Morton Feldman: The Johannesburg Masterclasses, July 1983
Session 1: Works by Barry Jordan & Johan Cloete

Transcribed by Dirk de Klerk

Voices heard: Morton Feldman (MF)
Johan Cloete (JC)
Barry Jordan (BJ)
Peter Klatzow (PK)
Carl van Wyk (CW)

MF: Barry, how do *you* feel about the rhythmic language in the piece in terms of its notation?

BJ: I feel roughly the same way as I feel about anything I write, that it's very limited.

MF: Well how about what I was saying, do you think that perhaps it might be limited only in terms of that kind, of that kind of "antecedent-consequent" response to material, like stuffing a mattress?

And another way one stuffs the mattress is in a kind of gestural way: offset things in a kind of Webernist…which he does so magnificently in the *Variations*. But in a sense, the fact, as Stockhausen once said to me, "You're crazy, what are you talking about, there's the beat, what else is there. We're not living out there, we're living down here [Bangs the table] the beats!" And in some degree it is true, evidently we're measuring something. What I would suggest is a *mix*…just the way you could take a major seventh, with that little 'be-*bum*' and then repeat it in a perfect fifth. That alone to me shows that we then, for example, might be able to go from inches into centimetres, and from centimetres into millimetres. My rug studies really helped my language insofar as that every country has different kinds of measurements and I had in mind these measurements, and I was going inches to millimetres, centimetres, and I had an idea. I said, why don't I do that rhythmically in my music, instead of just working as if…that whole business of changing depending on when the music suggested. And using *that* as the detail rather than complicating *inches*. I remember in the one piece that I ever wrote for tape I was sitting around with John Cage and David Tudor and we had to measure the tape and everybody had a definition of an inch. [Laughs] We just used an inch ruler, I don't know why we didn't think of more sophisticated measurements. Earl Brown saw the inch […] I was sitting over *here*, he was sitting over *there*, we can't be in the same place. We couldn't agree what the hell an inch was, it was very funny.

But I do suggest it and I think that kind of switch would really help.

Another thing that would help the rhythm is: forget about this whole idea of going to points in a gestural way and really *believe* in the rhythmic movement - *up* movement or *down* movement and try and get it into more detail. That will slow it down. Slowing it down will give the rhythm *distinction*, you see, rather than this balancing act that you try to do. And a lot of reasons you do it is because there is still the old building blocks of antecedent-consequence formations. That's the problem.

And if you're uptight but you don't want too much time to pass, you feel that music is flat and you're going to go pfft, you see, then it's close together and it's very difficult to really balance it out. No-one has balanced it out. The only way to balance it out is to have the right amount of notes in it the way Boulez…

Boulez balances out because he has the right amount of notes in it, you see, in this space. So take my advice and fluctuate it from inches [to] centimetres, see. But it's all in inches and when you do go to something in a sense, imagey, then it becomes very conventional. And you have all these, you know … the rhythmic AIDS disease of 1950: the *quintuplet.* [Laughter] It has killed off more composers than anything in the world, get rid of that quintuplet.

Find rhythm in other kind of structures rather than in these *quixotic* ones, find it for example in a new concept of rhythmic structures and analyse something - This is not a master class this is a misery class! [Laughter] - something like Satie's *Socrates* which is also the sameness of this language, in a sense. And notice the way the *crazy* rhythmic structures, in a sense, … almost serial: three measures – one measure, two measures, a very beautiful kind of *breathing*, breathings of *superimposed* structures rather than a structure, in a sense, *nose-to-nose, bumper-to-bumper* structures. That's the problem I find here. And of course the pacing because if you figure, well from going up here how long do I hold it, you see?

Another thing about this style if I may call it a style, is that you should work with a better piano. Do you compose at a piano? No? Well it's one of the problems because a *very* good piano …

I was out of the country once for two months and I gave Bunita Marcus the key to my place and she composed on my piano and she said, "Well, that's the whole secret for crying out loud, you are a faker!" She said, "Look what I did on your magnificent Steinway!"

She avoided certain registers, certain areas, she just got where it was real *swank* you know, everything, the *time* you know, everything because I have a magnificent instrument. So she found out, she found me out.

