.[17]

There's a marvellous book by Stendhal on Napoleon[18], and I always remember the opening line. He said, 'I'm writing this book to refute a lie.' Not that anybody was lying about Napoleon, and so he went and wrote this book. And I'm kind of like that in the sense that because you might speak German, and you're Goethe, and have certain ideas about culture or European civilization, I want you to drop it. [*hesitant laughter*] And not have that feeling that you're so to speak, in possession of the truth. I'm not talking about Darmstadt. I'm talking about the fact that you're Europeans, and you have mainstream interests and ideas. It's very important to drop it. And instead of thinking of concepts, ask questions that are more flexible.

Another very interesting man, the father of cybernetics, of the computer, had a marvellous phrase. Norbert Wiener: 'hardening of the categories'.[19] You know hardening of the arteries? Hardening of the categories. And that's what happens. They get very hard. Which gets us, believe it or not, to why I use the spelling, the more microtonal spelling in the second quartet. The hardening of the distance, say between a minor 2nd. When you're working with a minor 2nd as long as I've been, it's very wide. I hear a minor 2nd like a minor 3rd almost. It's very, very wide. [*laughter*] So that perception of hearing is a very interesting thing. Because, conceptually you are not hearing it, but perceptually, you might be able to hear it.

So it depends on how quickly or slowly that note is coming to you, like McEnroe.[20] I'm sure that

[17] Colour-field painter Josef Albers was Chairman of the Art Department at Yale University from 1950 to 1960.
[18] Stendhal, *A Life of Napoleon* (1818). The translation by Roland Gant published in 1956 by The Rodale Press, London, starts with the line: "I am writing this life of Napoleon to refute a slander." (p7)
[19] This expression does not seem to be used in Norbert Wiener's major works. It was however regularly used by Marshall McLuhan. Perhaps Feldman had confused the two here.
[20] John McEnroe, World Number 1 professional tennis player, at the peak of his career around the time of Feldman's lecture.

he sees that ball coming in slow-motion. And that's the way I hear that pitch. It's coming to me very slowly, and there's a lot of stuff in there. But I don't use it conceptually. That's why I use the double flats. People think they're leading tones. I don't know. Think what you want.

But I use it because I think it's a very practical way of still having the focus of the pitch. And after all, what's sharp? It's directional, right? And a double sharp is more directional.

But I didn't get the idea conceptually from music at all. I got the idea from *Teppiche*, rugs. Walter [Zimmermann] already told you about my interest in *Teppiche*. But one of the most interesting things about a beautiful old rug in natural vegetable dyes is that it has 'abrash'. 'Abrash' is that you dye in small quantities. You cannot dye in big bulks of wool. So it's the same, but yet it's not the same. It has a kind of micro-tonal hue. So when you look at it, it has that kind of marvelous shimmer which is that slight gradation. I also got my feeling of doubling and how I want to double, or how I want to hear a certain note, from music as well, of course, from my ears. But also from something that's very, very beautiful in that *Teppich*, rug. If you want a very deep blue, you cannot get it on the first dye. It has to be re-dyed, over and over again. And the whole idea of someone doing it outdoors where I know how long it took her to re-dye and re-dye because she was very fussy on the timbre about her dye is something that influenced me.

Now getting back to the timbre, another thing I want to mention to my young colleagues: 'Know thy instrument!' Know thy instrument better than you know yourselves. It's very, very important. And one of the interesting things that helped me write this piece was another focus: a little more what I would feel is a more matching relationship between the instrument and the pitch, its timbre and the register it's presented in. And that's very, very important. I would feel that the late Webern was a very bad influence in that sense, and it's a little disconcerting because the matching of his colours, for example, in the *Six Pieces for Orchestra* cannot be better. Faultless! Sensational! But when he became more conceptual and had an idea that he was going to use a saxophone for a cantus firmus –

From the audience: Why not?

No, that's not the function of instruments. Because you don't need it; you don't have to write something as crazy as Opus 24 [*Concerto for Nine Instruments* (1934)]. You don't need the double basses and the piccolo to tell you about a few notes. And he doesn't need it in Opus 28 [*String Quartet* (1938)], which is a magnificent quartet. It's a magnificent piece. One of my favourite pieces. So you don't need it. Why would one feel that he has to use these instruments? I don't know. I just don't understand. I'm confused.

