Toward an Art of Imminence
Morton Feldman's *Durations III*, #3

Traditionally, a work of art was conceived as a fixed object, bounded and circumscribed by a finite set of relations born of some personal aesthetic impulse. Since the 1950's, in American music, dramatic changes in attitudes toward the creative process have called into question this very notion of art and the critical position that supports it. The most progressive composers, artists and writers of this period have come to recognize that the art object is itself nothing more than a remnant of their creative activity. It is the end product of a series of events which constitute its perceptual and conceptual framework; a framework within which the object must constantly resonate if it is to remain in any sense meaningful. In the 1950's, along with various members of the so-called New York school of painters and the Black Mountain poets, Morton Feldman became one of the first composers to conceive and execute an art completely freed from any vestige of a priori compositional rhetoric. As the foundation of his new art, Feldman proposed a language of pure process, in which the work and the act of creation became indistinguishable.

A piece of music typically evolves through a series of transformations during which raw materials are carefully molded into a unique configuration that is then identified as the artwork. Sketches and drafts are constantly replaced or discarded as the composer slowly fashions the particular structure that he desires. Feldman, in contrast, seems to engage the entirety of this process within the very perceptible framework of his compositions. For him, the *act* of creating a piece of music becomes the very substance of that piece - its form, in a rich new sense of the word. Another striking example of this attitude toward art is found in the work of the poet Charles Olson. In Olson's view: "The motive ... of reality is process not goal."[1] To this, critic Robert von Hallberg has added several illuminating observations:

One normally expects a poet to blot out his first thoughts after they have led to subsequent, more precise and refined formulations, in the name of craft and artistry, not to mention brevity. But these expectations grow from ... an aesthetic theory ... [in which] the artifact is achievement and result. 'Artifact' is not even an adequate term to use in discussing [Olson's works]: *they are not the result of Olson's labors; they are his labors.*[2]

Thus, for example, throughout his *Maximus* cycle, whenever Olson refines, an idea, he does so within the very context of the poem itself rather than from some improbable vantage point outside of it or in any sense prior to it. In one striking instance, as his *Maximus* persona looks up at a statue of Our Lady of Good Voyage, which stands on top of a church overlooking Gloucester harbor, he continually corrects his observations and impressions *within the poem* until he finally comes to an accurate representation of the scene. The passage concludes as a clear picture of the object, which the figure is holding in its arms, bursts forth into consciousness:

<blockquote>
(o my lady of good voyage

in whose arm, whose left arm rests

no boy but a carefully carved wood, a painted face,

a schooner!

a delicate mast, as bow-sprit for

forwarding
</blockquote>

(The Maximus Poem' s I,2)[3]

In art such as this we experience the act of creation *in medias res* and the work in the act of being born. What the perceiver experiences is the very emergence of order; the artwork organizing itself into existence. Thus, as it was for a philosopher such as Merleau-Ponty, so it seems that for Olson and Feldman: "... the perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect...; it is, rather, a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views."[4] Through their art, perception and creation are revealed as one and the same act. Each of their works appears to be born at the instant of the creator's appropriation of its elements.

Among the works of Morton Feldman, none more clearly and concisely exemplifies this attitude toward composition than his series entitled *Durations* (1960-61), the third of which consists of four pieces, scored for the unusual combination of violin, tuba and piano. The third piece of this set will be considered here. The score is reprinted on the following page (Example 1). The instructions read as follows:

> The first sound [is played by] all instruments simultaneously. The duration of each sound is chosen by the performer. All beats are slow. All sounds should be played with a minimum of attack. Grace notes should not be played too quickly. Numbers between sounds indicate silent beats. Dynamics are very low.[5]

The work opens in stasis. A single three-note sonority is repeated over and over again. There seems to be no functioning linear structure. Rather, the sounds appear to be organized only as a succession of isolated vertical configurations. Gradually, however, this situation begins to change. As the piece proceeds, the initial sonority breaks apart, its constituent elements taking on functions independent of their role within that particular sound. Over the course of this transformation, one instrument, the tuba, emerges as predominant - twice uttering highly organized linear formations, each an extension of the initial three tones of the piece. As these new structures evolve, the violin and piano continue to sound the original cluster that now, however, clearly functions as a backdrop to the lines unfolding in the tuba part. Eventually, the purely vertical format of the opening is transformed into an exclusively linear one and the work concludes with an unaccompanied tuba solo. From the single three-note sonority that opened the piece, a complex foreground/ background dualism emerges.