So if you are writing, if you are writing a piano piece and you're not using the piano it's like going on a honeymoon, *alone*. [Laugher]

Let's go onto Johan's piece. But we'll talk about … are you going to be here next week? We'll discuss rhythm. I feel in a sense that essentially I want to tell you to some degree this is all trumped up. I can come into a place, not even look at the music, then talk about the proficiency, the rhythmic language. Because it's everywhere, it's a *tremendous* problem.

If we're thinking this way [Taps the table with a regular rhythmic beat] and we try to fit something in, the minute we leave patterns, neo-classicism, we're in hot water, you know, we *are*. Especially in non-repetitive kind of situations you see. The minute we leave repetition patterns, the minute we leave Stravinsky, we're in trouble.

OK. So we *can* hear a programme. Tell us technically, technically.

JC: All right, there are nine sections.

MF: Nine sections.

JC: A lot of detail.

MF: It's important?

JC: Four themes I think.

MF: Four themes.

JC: I don't know anyone who is able to recognise them all.

MF: OK.

JC: And they're all … I think there might be a bit of Messiaen in it I'm not sure. Anyone recognising Messiaen? I don't give any money to them… so it basically moves through, either horizontally or vertically. I really can't say anything more than just about that.

MF: You mean it goes from the horizontal to the vertical or the vertical to the horizontal?

JC: No, there is not a process like that. It just … it just, like in the third section...

MF: Yes.

JC: The whole thing is based really on the chords.

MF: Yes, fixed pitches.

JC: And where section 1 is completely… [Demonstrates]

MF: I see what you mean.

JC: I think I used all of them like this in a kind of… in a kind of Bachian …I don't know…

MF: OK. I feel you come more out of the kind of Scriabin tradition, to some degree.

Do you know the *front piece*, most people never see it, they pass it by, they don't know it's a *front piece*, in the *Poem of Ecstasy*?

Well it's like this, the old Russian school, and in it there must be about ninety, where every measure is a scenario, you see, as it's going. Sometimes it's just the temple, sometimes it's just some kind of *exulté*, whatever, and it's in French.

I had problems with the piece. I think it's a degree also that I have problems rhythmically in terms of the [Taps the table with a regular rhythmic beat]. You have terrific skill in obtaining things, I would almost say the same thing to you that Boulez once said to me about John Cage. He says, "You know, I love John's mind but I don't like what it thinks." [Laughter]

I don't think you have a future in this music, I think you are better than your music.

JC: Yes I know that. [Laughter] No, I'm not being conceited now. I know that, I mean, that's potential and things like that.

MF: But this whole *idea*, this *scenario*: because what happens is, is that one move is going to be terrific, the next move is going to be lousy. That's what happens with this kind of evoking of the situation, you see.

It's *too* programmatic, while on the other hand someone like George Crumb, I'm not nuts about George's music but still I mean when all is programmatic it doesn't seem to come off, that programmatic. The programmatic goes into a kind of, another kind of ritualistic self-indulgent world but still there's something there. And a lot of things that really help Crumb are sections where he got away from the conventional type of music and created a kind of time world, though, of moving in and out of things all on its own. And it developed a certain type of authenticity. He captures you in a non-defined time world, you kept yours in a *too* defined time world. These are *boxes* you are making [Taps the table with a regular rhythmic beat].

Give it up, start all over again, I'm sure you are going to have a terrific success.

Can we hear the next piece please?

[Music is played]

MF: What is interesting is that I find this piece as far as *piano* writing goes, the most idiomatic. And if you will look at the scores, it's almost like four part writing and especially in the first movement.

The most interesting thing about the piece and something that younger composers should think about, not only in *this* music but in *other* music which idiomatically they might not feel that close to, is the wonders that you could do within one octave if you are listening the way *this* composer is listening.

And then what happens in the last movement, when you suddenly hear those high registers and it's absolutely very very beautiful, and shocking.

Here is another example of a mixture to some degree of styles, the way it marvellously, I don't know how you do it, I'll have to take a look at it and get into those dissonant world … and get out of it! [Laughs] Beautifully done. I'm going to take a look at this and just see.

Also, you see the problem is, how are you influenced by music which you don't particularly like? One of the biggest influences in my musical life was Copland and the only one that ever caught that was in Italy when a very spacey piece of mine was played and Bussotti was sitting next to me and he says, "You like Copland?" And I said, "I love him."