I mean pitch is a gorgeous thing. If you have a feeling, a tactile feeling for the instrument, what you can do with just your finger – something I learned from my teacher that taught the Czar's children. The way that she would put her finger down, in a Russian way, just the finger. The lightness of the finger. And produce a B flat, and you wanted to faint. [*laughter*] When she'd sit down and show me how to play – I'll do it in slow motion. [*MF plays a few notes on the piano*] Now when she'd do that, a B and a D, now look at that marvellous registration. I'd faint. [*laughter*] Again that's a leap

in learning what is the twentieth century.

That's why I don't like electronic music. I think pitch is too beautiful for that electronic sound, to get near it, too beautiful to be played on an accordion. [*laughter*]

So if we want to have a look at history, let's forget about concepts. Concepts come and go. They're like the planets in the universe.

From the audience: But what do you think if you had –

It's not the question time, and if you're coming to Buffalo, you'll have plenty of time to talk to me. [*laughter*]

Same questioner: I'm not sure I'll come.

OK, then talk. [*laughter*]

Same questioner: If you had nothing else than an accordion, on what would you play then?

Play on your skull. I don't care. But listen to me, will you? Listen. I'm saying to make a leap. What is our tradition? What do we have? I want to tell you what I feel is our tradition, I am saying our Western tradition. I think if we leave it we're slumming, it's like me going to Harlem. [*laughter*] In fact, I don't even feel I'm in the West here. The tuning is too high. [*laughter*] I feel I'm in some underdeveloped country with some crazy –

From the audience: You are! [*laughter*]

I was in Vienna, and I heard my music, and I didn't recognize it, it was so high-tech. [*laughter*] What I'm really trying to say is this: instead of the twelve-tone as a concept, I'm involved with all the eighty-eight notes. I have a big, big world there.

I remember in the '60s when I was seeing a lot of Stockhausen, who was in New York, and he says to me, 'Morty, you mean to tell me that every time you have to choose a note, you have to choose it out of the eighty-eight notes?' So I looked at him, and I said, 'Karlheinz, it's easier for me to find a note on the piano and handle it (the choice of the note) than to handle one woman.' [*laughter*] To be married, or to have one girlfriend, is more complicated than to find notes. I hear them. Of course, maybe you don't hear them. Maybe you didn't know that was music. Maybe you thought music was words without music. I don't know. Talk without music, concepts without hearing. I don't know. Even John Cage said to me recently, 'Morty, you mean to tell me you hear all that?' And I said, 'No, I write it down to hear it.' And he said, 'Well, I understand that.' [*laughter*]

So actually when, say, I write it down to hear it, we get to another parameter. There are very few of you who see it. More and more, you're all involved in how to get your notes, which I understand it is like how to make a living. [*laughter*] So there's an anxiety. How do I get my notes? There are

other things besides notes, of course. Registration. What's that? I would say that if I were forced to confess the one thing ... I hate to make hierarchical statements because the hierarchy is, *alles zusammen*. I'm serious! Everything together ... In fact, I can't hear a note unless I know its instrument. I can't hear a note to write it down unless I know immediately its register. I can't write a note unless I know its suggested shape in time. But that's another aspect in the sense that I retranslate. Once I hear it in the terms of rhythmic shapes, almost in a kind of Stravinsky way; that is, the beat in relation to the meter. Sometimes I hear it where it's just a kind of overall durational block, where it's almost a kind of a cubist block. And I'm dissecting the time.

That's translation. Beat in relation to the meter. It's as if one minute I'm working in inches, and the next minute I'm working in centimetres, and the next minute I'm working in millimetres. And then I put them all together, and then I just use two, and then I just use one, and then I just go into inches for example. And I use that very much as a kind of rhythmic energy. And then I'm looking for, I'm really just hoping for, I'm panning for gold.

A term I like that Freud used ... I don't think of myself as a composer, or have an obsession with professionalism. De Kooning again, 'I work; other people call it art.' And I have that kind of attitude.

But where was I?

From the audience: Freud.

Freud's great remark: he never referred to himself as a scientist. He always called himself an adventurer.[21] I always liked that. Because I'm an adventurer. An interesting idea, isn't it?

I've spoken to a few of you here and a very, very serious problem is that you don't know how to consult for criticism. You don't know how to study with anybody. You bring something, you want to get some opinion, you get some opinion, you immediately don't want to hear it. And so it's overly defensive, and then you realize you're walking on eggs. And remember, I'm saying this and being a little rough sometimes.