For the purposes of analysis, each vertical sonority has been numbered (Example 1). This procedure has been adopted in spite of the degree of rhythmic freedom involved in any performance for, as the composer himself notes, each vertical configuration may be treated as a relatively integrated sonic event:

> In the *Durations* with the tuba, the weight of the three instruments made me treat them as one. I wrote all sounds simultaneously knowing that no instrument would ever be too far behind or too far ahead of the other.[6]

Example 1

Durations III, No. 3

Morton Feldman

Also, to help organize the discussion, the piece has been divided into four segments labeled "gestures". These are (as marked in the score):

Gesture 1: sonorities 1 -15

Gesture 2: sonorities 16-21

Gesture 3: sonorities 22-29

Gesture 4: sonorities 30-37

The reasons that support this particular partitioning of the work will become clear as the analysis proceeds. As it is intended here, the word "gesture" is roughly analogous to the term "phrase" though in this context, the former is clearly preferable. "Gesture" has fewer connotations of closure and Feldman's music is generally far too continuous in its unfolding to be properly considered in terms of distinct, separable parts. However, in order to coordinate discussion of the piece, the use of some term was felt to be necessary and "gesture" seemed most appropriate

The first gesture of the composition (sonorities 1-15) consists entirely of a gradual temporal acceleration over a relatively static pitch and register field. The first distinct sound of the piece is heard five times in succession (sonorities 1-5); the second, three times (6-8); the third, four times (9-12); the fourth, two times (13-14); and the fifth once (15). In general, sonorities at the opening of the passage are prolonged for rather lengthy periods of time and thus seem to change from one to another at a rather slow pace. Toward the end oft the passage, however, the sounds are not repeated as frequently and therefore, change far more rapidly.

Despite this acceleration, the passage is, in many respects, quite static. In terms of pitch content, it consists entirely of one three-note cluster - F#, G, Ab. Using this basic pitch material, the first fourteen of its fifteen sonorities are fashioned with the aid of a simple permutation scheme (the fifteenth and final sonority is transitional and will be discussed later) (Example 2). Such a procedure ensures that all three pitches will be present at all times, in equal abundance, and that none will be given undue emphasis.

Example 2

	5x	3x	4x	2x
Violin	Ab	F#	G	Ab
Tuba	F#	G	Ab	F#
Piano	G	Ab	F#	G
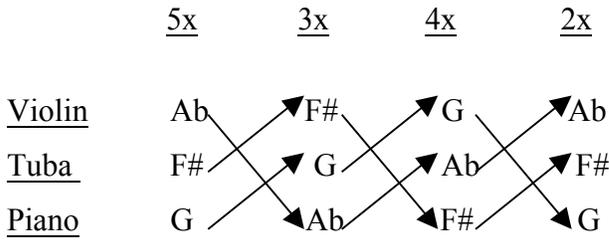
Secondly, the spatial distribution of tones is quite static. The highest and lowest extremes are always present but, with only one, exception, the mid-range (ca. C^3-C^5) remains empty (Example 3).[7] The tuba and violin each tend to be associated

