

Impressions Between the Lines: Some Digressive Reflections on Morton Feldman's *Nature Pieces*

by Daniel Ender

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“Art is the imitation of nature in her manner of operation.” Or a net.

Thomas Aquinas | John Cage¹

Forest, Wind, Brook, Earth, Sea, Desert, Moon: in 1952, these were the themes of a choreography by Jean Erdman, to which the 26 year old Morton Feldman had contributed a series of piano pieces. How the five *Nature Pieces* (1951) were assigned to these motifs can no longer be determined.² This circumstance leads to a number of questions: What connection can there be between the “content” mentioned above and the music, if the sounds themselves do not allow any conclusions to be drawn? What are the relationships between the art forms? What does it mean when music is written to accompany a dance performance, and is then considered in isolation? Have Feldman’s pieces anything to do with the images of nature that were mentioned at their first performance? Of course, these questions can only be touched on here. The discussion will be about the music itself and about a certain understanding of nature, which – to put it cautiously – could be related to it.

For centuries there had been a seemingly self-evident connection between certain subjects and musical means of expression; the imitation of nature in art had been an undisputed premise of creative work. Beautiful art and nature should correspond to one another. However, since the beginning of the modern age, precisely this had become questionable. Arnold Schönberg, for example, had made the distinction: “Art is not something given, like nature, but something that has become”.³ His pupil Anton Webern, on the other hand, returned to direct comparisons with nature through his engagement with Goethe; his talk of the organic in art continued the analogies with natural structures.⁴ And even in the radical rationalisation of the

compositional means in serialism, something of it remained, as a negative impression as it were, in that the “natural” material of notes and sounds should be systematically developed. Man’s relationship to nature and to his own nature had always been contradictory, but since the mid-20th century these irritations reached unprecedented proportions, which affected the self-understanding of all art forms.

All the arts were also affected by that movement in the 1940s and ‘50s which became famous as the “New York School”, primarily for painters and composers,⁵ but also for literature, dance, theatre and architecture. The breaking down of the boundaries between the arts brought about a breaking down of their means and the spaces they entered: “Thus, the ideas of infinite space, infinite extension of time in process and in the moment, and infinite rhythm, which were decisive for artists at the beginning of the century, became important again for the painters and composers of the New York School.”⁶ At the same time another important idea from the philosophy of nature after 1900 was taken on board, namely the “reduction of space and time to the category of ‘movement’”.⁷ Just as the gesture of painting in Action Painting determined the form of the pictures, and also made the act of creation a genuinely artistic process, so too in music the boundaries of the work were removed. Music was no longer found only as a complete and self-contained composition, but also in many ways – and to different degrees – as a happening. Perhaps the most revolutionary aspect, generally associated with the name of Cage, was that the sounds of the environment became music on an equal footing with the sounds deliberately made by composers and musicians. “Nature played a major role as the aesthetic paradigm of the New York School,”⁸ bringing a general “turn to the environment, in the broadest sense to nature and its immanent material.”⁹

The new understanding of the concept of music brought about in this way had a lasting influence on the young Morton Feldman following his first encounter with John Cage in 1950. As a composer he undertook a radical reorientation and quickly developed his own musical personality (his first piano sonata from 1943 had referred to Béla Bartók). In his new work, reactions to Webern were as important as the revolutions associated with Cage and his fellow avant-gardists. Despite all the experiments and the sustained expansion of experience that his work as a whole contains, Feldman’s music adheres to the concept of the work in an almost conservative way, although permeated by transcendence. Something important initially happens off the notes. As with Cage, silence plays a key role in Feldman’s *Nature Pieces*: each of the five pieces begins with a rest, the first and

third pieces also contain several strikingly long caesuras. In addition, all except the last piece contain sometimes quite extensive processes of fading away. “Sound is what becomes silence, and to follow sound’s nature, then, is to write a music always on the verge of vanishing, a music of shadows.”¹⁰ Along with this focus on silence and fading away, the signature style and approach of Feldman as we know him later, based on the repetition and modification of distinct patterns, gradually unfolds.

The first piece (Fig 1) gives us an initial glimpse of this. At the beginning, it is rooted in a juxtaposition of continuous movement and its interruption: the hands have to quickly and fleetingly scurry across the keyboard in sometimes extremely wide leaps – figurations that have no centres due to their interval structure with predominantly “atonal” intervals such as tritone, minor seventh and ninth, and which seem to lead nowhere. This unsteady haste is interrupted not only by rests, but also by isolated single notes, which are extended to longer note values and let the music rest a little at certain points (for example, already at the first note!). And then – more and more as the piece goes on – quarter notes appearing singly or in groups of two, continue the principle of “movement” in the most highly concentrated form, and already present in places a pattern formation in its simplest form. The two opposing poles are thus related in a dialectical way, and develop continuously in the course of the piece clearly in the direction of standing still. Of course, such a procedure could be described by analogies to natural processes, but reference to organic growth and proliferation is less significant here than the analogy, which Feldman himself later often made, between his patterns and the knotting patterns of oriental rugs. For it is more a matter of dissolution here than of growth processes, as well as of the qualitative expansion of the music, which opens up a wide space of possibilities between the lines. The fact that the composer writes the title of the cycle between the systems in his autograph score possibly points to a conscious claim to such transcendence.