I was invited to ... Well, let's say the kids weren't good enough to get into Julliard – the Oberlin Conservatory. And just before I walked in to give my criticism, the chairman walked over to me and said, 'Morty, we're walking on eggs here.' I said, 'I understand.' So then a young fellow had a tape and played a flute piece. And the piece, like anybody would like, a sweet piece, starts low, builds up high. You might not go that high C like in *Density*[22] and then you come down, and that's what this fellow did. And then I kind of used it. I got turned on with the idea, and I said, 'Isn't it interesting, the whole idea of going up and coming down.' I said, 'Can anyone think of pieces that go this way, like a V, start high and go down?' The fellow walked out of the room. [*laughter*] He

[21] 'I am actually not at all a man of science, not an observer, not an experimenter, not a thinker. I am by temperament nothing but a conquistador – an adventurer, if you want it translated – with all the curiosity, daring, and tenacity characteristic of a man of this sort.' Sigmund Freud, *Letter to Wilhelm Fliess* (1 February 1900).
[22] Edgard Varèse, *Density 21.5* for solo flute (1936).

was insulted. It’s interesting. Do you know any pieces that start high and go down? Don’t write it! [*laughter*]

Now as far as the pitches and the notes, I would say that the second *String Quartet*, intervallically, is essentially an interest in the minor 2nd and the major 2nd. Those three notes. I like it that way because I could – in a sense – divide the octave better.

As far as why the piece is so long, or why I’m writing long pieces ... In fact, I could find some very interesting, either social idea, or whatever: I’m tired of the bourgeois audience; the audience is for four movements. I mean, I could say that. But I think the reason I write long pieces is that I have the time and the money to write long pieces. [*laughter*] That’s what they asked Henry Moore. They said, ‘Why are these things so big?’ ‘When I was a young man, I didn’t have any money’, he said. ‘Soon as I would be able to afford it,’ he said, ‘I really wanted to produce things big and send them to the foundry. And give them real shape.’ So it’s all a question of economics.

Sometimes it’s no good to get money. For example, there was a great painter, Franz Kline. And even De Kooning early pictures. They didn’t have any money. They didn’t have any money at all. And so they used cheap house paint and it had a great look. It didn’t have an educated look.

You have no idea. There are so many things working for you. The sound of a violin is educated ... You have no idea of all the work that’s gone in before you even write. That’s part of our assemblage in Western civilization. Things are handed to us on a silver platter. We don’t even know it. We think it’s raw materials. I’d stop writing music unless I had a beautiful piano. I wouldn’t be interested unless I had a fantastic violin. To me, that’s Western civilization. Perfected instruments. The chromatic scale is to me Western civilization. All the other things, as I said, were satellites, planets on our way to the grave.

OK, *genug* [enough]. And now maybe ten, fifteen minutes of questions.

I would like to give you something technical. But it’s a question of words. I like words. Like tell me, what’s the chromatic scale? It’s like saying to somebody, if I said ‘Look, you’ve got the chromatic scale.’ My father said to me, ‘Morty. I’m going to give you what my father gave to me, the world.’ [*laughter*] You don’t want the world.

What you want is money for a house. You want to go to Darmstadt. What good is Darmstadt if you don’t have the money to go to it? So you don’t want the world. You might not even want Darmstadt. [*laughter*] You want the money to get to Darmstadt. [*laughter*]

From the audience: Can you imagine you didn’t have any money to get away from it? [*laughter and applause*]

See what a piano means to me? I saw that glass on the piano immediately. My reflex took the glass off the piano. See that? It’s not because I’m middle-class. It’s because I love the piano!

From the audience: How about the violin? You can't put a glass on the violin.

You're right. You know how crazy concepts are, speaking of violins? I did a wonderful concert in Padua with Aki Takahashi. We did some two piano pieces of mine. And we're sitting in a little restaurant afterwards. And there was a nice young man sitting there, and I thought he was friends of the people that invited us, but he's just a student who came along from the university there and sat down with us. And I asked him about himself, 'Who are you?' And he said that he's writing a long paper. I said, 'What's it on?' Get this! He wants to show with diagrams and measurements that the violin was only made for man's hand. [*laughter*]

I notice that even here – and I'm saying this in a humorous way – even people I like very much, there's something when you start talking about your concepts, something happens. You hear it in the background. [*MF hums a tune pathetically*] And a look comes into the eye, like a Jehovah's Witness. [*laughter*] I mean, if you want to be modish, concepts are out of style. They're based on the '50s or '60s, and they're usually misunderstood. And they're usually other people's concepts.

