Morton Feldman
String Quartet No. 2 (1983)

by Ryan Dohoney

The following notes were written as programme notes for a performance of Feldman's second quartet by the Spektral Quartet on March 11, 2017 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. They are reproduced here by kind permission of the author.

"You are a poetic extremist!" John Cage confronted his friend Morton Feldman with this assessment following the premier performance of his *Five Pianos* (1972) in Berlin, in which both participated. The epithet was not necessarily kind, but it was surprisingly apt. Feldman had long tacked toward the extreme limits of what might constitute a piece of music, particularly in the realms of dynamics and form. Feldman's music hovers on the edge of silence and should be played so as to be *just* audible. It draws us in by gently demanding our attention. In the realm of form, Feldman builds up his music from *instants* – small units of sound composed of a single chord or a repeated gesture of only a few notes. "The instant" was a term Feldman borrowed from existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The composer understood it as an emotionally charged musical moment "philosophers had failed to categorize" that offered up the "abstract experience" that Feldman and his painter friends (Pollock, Rothko, Guston) valued.

Late in Feldman's career, his extremism pushed toward another musical parameter, one of time. He had since the 1960s encouraged listeners to think of his music "as an environment," though his pieces in that decade never extended beyond twenty minutes. He fulfilled this desire for temporal saturation only in his music of the 1980s when his pieces begin stretching from ninety minutes, to three hours, and, ultimately, to six hours with String Quartet No. 2.

Feldman's expansion of his music's duration was bound up with a fundamental ontological question: Was music an art form? He first formulated this question in 1973 as an odd opposition. Was his music to be an "illusion of feeling" or an "illusion of art"? The question of whether music could produce an "illusion of art" occupied him for the rest of his life. In the year prior to the completion of String Quartet No. 2, he framed the question in relation to the writings of Marcel Proust and James Joyce:

> So I'm at the end of my life, let's say I'm at the end of my life; working since I'm thirteen; I wake up one day and I say to myself, 'What the hell am I involved with? Memory forms? Musical forms? . . . I mean what the hell is it all about, all the set poses, the set emotions? Do we have anything in music for example that really wipes everything out? That just cleans everything

> away, from some aspect of illusion and reality? Do we have anything like Proust? Do we have anything comparable to *Finnegans Wake*? I wonder.
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> So that's something I think about. And that's where I am now: Is music, could it be, an art form? That it could exist on its own terms, whatever those terms are.

Here the question of art becomes a matter of memory and forgetting, of "wiping everything out" or, as Feldman later put it, of "formalizing the disorientation of memory." For a piece of chamber music, Feldman's String Quartet No. 2 is – by comparison with a quartet of Hadyn or even late Beethoven – Proustian in scale. Though certainly less of a time commitment than reading the whole of *In Search of Lost Time*, an experience of the second quartet in a single sitting in effect restages Proust's drama by musical means. More environment than monument, the music of the quartet works through a quiet logic of repetition and transformation that acts directly on our memory. Over the course of six hours we are gradually attuned to the soundscape of the quartet, which is bountiful in its variety, subtlety, and pathos. For example, after the initial anxious music of the beginning moments, the music unwinds and dilates. About forty minutes into the piece, a gorgeous and achingly sad chorale emerges and keeps us company for about four or five minutes. It then vanishes as other fragments we've heard before return. The sense of loss is, at least for me, profound. This music, unlike other blocks of music, never returns in the identical form in which we first hear it. Instead, every hour or so we're offered a shadowy version of the music, a grayed-out reprise of the beauty we experienced earlier. As in Proust, we are offered sensations that recall our earlier delight but never offer us the same experience again. We come only to an awareness of the impossibility of recapturing lost time. It is a simple lesson, both edifying and melancholic.

At the risk of over-determining the listening experience you might have of String Quartet No. 2, I've hoped to offer a sense of how you might chart a path through the piece. I encourage you to come to know it as you might another person. As with a new friend, you'll be drawn to some sounds more than others, take more interest in one aspect than another, recognize something that you love or hate. It is a wonder that music can do this *at all* and that Feldman's "memory forms" gathered in String Quartet No. 2 seem to achieve this drastic human presence in a way unique to late modernity.