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Fig 1:¹¹ Morton Feldman, *Nature Pieces* for piano (1951), autograph MS p1

On another level, an unmistakable reference to the European tradition, with which Feldman is closely associated, and the emergence of his own signature style, permeate each other: the fifth piece shows an amalgamation of Webernesque procedures and significant repeat structures (Fig 2). A small set of elements of the same single note (C8, the top key on the keyboard), second, third, and octave intervals, as well as fixed chord structures, are all highly differentiated in terms of dynamics, placement, and density of events, and thus strongly suggest post-Webern serial methods. Webern himself could have been godfather to the sometimes quasi-symmetrical groupings (for example, in bars 14, 16, 17 and 20). However, the most striking feature of the piece is the permeation of the constructive and hermetic texture by a network of repetitions. This appears most distinctly in the prominent C8, and also in a similar way, but less conspicuously, in the four-part chord marking the lower end of the tonal space of the piece (the lowest note is, meaningfully enough, C#4). The deliberate juxtaposition of these two elements is already indicated by the number of their occurrences: in the total of 20 bars, the most dense chord of the piece occurs 19 times, while the single note is struck 21 times. This emphasizes that here again a play between two extremes is taking place. As in the first piece, there is a gradual shift between them: while the single note dominates at the beginning and the chord does not yet appear, chord groupings have the last word at the end.



Fig 2: Morton Feldman, *Nature Pieces* for piano (1951), autograph MS p10

The remaining pieces demonstrate the extremely well-planned cyclical arrangement of the whole work: in the third piece, horizontal and linear events meet and work against each other. And here there are real patterns, in the sense of often repeated note groups, which anticipate the typical Feldman shifts which he later uses to invest long series of repetitions with gradual processes of change. An extreme case here is a seven-note pattern, in sevenfold pianissimo (!), that is placed over a metre in 5/8 time and therefore shifts (Fig 3). On the other hand, the second and fourth pieces are of the highest simplicity: the second is limited to chordal and octave structures and follows a gradually increasing dynamic level from beginning to end (Fig 4). And the fourth confines itself – with one exception – to a diatonic tone set, in fact to the white keys of the piano, with the two hands usually remaining in the five-note space (Fig 5). With these simple models – mostly descending lines or other, even simpler, groups of notes – this piece is the only one of the *Nature Pieces* in which a possible connection with an image of nature could be suspected. Of course, this cannot be substantiated, but Feldman makes possible associations with the tradition of the 19th century Character piece for piano, and also with Debussy's *Préludes*. Finally, a closeness to Cage can also be observed here, which otherwise seldom manifests itself so directly in Feldman's music. In terms of thought, this closeness is always important, as can be seen in a possible connection between *Nature Pieces* and Cage's *Imaginary Landscapes* (1939-52). In his *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946-48), Cage had used similar simple repetitive patterns as in *Nature Piece IV* and combined them with the sound modifications of the prepared piano. With Feldman, however, the distortion or expansion of the sound works in a much more subtle way: left and right pedals are held down throughout the piece. Here again – on a different level – is an expansion that goes far beyond the distinct notes and can enrich both the perception and the understanding of this music as a whole.



Fig 3:¹² *Nature Piece III*

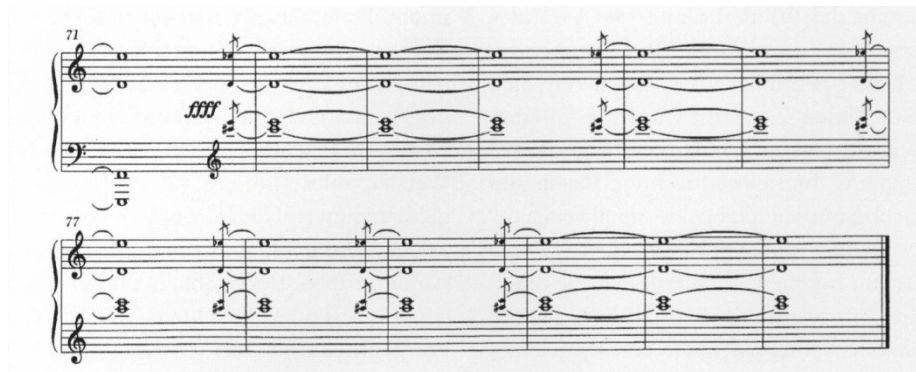


Fig 4: *Nature Piece II*



Fig 5: *Nature Piece IV*

How to interpret these pieces, both in performance and in intellectual interpretation, remains as open as the fields which Feldman opens between the lines and the notes. In the booklet accompanying his recording of *Nature Pieces* and other Feldman piano music, Siegfried Mauser warned against adopting “an approach that is as emotionally neutral, undemonstrative, and as restrained as possible”,¹³ and pointed out connections with Schubert and Debussy. If one is prepared to see Feldman’s music more in the context of 19th and early 20th century European art music, hidden connections to its emotional and content-related connotations arise as if by themselves. This also allows one to focus on the relationship between art and nature. The composer has spoken about nature in a number of statements (which have so far received little attention). For instance, in relation to the influence of Cage: “My only argument with Cage, and there is only one argument, is with his dictum that, ‘Process should imitate nature in its manner of operation.’”¹⁴ Here it is unclear exactly how Feldman understands his “argument” with his influential colleague, since his music is intrinsically ambiguous. However, this thought is not original to Cage, but is a formulation of Thomas Aquinas, which goes back to Aristotle,