From the audience: Excuse me, I came to hear about your *String Quartet*, and I've heard precious little about it. This is supposed to be a question hour which is not even a question hour.

You're not nice. [*laughter*] I wouldn't answer anything you asked me. You're horrible! You're hostile!

Same questioner: Oh come, buy me a drink and then you'll get to know me better. [*laughter*]

I don't want to get to know you at all! You see, I actually can't give you that kind of information you want. When I sit down and write a piece, I'm in thought. And as I'm moving, I'm focusing from one thought to another. And the whole idea of being in thought is to find the right kinds of notation at that moment that presents that thought.

How can I talk about my work? I'm intensely involved as I do it. And the minute I draw the double-bar line and I wake up the next morning, I hardly remember anything about it. It's over. A piece doesn't live when you finish it as a composer. When you draw the double-bar line, the piece is ended, finished. The piece is dead. I don't want to be nostalgic. You know, I'm not a person who goes around and says, 'my piece'. So I spoke about certain basic, general attitudes. I was talking about Beckett, and now I'm doing this. And those are analogies. It seems that they didn't give sufficient information.

From the audience: Well, I found that you threw up some very interesting concepts, in a sort of jumbled style you use.

I keep no sketches. Most of the time I write in ink. And I don't write in ink because I feel the work is 'ex cathedra'. I write in ink because it is a way of telling me how concentrated I am. That is, if I start using my eraser, or if I start changing things, I get up and I have breakfast. I'm not concentrated. I thought I was concentrated. I've got no plans for the day, but I put in a day's work.

And that's an intuitive feeling. I might work around the clock. I might work ten hours, fifteen hours. I might work two hours. I have to feel I did a day's work, that I shouldn't go on. But I don't leave the house. I'm waiting.

Another strategy I have to compose, which might mean nothing to you, but without that advice, I never would have become a composer. Again, it might mean nothing to you.

When I met John Cage, I asked John how he works, the practical elements of how he works. I asked him what kind of pen he used. It was through John Cage that I learned about a great German pen, the Rapidograph.[23] Before, I didn't know it. We didn't have that particular type of precision pen at that time in New York. I looked. What kind of ruler does the man use? What kind of an eraser does he use? If you would notice my early graph music, three graphic pieces, he copied it. It's in his, in Cage's handwriting. He spent the whole week copying things, showing me how to set up a page. His idea of professionalism was that things had to be beautifully, and neatly, and cleanly presented.

But the advice he gave me was the most important advice anybody ever gave me, and I'm going to give it to you. He said that it's a very good idea that after you write a little bit, stop and then copy it. Because while you're copying it, you're thinking about it, and it's giving you other ideas. And that's the way I work. And it's marvellous, just wonderful, the relationship between working and copying. And what's marvellous about it to me is that even if I'm writing long pieces, I don't feel that I got sixty pages which I then have to copy. And it worked out beautifully.

All those things, having the right pen, a comfortable chair. I once wrote an article and said that if I had the right chair, I'd be like Mozart.[24] [*laughter*] I mean, are you comfortable in your chair? Do you think about your chair? I work at the piano as a desk. There's just something about ... [*waves around*] This is low. I have a stool which is higher. [*sits down on a chair*] There's just something about the distance with the stool as you write. [*changes his stool*] It's fantastic now, very comfortable, just right. If I ever had a desk made, I'd take my stool and measure it.

Those things are very important. Those are strategies to get you going. I mean, my ideas may get you going.

If I can annoy you with another bon mot. Degas, you know, spent too much of his time writing sonnets. So he meets Mallarmé on the street, and Mallarmé says, 'How are the sonnets going?' And Degas says, 'I don't have any ideas.' Mallarmé says, 'You don't write poetry with ideas. You write it with words.'[25] [*laughter*] European, you know, Mallarmé.

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[23] A Rapidograph is a technical drafting pen. It produces a very fine line. You have to shake it slightly before writing and a vertical grip is required to allow the ink to flow.

[24] In 'The Anxiety of Art' (1965), collected in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street,* p. 30.

[25] This anecdote was originally told by Paul Valéry in his book *Degas Danse Dessin* (1936). Feldman probably knew the translation in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry Volume 12* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960). The anecdote is on page 62. In the original, the meeting takes place, not in the street, but at Berthe Morisot's house, and it is Degas' complaint that he has *too many* ideas that elicits Mallarmé's response.