I lost my thought actually ... Oh, the fact that I have nothing to do with Copland and yet one of the most important pieces of my analysis class is - my *orchestral* analysis, that's the only thing I talk about at school. A very important piece is the first page of *Appalachian Spring*.

There's more information there, there's more change of colour - and yet there is very little, a few basic chords - than in most pieces in the 1960s era. But it's very difficult for the student to capture the perception of this change of colours in the score.

I think that we should have some tea and then come back and, and then continue a, maybe a talk which one can either ask me something or maybe it would be more fitting to ask the composers … or maybe some comments and some remarks.

You see, you become very liberal when you teach and by liberal I mean there's a marvellous definition of a liberal in America. And that is, that a liberal is a radical with two children. [Laughter]

And my two children is the far left and the far right. As a teacher and I have to deal with it. My feeling about it is a very upsetting remark by Freud in which he said, "Well if your neurosis doesn't get you, the world will." Let's have some tea.

[Tea break]

MF: .[...] going to join us next week in a composers' seminar that Peter Klatzow has *graciously* accepted my invitation, with a gun on his head, to join me in these seminars and I thought that maybe we could have a kind of trial run now about two of the pieces we heard today - Barry Jordan and Johan's piece. Is it Johan?

JC: It is.

MF: Yeah.

PK: I have to be very careful because Professor Feldman said, I am the one who stays here afterwards. And certainly in both these cases doubly so. In one of them, I take a certain amount of responsibility of being - in both cases - a guide for a considerable period. And also a publisher, which is a different kind of responsibility. But we can put all those things aside, I think, very easily. Because they're so

peripheral when you are talking about the music which is so definite - and discuss the various things. And I must say that first of all the thing that I find utterly refreshing about your teaching is the fact that you can talk about so much different kinds of music. We had an eminent composer/writer some many years ago - I'm not going to mention names - who actually was not interested in discussing any music which is even remotely unlike his. And there were some very ugly scenes and I am grateful and I'm happy that there have been no ugly scenes here which I suppose could have easily happened when you are dealing with a composer who is very definite as Johan Cloete is.

This piece, I think it would be easier if you had actually had a chance to see it because the observation that it is divided up into boxes is correct, that's absolutely right and I think that it's made even more clear by the score. What I want to say is are the boxes a problem? I'm not sure that the fact that it is divided up in this way is necessarily to its detriment. I think it's a different kind of music to the one that is a long endless scene which is harder to write in many ways - to keep it going to make a, almost a kind of Wagnerian thing out of it. Is Wagnerian right? An endless, you know, a river; a broad river that doesn't create hiatuses.

MF: Well, during the break I had a discussion with Johan and he said that my point of view is that everything is programmatic. Serial music is a programme, Xenakis' random walks is a programme. Tonal music, if we could define it, is a programme.

I mean what's *not* a programme? So it's a question of *material,* in a sense, that seems to *ride* it like you know just to ride *over* it. I mean what makes a work *memorable* in its programme, is a very, very interesting thing.

I think the minute it becomes memorable in that *one parameter* of its programme, it kind of jumps *out* of something and seems to be telling *another* story at the same time.

It becomes a very mysterious thing that if a work succeeds on the level we feel that we *want* it to succeed in, we kind of get a *bonus* from somebody, you see… and another *atmosphere*, another *emotion* comes in, you know, as a reward. [...] Anyway my suggestion was if everything is a programme anyway, that he should write music without this other literary programme and that the quality that he wants is going to be there anyway, that's the point.

PK: I would be interested to know, not having discussed this either privately and certainly not publically, if you read the programme which is about the arrival of a space ship and its greeting and children, may I read the titles of the sections? *Astral Horizon, Disappearance of the Sun, Arrival of Vagar, Astral Horizon, Calling the Children, Gathering of the Children, Sleep and Slow Exorcism One by One, Astral Horizon, Departure of Vagar from a Great Multitude*. There are things that can impress me in the piece and they are sort of almost like naïve with this broken E minor chord. The odd totally unprepared diatonic moments, the very simple repetitions. They are very effective. I would be quite interested to know from the composer if they came first, or if they are illustration. I think, I think you have problems with the programme when the programme comes first and it builds the piece and therefore everything that is in the piece is merely illustration. I think that very often with illustrative titles we might find them after the piece. Quite honestly with my own *Murmurs of Tiger and Flame* the piece was about three-quarters complete before I decided that would be a good title for it. The other thing about this kind of title and maybe even a programme is that it makes you play the piece in a certain way but that may itself be a limiting factor. For example if we look at your titled pieces, if we take *Madame Press Died Last Week at Ninety*, I think that makes us play that piece in a certain way, but is that the only way that it can be played? In other words it gives us a slant, it was described as an [...] piece, is it really an [...] piece, I mean do you think of it in these kind of terms?