Example 3
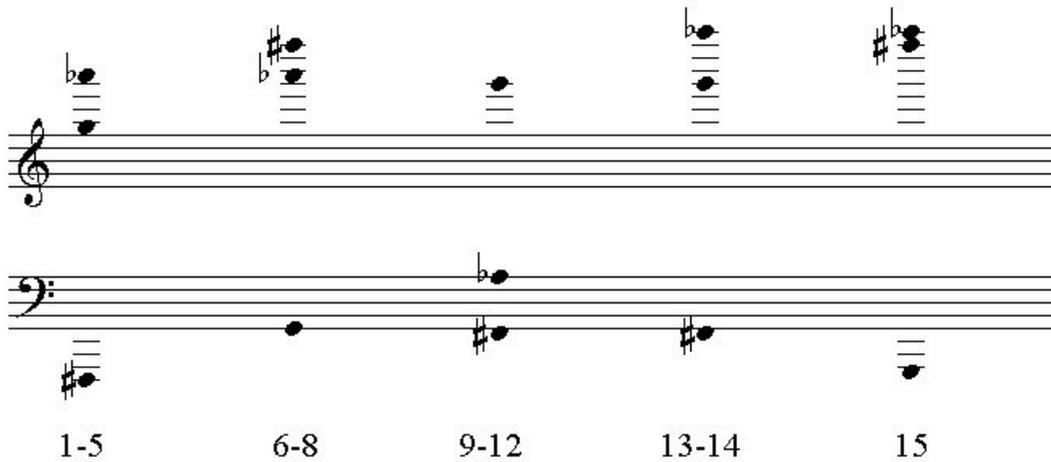
with one particular register (a fact undoubtedly due to their specific ranges). The violin invariably sounds in the highest register while the tuba, with one exception, appears in the lowest. Significantly, however, according to theorists Robert Cogan and Pozzi Escot:

> The resonance region of the tuba is between 100 and 300 cps ca. G^2-D^4 thus, in the lower half of the range ca. C^1 F#2 energy lies in the second to fourth partials.[8]

As such, though the tones that are played by the tuba are almost all located in the lowest registers, much of the sonic energy is actually placed in the mid-range, foreshadowing the shift to this spatial region that will take place in Gesture 2. Of

course, this change is also prepared by the single fundamental tone sounded by the tuba in its upper register (sonorities 8-12).

Finally, certain pitches tend to be associated with specific registers and, as a result, are quite frequently repeated within the same octave. With one exception, Ab appears only in the upper register while F# generally sounds in the lowest. These factors all play a crucial role in determining the generally static nature of the passage.

As noted earlier, the final sonority of Gesture 1 must be viewed as transitional. While it does not arise from the proper continuation of the permutation scheme outlined above, it does reflect many other qualities characteristic of the music that precedes it. In particular, it maintains the same wide registral spacing and repeats the same high Ab found in the previous two sonorities. Thus, while it continues to prolong the general sonic character of the opening gesture, it also, for the first time, breaks the permutation scheme in preparation for the music that is about to unfold in Gesture 2.

The second gesture of the composition (sonorities 16-21) continues to prolong the same three-note cluster that constituted the entire pitch collection of Gesture 1 (Example 4). There are, however, several factors that clearly distinguish this music from that of the first gesture: the permutation scheme is abandoned, and the composer no longer repeats sonorities verbatim. As a result, the music of this passage is altogether more active than that which preceded it. Finally, the activity of Gesture 2 incorporates those registers that, up to this point, were left relatively barren - a development that, as noted earlier, was prepared in Gesture 1.

This change in spatial disposition is immediately apparent. In the first half of the passage (sonorities 16, 17, and 18) the outer registers are completely abandoned in favor of the central regions (ca. Ab^2-G^5). By the middle of the passage, however, this situation begins to reverse itself and the music starts to expand back outward to the spatial extremities. First, the low register returns in sonority 19 with the tone F# which predominated in that register through the initial gesture and which, in fact, opened the piece in that octave. Then, in sonority 21, the upper region returns with a sounding of high Ab which predominated in that register throughout Gesture 1 and

Example 4

which also opened the piece in that octave. In addition, throughout most of the second gesture, G is fixed in the very same register in which it appeared in the opening sonority of the first gesture. However, while, at the end of the second gesture, the composer clearly recaptures the wide spacing of the initial sounds of the piece, he still maintains some sonic presence in the mid-range, a characteristic, of course, of the second gesture. Thus, while the music of Gesture 2 expands into new dimensions, it also reaches back to its origins, assimilating into this new material the very first sonority of the piece.