Are there any questions?

From the audience: Yes, there's a question here. Could you give us an idea of how you knew you were approaching the end of the composition? When you were writing it.

John, did you ever see that film with Boulez and Stravinsky in Hollywood?[26] [*laughter*] Boulez is on camera, and he says, 'Mr Stravinsky' – you always had to call him Mr. Stravinsky. A friend of mine who knew him for four years once called him Igor, and Stravinsky stopped talking to him. [*laughter*]

Same questioner: Well, Mr Feldman, how did you come to the end of the ... [*general laughter*]

John, [*laughter*] I'm telling you about that film. So Boulez, in the film, says, 'How did you know how many times to do *Sacre* (Eleven beat passage from *Sacre du Printemps*)?'[27] [*laughter*] Stravinsky looks at him like [*MF stares*] and really couldn't answer the question.

Word the question just a little bit different.

Same questioner: Well, you're writing music, and you've heard the music internally, I imagine, to some extent; and you've arrived at a certain point. Obviously, physically, you have a number of manuscript pages on the right, but you must have a sense of a kind of internal workings of your music to give you the feeling that you're coming towards the last page. How did you know that the last page was the last page? I must tell that I thought the last page was the last page, musically – if I can use the word musically. It seemed as if we were approaching the end of the piece, but I didn't know why.

Well it's what I said in the conversation I had with Metzger. I find that as the piece gets longer, there has to be less material. That the piece itself, strangely enough, cannot take it. It has nothing to do with my patience. I don't know, my patience, how far it goes, you know. And I don't think about what your patience would be. I don't know that. In other words, I don't have a kind of psychological situation. Let's put it this way. I don't have an anxiety that I've got to stop. But there's less going into it, so I think the piece dies a natural death. It dies of old age. [*laughter*] Like a cousin of mine said to his daughter, 'Sweetie, pull out the tube.' So, that's what happens. I decide, you know.

Little by little, as I got into middle age, I asked myself a question. I said, maybe music is not an art form. After all, you don't see a congress of young painters like this. It must be interesting that composers get together like this. Painters don't have their Darmstadt. Why?

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[26] *A Stravinsky Portrait*, directed by Richard Leacock and Rolf Liebermann (1965).
[27] Part 2 Section 2 (*Mystic Circles of the Young Girls*) of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) ends with a bar of eleven beats (timpani and strings in unison).

From the audience: They're too rich. [*laughter*]

Another questioner: I am a painter and ...

Please, behave yourself. [*laughter*]

So I asked myself that question. Maybe music is not an art form. Maybe music essentially only has to do with music forms. And then I got involved with other ideas connected with music forms, and I came up with memory forms. Then I spoke to an anthropologist friend of mine, and he recommended a very good book, which I recommend to you. It's a paperback. It's by an English woman by the name of Frances White[sic] – who just died recently – and she wrote a book called *The Art of Memory*.[28] It will be as if you would have the history of the computer written, two thousand years from now. And I went out of my head with this book. It's fantastic. The props that they would use for memory. For instance, the Globe Theatre, Shakespeare, 'all the world's a stage'. 'All the world's a stage' was the Globe Theatre, it was a reference to things ... and the whole history of memory forms and what happened. And the whole rigidity of memory forms. For example, Bruno. An interesting character. He was burned at the stake after a seventeen-year inquisition. His heresy was that he included other memory forms other than the Holy Trinity as a memory form. He brought in the Kabbala, Egyptian. He was very eclectic. He was an historian. He was a cultural anthropologist. He was a philosopher. And that was the reason he had to justify his use of other memory forms.

And then I felt that the memory forms in music were primitive. That they were based on small attention. They were based on a convention. They were based on things that worked, and they worked beautifully. And I give to my own students, say, the slow movement of the Debussy quartet, the ABA construction. And Debussy is very interesting. In his piano *Études* there's one piece where the B has nothing to do with the A. It's just a marvellous piece in relation to what you can do in terms of the relationship of an ABA. They work. They're wonderful. And I said, 'What would happen if you got rid of the ABA forms? What happens?'