MF: Not, no...

PK: So I suppose in this sense also the title can be misleading and limiting, maybe not misleading...

MF: In other words, I could not have a major third throughout the piece, not that quickly.

PK: Isn't there one, aren't the flutes playing a major third?

MF: Well you see it was only described as a minor third, the G to the E-flat. No, it is a major third.

PK: I mean, you're right, you have got a major third?

MF: I have got a major third. You know I got a, I wrote so many pieces but I know that there was something that I wanted to say about a third that I did have a major…

[Gap in recording]

MF: ...But I think that the whole idea of…being that everything is a programme, some programmes work fantastic, like the trills in the Scriabin and *Seventh Symphony* are fantastic. I mean I'm listening to that piece, I listen, I think, I listen to that piece, the record's worn out! Roger Woodward sent me the recording, I'm just nuts about it! In the *light,* in the light this, you know actually in the light, and the building and everything is fantastic. [...] Just as a programme you see the trills are *fantastic* and I think it helps the piece. I think it makes the piece a masterpiece.

Essentially programmatic. He's on a bridge looking over the Volga and he's walking back and he's picking on this thing that's going to kill him and he has the … in the lights, in the lights.

I get obsessive about [...] in my *Piano and Orchestra*, you know, it was like I was laughing to myself. It was like I was like Schumann in a nut house, just hearing A. I was just walking around, I just heard that D-flat on the piano. And the breathing, the breathing of the D-flat, and the action on the piano, and how could I articulate, no matter what I do, even if I had the pedal down. I can get the most complicated rhythm even with the pedal down and my hand down and still nothing to take away the rhythmic clarity, no matter what I did to that D-flat. And to me it was programmatic. I was obsessed with my D-flat. Why, I don't know. Maybe because I found that right note on the piano as a pivot where I could begin my piece. And I was asked to write another piano and orchestra piece and I sat down, I started to work and I went back to that same note as if that's the only note the piano could play in my hallucination now, it will take years before I could sit down and write another piano piece, a piano work.

So what's not a programme? The thing on discussion is…

For example if you are a born serialist you might not even have to write serial music. I mean I think my remark might sound a little strange, I mean I think it's *there*. It will *be in the music.*

PK: Yes, in this case I think not.

MF: No, but I think that Johan is always going to tell stories.

PK: Is this a kind of Schumannesque quality? I suppose …about it …in *that* way and also in the way it is built. I think it's like a kind of 150 year later *Kreisleriana*, it's mad. [JC groans] Did that hurt?

MF: The only problem that I don't like about any kind of story telling, whether it's serialism or whatever, is that it's manipulative. There's something manipulative about story telling. Technically or otherwise and I thought this piece was to some degree manipulative.

JC: I like that, actually. Because you're talking about the story which I was going to say before it started, that it came, I think, to the surfaces of my mind here, consciousness, when I read the blurb long before ET appeared in this country. Then ET appeared and Peter went to see it and he told me it was manipulative so…..

PK: I cried.

MF: So did the Queen of England. [Laughter]

JC: So you seem to agree with, is it really this, maybe it's the kind of story you don't like, the story might not appeal to you, is it the way it's told?

PK: What if we heard the piece without a story without any title, what if it was called *For Piano 1*? What? Do we lose anything?

MF: We lose this discussion. [Laughter]

JC: Anything else?

MF: It's the kind of piece where I think that you are always going to get somebody to make a story out of it. I mean you know if you look back, for example. I know that they are very provocative and you see what pianists were doing at the end of the last century with the Chopin *Preludes* which are marvellous pieces because they are stories. But the kind of scenarios that they dreamt up, and in such explicit detail, you know. The little C-sharp minor one which comes [Sings] and Talzig said this is moth flirting with the flame and at the end where it sort of resolves and there's this chord and that's where he gets burnt.