As was the case with register, so too the use of timbre is at least initially quite different from that found in Gesture 1. With respect to the violin, throughout the initial gesture only harmonics were heard. Now, in contrast, the string color shifts constantly, first from harmonics to normal sound and then to pizzicato. Similarly, throughout Gesture 1, the tuba focused primarily upon its lowest register while, in the second gesture, it expands into the upper limits of its range (a significant development which sets the stage for the distinctly bi-leveled registral structure of the music which will be heard in Gestures 3 and 4). This change in register also highlights certain characteristics of the instrument's tone color. Again, according to Cogan and Escot:

> There is a marked contrast between the lower half of the range, where the energy lies in the second to fourth partials, and the upper half whose tones approximate pure sine tones.[9]

These are precisely the two regions upon which Feldman gradually focuses his attention.

Gesture 2 is also, in many ways, quite static, a fact that helps maintain continuity with the first gesture. First of all, while the spatial disposition of tones is more active and variable, there is a clear tendency for G to appear as the highest b sounding tone of the cluster, F# to be in the middle and A on the bottom.   This is true without exception throughout the first half of the passage and changes only as the registers expand outward, recapturing the sonorities of Gesture 1. In addition, particular tones are quite often fixed within specific registers. The most prominent of these is the tone G, which repeats in the same octave four of the six times it sounds over the course of this passage.

Thus, as with Gesture 1, the structure of this second gesture may be summarized as a movement from stasis to activity, expanding both the degree and kind of motion that preceded it. Individual sonorities are never repeated in their entirety. Timbre changes frequently and register becomes quite variable. Throughout, however, there is an ever-increasing amount of pitch/register association that helps draw the listener back to the very first sonority of the composition. As a result, despite all the changes that have taken place, the music continues to resonate with the source of its unfolding.

The third gesture continues this dual process of prolonging the original sonority while expanding ever farther into new sonic dimensions. For the first time, new pitches are introduced into the original cluster. The instruments begin to take on new, more independent roles as a result of which the texture becomes more heterogeneous and fragmented - a tendency also promoted by the use of fermatas within the individual parts. In addition, for the first time, the piano introduces simultaneities into the texture and assumes the function that previously had been assigned to all three instruments. It alone continues to prolong the original three-note cluster as a vertical sonority. On the other hand, the tuba part, which now consists almost entirely of new tones, emerges as a purely linear construction. As a result of this dichotomy, the tuba gradually moves to the foreground while the piano recedes into a supporting position as background. More precisely, the emergence of the tuba part as a separate entity from the rest of the ensemble *actually creates the*

*foreground/background relationship among the members of the ensemble which did
not exit prior to this point in the piece.*

Gesture 3 begins with the sounding of new pitches for the first time in the piece.
Over the course of this passage all but two tones of the complete chromatic collection
are heard. Specifically, the violin and piano each introduce two new pitches while
continuing to prolong the original sonority, with frequent echoes of the pitch
disposition of the opening (F# in the lower regions, Ab on top). However, within
each of these instrumental parts, the original three-note cell remains predominant.
The two new pitches introduced by the violin, D and F, each sound only once while
each of the original three tones sound twice. Similarly, the two new pitches
introduced by the piano are each heard two times while, of the original three, F# and
G each sound three times and Ab sounds four times.

The tuba part, in contrast, consists primarily of new pitches and, as such, abandons
almost all connection to the original sonority (Example 5). Of the eight tones that the
tuba sounds,

Example 5
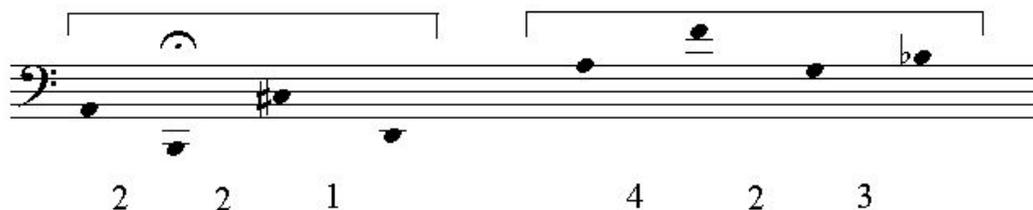
all but one, G, are new. In addition, the tuba part emerges as the first organized linear
configuration of the composition. Its eight tones are evenly divided into two related
tetrachords each of which opens with the same pitch, A - the only repeated tone in the
line. These tetrachords are divided into two distinct registers, which fall quite clearly
into the two characteristic tone color regions identified by Cogan and Escot, as noted
earlier.