So what am I doing? I'm not doing anything different than Beethoven, who was writing a piece which is getting longer. And he does something else that nobody else ever did. He threw in another three tunes. I'm not throwing it in as a memory, I'm throwing it in in a more Proustian sense. When he goes out in the car with, remember, his chauffeur to smell a little something – and then goes home and writes about it. And many times I would turn [over the page] and say, 'Didn't I do this over here?' And I would go over and look through it and use it and then use it in another way, of course. Like Proust, the novel. This piece is also that when you first get material, you're idealistic. And what happens in this piece, there's a disintegration of it, like in Proust. It's very much like it. I can compare it to *Remembrance of Things Past*, where you begin idealistically, and then you get more and more into reality as your experience grows.

For example, there is one section in the second *String Quartet* which comes back all the time.

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[28] Frances Amelia Yates (1899 – 1981), *The Art of Memory* (1966).

Every time it comes back now, the modules are different than any time before. But if I did it the first time, it would be less acceptable for your ear. As it becomes saturated and saturated, you accept it more and more and more. You're less idealistic. You are less wilful. You just let it happen. You hang loose, so to speak, artistically. You just let it happen without trying to be deterministic. So what I try and do is make it close to, maybe not an art form, but to a metaphor, what I would feel could be an art form in music.

Proust didn't even know the subject of his last book until the end of his life.

I think you do know what you're doing. I don't even know to what extent Immanuel Kant was right when he talks about intuitive knowledge. I don't even know if I really believe in it. But you have to know your instrument. You have to know what happens in registration. You have to know how to notate very difficult images. Isn't that composition? None of my students think so. I'm going to give up. [*laughter*] They don't think it's music. They don't think instruments are music, or notation is music, or registration is music. How to get the notes is music.

From the audience: I would like to know why you keep saying to get the notes and not get the sounds.

Because they're notes. [*laughter*] They've got names. They're pitches. The magic is to make sounds out of pitches. Or the magic is to bring back pitches. They might be sounds. Of course, I do that in my quartet. I'm going from pitches to sounds. Again it's a retranslation.

Same questioner: Well, that's why I felt the word note was a little bit limited. There's more in your piece than just notes. Well, notes is the slang term.

No more questions?

From the audience: Could I ask, please, what do you think of this carpet, that drawing Mr Zimmermann did of your piece?[29]

It's not a painting. This is an analysis of the quartet where the information duplicates itself and comes back in variation.

Same questioner: What do you think about it?

It's just a duplication graphically of the kind of material that comes and goes in the piece. It's an aspect of something called the 'new criticism', like counting commas. [*laughter*] And I learned a

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[29] In July 1984, Walter Zimmermann created a visual representation of the score of Feldman's *String Quartet No. 2* which he entitled 'Muster Teppich' [rug pattern]. Rectangles divided vertically in three represented each page of the score with its three systems. Different graphic symbols were added to the rectangles to indicate the type of musical material in each page and system, the same symbols being used wherever similar material recurred throughout the score. The resulting 'rug pattern' representing the 124 pages of the score was published in Zimmermann's collection of Feldman's *Essays*, pp. 22–3.

lot. I like to see it. I think you'll learn a lot. The only problem is that one might think that what comes back is hierarchical material. What usually comes back is the material I wasn't sure about and wanted to hear again, because of the taste.

Another very important attitude I have when I work is that – and again this might not help you – I ask myself all the time: what is material? Which is a very interesting thing.

A student of mine came to study some place in Europe, and she mentioned to her teacher that Feldman always uses the word material, and the teacher said, 'We don't use that term here.' And I think that's a very interesting thing. And that also in translation. And my confusion about definitions, the difference between material and an idea.

The young English boy[30] that was talking about his material in relation to his process? Evidently we wouldn't agree on what material is. There's an avant-garde aspect which has a very religious kind of St Thomas attitude about the 'truth of material'. In that sense, I don't feel that material has any 'truths'. It has our truths. We bring it in. If you write a random piece, if we write it, we like it. We call it 'material'. If we hear someone else's random piece, we don't like it. But that's a very interesting thing. What is material in a piece?

There are things in this piece that I never would have put in a shorter piece. That's where the whole idea of material comes in. Just four notes, chromatic little groupings. Just something banal, to some degree. And when I first came across it – not that I know the difference between one thing and another – and I said, 'What am I doing: what am I interested in?' And I had a kind of curiosity as it started going. As to how it started to move. And that particular type of rhythm. And then with the orchestration.

There are really no fancy syncopated off-beats to try to make it interesting. Just a change of its colour. Colour itself and registration created the rhythmic shaping. The colour was shaping out all kinds of designs and shapes. And as I'm watching it, and as I'm listening to it, I just let it go.