taken over by Cage and incorporated into his aesthetic ideas – and which Feldman also apparently adhered to for decades. The relationship to nature is also at the centre of a thought by Hermann Sabbe, who, with almost mystico-religious pathos, addressed an important difference between the aesthetics of the two composers: “Unlike Cage, Feldman who, like Cage, has replaced man as a creature of nature *in* nature, does not leave him there in tutelage, powerless, condemned to utter silence; he has also given him a new responsibility and thus restored him to a new dignity.”¹⁵

Feldman himself used the term “nature” in his verbal utterances more in connection with others than with himself. Thus, he repeatedly brings art – painting as well as music – into connection with nature. For example, about the impressionist painter Camille Pissarro he said, “Nature is not a fixed ideal, but something to be reconstructed according to the personal vision of the artist.”¹⁶ And about the composer Tōru Takemitsu he said: “He draws very nicely, and you have to be Japanese to understand the fact that there is no escape from nature references. That’s why all his music is nature.”¹⁷ Here again Feldman produced a very simple analogy which would hardly have occurred to him as a composer in relation to his own work.

It may just be a coincidence that the title of the *Nature Pieces* explicitly names nature. Nevertheless, it is tempting to speculate that it was perhaps the very idea of images of nature, as mentioned in the choreography, that occasioned the five piano pieces and could have been decisive for the appearance here, for the first time so clearly, of all the characteristic compositional means of this sound magician. The fact that the relationship between the subjects of the dance performance and the music composed for it is loose or non-existent, or at least not clearly identifiable, leads both to a crucial problem of contemporary art in the mid-20th century and to the heart of Feldman’s aesthetics. Not least against this background, the *Nature Pieces* play an important role in the composer’s development. One could also say, he found his nature here.

¹ John Cage: *Silence*, Middletown 1961/1973, p100.

² See, Volker Straebel: “A Note on the Newly Published Piano Pieces”, in: *Morton Feldman: Solo Piano Works 1950-64*, New York 2000.

³ Arnold Schönberg: *Harmonielehre*, Vienna 1922, p115.

⁴ See also, Anton Webern: *Der Weg zur neuen Musik*, ed. by Willi Reich, Wien 1960, p43 et passim; Julian Johnson: *Webern and the Transformation of Nature*, Cambridge 1999.

⁵ See, Steven Johnson (Ed.): *The New York Schools of Music and the Visual Arts. John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg*, New York 2001.

⁶ Suzanne Josek: *The New York School. Earle Brown, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff*, Saarbrücken 1998, p10.

⁷ Helga de la Motte-Haber: *Musik und bildende Kunst. Von der Tonmalerei zur Klangskulptur*, Laaber 1990, p37.

⁸ Josek: Op cit., p26f.

⁹ Ibid., p44.

¹⁰ Erik Ulman: *On Patterns in a Chromatic Field*, online:
<https://www.cnvill.net/mfulman-patterns.pdf>.

¹¹ Figs 1,2: © Copyright Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel, Morton Feldman Collection.

¹² Figs 3,4,5: From Morton Feldman, *Nature Pieces* (1951) in *Solo Piano Works 1950-1964* (Edition Peters, 2000, EP67976). © Copyright C. F. Peters Corporation, New York.

¹³ Siegfried Mauser: "On the true Art of playing Morton Feldman's music", in: liner booklet of CD *Morton Feldman, Palais de Mari*, Kairos 12362KA1, p9. Incidentally, in this recording, the first of the *Nature Pieces* is played five times more slowly than specified: instead of Feldman's "each meas[ure] 92" (which corresponds to the duration of two minutes given in the autograph score), this value is used for the quarter note. Thus Mauser needs ten minutes for this first piece!

¹⁴ Morton Feldman: "The Anxiety of Art / Die Angst vor der Kunst", in: *Essays*, ed. by Walter Zimmermann, Kerpen 1985, p93.

¹⁵ Herman Sabbe: "The Feldman Paradoxes", in: Thomas DeLio (Ed.): *The Music of Morton Feldman*, Westport 1996, p14f.

¹⁶ Morton Feldman: "After Modernism/Nach der Moderne", in: *Essays*, op cit., p97. Later in the same essay, he says: "Nature, of course, is not life. A symbol, a metaphor – at most a moral." (p99)

¹⁷ Morton Feldman: "Middelburg Lecture", in: *Morton Feldman (= Musik-Konzepte 48/49)*, ed. by Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn, Munich 1986, p26.