In addition, the total interval content of each of these tetrachords is identical (all
intervals are labeled in their smallest form) (Example 6). [10]

Example 6

1	2	3	4	5	6	-	interval
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1	2	1	1	1	0	-	frequency of appearance within tetrachord

In the composition, the four tones of the first tetrachord are ordered in such a way that only the intervals 1 and 2 sound (Example 7). The ordering of the second tetrachord excludes 1 but

Example 7
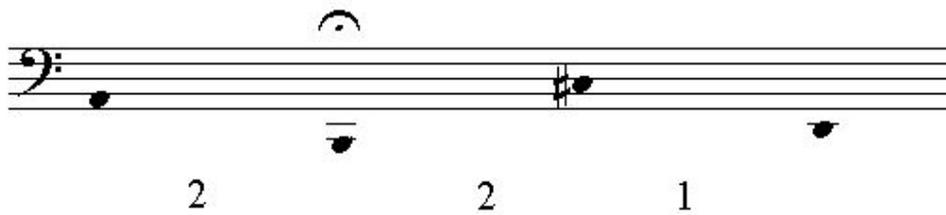
allows 3 and 4 to sound along with 2 (Example 8). Of course the predominant sound of the piece up to this point, the trichord (F#, G, Ab) consists entirely of the intervals 1 and 2. Thus, despite the fact that the first tetrachord contains no pitches

Example 8
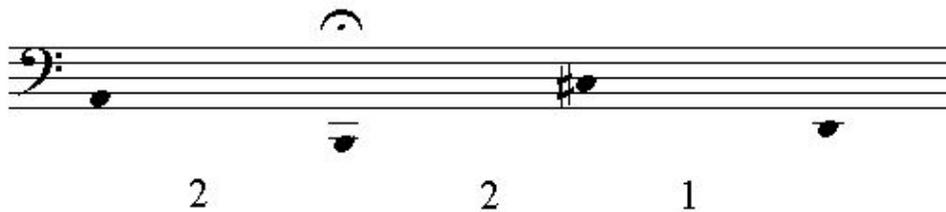
in common with this sonority, there is a striking intervallic consistency between them, as both project the same two intervals exclusively. At least initially, then, the tuba line of Gesture 3 appears as an outgrowth of that trichord which, thus far, has dominated the composition.

If we look closely at the first tetrachord, we notice that its four tones are paired as a result of register connections: a-c# and b-d (Example 9). These pairs

Example 9

articulate, respectively, the intervals 4 and 3. Thus, embedded within this first tetrachord are the same two new intervals that are made explicit in the second. This procedure enables a smooth transition from the half steps and whole steps of the first tetrachord (themselves a continuation of the intervallic language of the initial trichord of the piece) to the thirds sounded in the second tetrachord.

Each of the tetrachords used in this passage expands the original cluster. Each affords an opportunity to sound new intervallic material not available under the severe restrictions of the F#, G, A trichord. This potential is realized in the second tetrachord where the four tones are ordered in such a way that two new intervals, 3 and 4, are drawn out of the collection. Thus, from the original three-note cluster, unfolds an independent, highly structured linear formation which, after first revealing its roots within that initial trichord sonority, proceeds to expand its sonic boundaries. In response, the original cluster itself takes on new meaning as the source of all that has transpired. Each determines the other's function; as a foreground emerges (the tuba line), so too a background is defined (the original trichord continuing through the violin and piano parts).

The fourth and final gesture of the composition confirms the predominance of those elements just beginning to emerge as foreground in the previous eight sonorities. This passage consists of an unaccompanied solo for tuba that serves to reiterate, as well as extend, the music preceding it. First, it opens with a two-note figure very similar to the one initiating the tuba line in the third gesture. As if to emphasize this similarity, in both cases, the figure is separated by a fermata. In addition, this solo also contains eight pitches, only one of which, F#, is found in the original trichord. Finally, the composer introduces the two tones not yet sounded anywhere in the piece (D# and E), thereby completing the chromatic collection.