Many times the reason the passage is very long is because it's not that I'm thinking about its natural length. As if I have some idea about natural borders. I'm more or less like a scientist or somebody looking at a slide, watching these microbes just go in this field. And I mean, our music is not as complicated as what's going on inside a termite.

So that's a very interesting idea, about a termite. Now I'm trying to figure out why I was interested in it as an analogy to music. I'm really thinking about it all the time, and I can't get a handle on it. You know a termite. The one that eats wood. So it's very, very interesting. Who chews the wood? The termite has no apparatus himself to chew the wood. But inside it there are millions of these microbes and they're chewing the wood. There's some analogy about composition, about something else doing the work. And I like that idea. Of course, if you want to go ahead and make

[30] "young English boy": The composer, Christopher Fox, then in his late twenties, who was also a guest composer at Darmstadt in 1984.

images, that's another problem. I don't go ahead and have images.

Takemitsu once visited me, and he was showing me his sketchbook. He said that the Japanese are embedded in nature images: that it's so much a part of their culture that they can't think otherwise. That's why, you know, he has all those titles, *The Water*, and *Sea*, and that. So he shows me a very nice drawing and it has a bunch of birds, and in the middle there's a blackbird. And I said, 'Toru, what's the blackbird?' He said, 'Oh,' he said, 'that's B-sharp.'[31] [*laughter*] I don't mean those kinds of images.

One last question.

From the audience: 'I don't quite understand why you always avoid the term variation. You said in the beginning, "I hate the term variation".'

I don't hate the term. I don't use it. I'm not varying anything. I don't feel I'm varying anything. I'm seeing it in another language. It's another focus. It's not like I'm taking a tune and varying it. It's not that I'm doing that. [*hums a tune with a variation*] By the way, if I go for that as variation, then Webern's second movement of Opus 21, 'Variations'; how he got the Paganini thing to sound backwards like Rachmaninov.[32] [*laughter*] No, I'm not involved with variation. Of course, it's variation: I'm doing it one way, and then I'm doing it another way, with a different kind of focus. And I'm not involved with how I understand variation. To me, variation is Beethoven and Schoenberg. I'm not doing it that way.

Oh, I did get distracted earlier when I said at the beginning of my talk that I'm working with two aspects which I feel are characteristic of the twentieth century. One is change, variation. I prefer the word change. The other is reiteration, repetition. I prefer the word reiteration. So I'm involved with both. I don't make a synthesis, but they're going on at the same time. The change then becoming that which then becomes the reiteration, and the reiteration is changing. So you have these both things going on all at the same time. And it's not a calculated dialectic because I have to watch when it happens.

My music is handmade. So I'm like a tailor. I make my buttonholes by hand. The suit fits better.

One of the most interesting things that I've heard recently, speaking of high-tech. I was invited by one of the largest companies in the world that make farm equipment, called the John Deere Company. And I was invited out to the Midwest to talk to their research department. They invite artists because they feel that the engineers would want to hear how an artist thinks: the leaps he makes, the conclusions he produces. So I was invited out, and I walk into this room, and there were

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[31] "B-sharp": Apparently a slip of the tongue for F-sharp, which is the central tone around which Takemitsu's orchestral work *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden* (1977) is constructed, and which is represented by the blackbird at the centre of the sketchbook drawing Takemitsu showed Feldman when he visited him in Buffalo in December 1977.

[32] Anton Webern, *Symphony*, op. 21 (1928). The second movement consists of a theme and variations. Each variation works backwards from its central point to create an exact mirror image of itself.

fifty people there. Many of them were ex-professors, chemists, engineers, making very big salaries, very nice looking people. Everyone had a tie, everyone very interested.

Later, they took me around, and they would have a computer on an axle [*moves his hands*]. And there's a computer, and there's a blackboard, and everything is geared for a ten-year cycle. They feel it should work ten years. And they want it to be pretty good for ten years. You would see a tractor going through a kind of simulated field. Just back and forth. And it goes on and on, this cycle. So I said to one of the gentlemen, 'How much do you know?' And he says, 'We begin with eighty-five per cent.' Think of it, eighty-five per cent! That's what they know. The other fifteen per cent is where the millions of dollars in research go to.

So I just want to tell my young colleagues that John Deere Company only knows eighty-five per cent. Do I have to say it? [*laughter*] I'll give you *four* percent! Thank you. [*applause*]