As before, with the aid of a single repeated tone and some shifting of registers, these eight pitches also partition into two distinct tetrachords (Example 10). In this case, however, the first tetrachord opens with the same tone that concludes the

Example 10
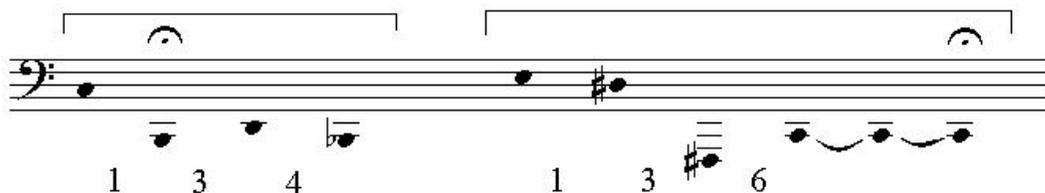
second tetrachord, which adds a feeling of closure not inappropriate to the final gesture of the composition. Moreover, each tetrachord opens in the same register and then descends approximately one octave. Each begins on tones within the instrument's resonance region, the region characterized by the sine tone color, and then descends to lower registers producing richer sonorities. These descending motions seem to reverse, in microcosm, the predominantly ascending movement characteristic of the tuba thus far in the composition. In general, however, the tuba here lies much lower than it did in Gesture 3 and tends to focus upon regions not heard since Gesture 1. This remarkable similarity to the opening helps to draw out latent associations between the linear configuration that concludes the piece and vertical sonority that opened it.

Once again, of greatest importance is the interval content of these two tetrachords (Example 11). The total interval content of the first is very similar to that of both tetrachords of Gesture

Example 11

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1      2      3      4      5      6

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2      2      1      1      0      0
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3 in that it continues to emphasize seconds and introduces no new intervals. That of the second is tetrachord somewhat different, most notably with respect to the addition of a tritone as well as the emphasis on the interval 3 (Example 12). The

Example12

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1      2      3      4      5      6

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1      1      2      1      0      1
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tritone is the only interval that, up to this point, has not been available either from the original trichord, which contained only 1 and 2,
or from the two tetrachords of Gesture 3, which contained 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The two tetrachords of the fourth and final gesture together contain all intervals, including 6.

The actual sounding intervals seem to reinforce this sense of expansion. The first tetrachord presents 1, 3 and 4, reiterating the intervallic language that characterized the tuba line in preceding gesture. Then, in the second tetrachord 1, 3 and 6 are sounded. The 1 and 3 provide continuity as they are carried over from the previous four notes. The 6, however, is the last interval to be brought into the sonic world that has evolved from the initial cluster of the composition and, significantly, is the last sounding interval of the composition. Coupled with the return of the very same pitch

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class that opened the solo, this moment brings both the last gesture and the entire composition to a striking conclusion.

It is interesting to note that this final tritone is foreshadowed in the lowest tones of the piano throughout Gesture 3, where, in the very same register in which the final tuba solo occurs, the piano reiterates the F#-C dyad over and over again (Example 13). It is also important to recall

Example 13
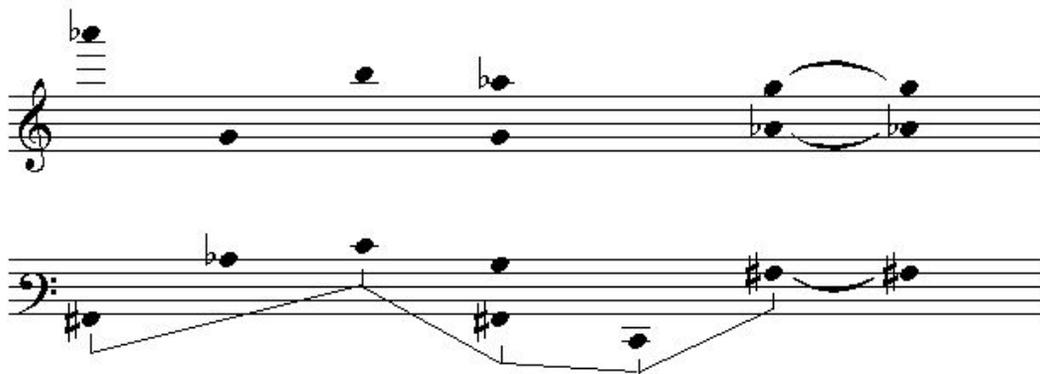
that it was in the third gesture that the piano first introduced the tone C into the composition. It was also in Gesture 3 that the piano assumed the exclusive role of sounding the original trichord as a vertical sonority. Thus, the tone C was first introduced into the composition within the context of the F#, G, Ab cluster. Moreover, it was first introduced as a tritone related to F# which, not by coincidence, is the only tone of the original three carried over into Gesture 4.

In conjunction with the foregoing rather specific analytical observations, it would be revealing to consider some of the composition's more general attributes. One of the most striking characteristics of this piece and, indeed, of Feldman's style in general is the apparent lack of rhythmic and dynamic articulation. As mentioned before, durations of individual tones are slow but free, and dynamics are constant and quite soft. The result is a very flat surface devoid of any sense of dramatic contrast.

As noted earlier, Feldman's is a music in which there is no apparent structuring of sound prior to its actual unfolding in time. It seems natural, then, that the composer would choose to work within a compositional format in which relationships appear to

emerge at the very moment sound is first perceived by the listener and never in any sense prior to that moment; a format in which order never seems imposed by the will of the composer but rather evolves within the perceiver's own awakening consciousness. As such, Feldman avoids all procedures that might tend to reveal his own presence consciously shaping the surface of the music for the listener. With respect to rhythm, for example, he prefers not to lead the listener through time, but rather to let the listener discover relationships for himself over time. In this regard, his music reveals a particular affinity with the philosophy of Heidegger, for central to the work of both men is the notion that understanding is an activity born of time, and that, as Heidegger notes: "Being and time determine each other reciprocally…"[11]

The structure of *Durations III*, #3 embraces the entire process whereby order is engendered by the appropriation of raw matter. Over the course of the composition a single sonority is first atomized, then extended and finally given meaning as one element within an organized complex of related sounds. From its initial stasis, the music proceeds at an ever-increasing pace to reconstruct a single, basic sonority in a plethora of new formations. As these gradually rise to the fore, the original sound, their source, slowly recedes into the background. From the undifferentiated situation that opens the piece, a rather complex foreground/background hierarchy emerges. In a sense, this is music born at its conclusion rather than its inception. As the work opens, the listener finds himself poised as if at the brink of his first contact with the world. Later, as relationships gradually coalesce, they appear to do so, not through any act of the composer, but rather through the will of the perceiving consciousness. Along with painters such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko and poets like Olson and Robert Creeley, Feldman intensifies the perceiver's awareness of his own role in the formation of a meaningful aesthetic experience. Through such art the perceiver becomes an extension of the artist - a collaborator in the creative act. His consciousness acquires greater definition through the appropriation of the artwork as, simultaneously and reciprocally, the work itself seems to take shape through an act of will.

Footnotes

1. Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, Ann Charters, ed. (Berkeley, California:
      Oyez, 1970), p. 49.

2. Robert von Hallberg, *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts:
      Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 73.

3. Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems* (New York: Jargon/Corinth Books, 1960), p. 2.

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, Illinois:
      Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 16.

5. Morton Feldman, *Durations* III (New York: C. F. Peters, 1961), p. 6.

6. Morton Feldman, *Brown/Feldman* (New York: Time Records, No. 58007).

7. Notation of 5 registers: middle C is labeled C4, the C on S octave higher is C and so
      forth; the C one octave lower is C and so forth. All tones between C' and C3, where i
      and j are adjacent integers, are given the superscript i and so fall within register i.

8. Robert Cogan, Pozzi Escot, *Sonic Design* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey:
      Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), p. 356.

9. *Ibid., p.* 356.

10. 1 = minor 2nd or Major 7th 2 = Major 2nd or minor 7th
      4 = Major 2nd or minor 6th 5 = Perfect 4th or 5th
      6 = tritone

11. Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers,
      1972), p. 3.