It's absolutely amazing and you know I think that with anything like this and these pieces probably in particular you are going to get somebody who's going to try and illustrate it in a certain way. I know that Lamar [Crowson] does this all the time even with very abstract pieces, he creates a scenario. Yeah.

He's a good pianist, he's got a good brain, it's capable of coping with abstract and other things but in order to make a certain projection if you like maybe that's a mistake too.

JC: It's for the students no?

MF: Yes it creates.

But there is nothing in it, say, pianistically where the pianist then can tell *their* story.

And what I'm really thinking about is one of the funniest situations I've had in my life. I was in a room where Gina Bachauer played *Pictures at an Exhibition*. So usually you know you're… [Sings first 7 notes of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, simultaneously knocking on table]

No! [Sings first note, knocking] - how the hell she did it! People were getting up… [Laughter] We can't even do that! It was fantastic and fabulous. What theatre! I never saw anything like it anywhere, what she did with that. It sounded great. Of course it was unnecessary.

But it wasn't the home of a Texas billionaire so she wanted to play in other homes.

Of course you are telling the level of yourself as a story teller, and [...] a Kafka you are not. So you're telling a story and at the same time you are the story teller and so it could boomerang you see.

I tell some stories, apparently some more gripping than other stories. That's like ET, you don't know in advance and then if you have a success with your ET, there's going to be an ET2 and then TE and so on, you see. So you become… really, you become enslaved not only with the story you are telling but the fact that you are the story teller.

JC: Well thank God nobody likes it, I wouldn't get into the first place. It's gone.

MF: What?

JC: This, I mean here on page - I don't know what page it is - it's *left,* hasn't it? But that's what I did, I wrote it out of myself. I mean that's the whole point of the piece that I wrote it out.

MF: Well what do you think about Barry Jordan's story?

PK: I could make a story up, it's a very abstract piece and I like its kind of….

MF: Why don't you give us a Talzigesque scenario?

PK: Well at the beginning you see there's this bat [Laughter] looking for light.

MF: What is this little rhythmic motive?

PK: It's a sick bat.

MF: I thought the octaves were the sick bat!

PK: Don't you think there is a certain kind of lesson to be learnt in writing the kind of music that you don't want to write? I know that very often I think that you can get something out of doing that. Barry is not an illustrative composer, in a way, and Johan is. That's why I think it's actually very interesting for us to talk about these two pieces in particular and I think it would be very good for Johan to write an absolutely dry, remote piece and very good for Barry too to write a more descriptive piece.

It's very funny because we heard a piece of yours called *Summer Music* and if you hadn't told me that was the title I would have never known that was *Summer Music*. To be honest it was still an abstract piece you know in the sense that even with the title I didn't get hot. [Laughter] Maybe you should cultivate that illustrative side of yours? To have it as a facet and vice versa.

I can't remember if you've ever written a really abstract piece which has not had a very explicit programme? Have you?

JC: Yes I have.

PK: When was that?

JC: I threw them away.

BJ: I threw my illustrative ones away.

JC: You know those *Terminal* things that I….

MF: Why don't you write a piece together?

JC: A piece which I broke the string in C7, the piano string.

PK: Which piece was that?

JC: *Terminal 2*. You see the minute that you call it *Terminal* I mean we're starting to look at various different things I mean…. Well that was Xenakis I thought it wasn't a story - normally Xenakis as a story teller.

MF: Yeah, I think that one should now be frightened and realise that everything is a story. I mean we are doing something are we not? We are not doing nothing, we are doing something. Now I can relax, I don't have to dream up these things any more.

PK: Have you ever written a film score?

MF: Under another name.

PK: John Williams? [Laughter and clapping]

MF: Luckily they were documentaries. One was on Australia and the other one was on American Samoa. And as far as the films I wrote on painters, I just put in my regular music, you know, regardless of the action you see. But the two [documentaries] was in a very financially crunchy period. I just got out of business and I was looking, trying to make a living in music. And I didn't look for these things. And my brother had a neighbour and he gave me these two jobs and I didn't use my… What was fun about it is that I had to find a style for it that was, of course… There was like two minutes in the Outback in Australia where I wrote my own music but as far as everything else I found a marvellous formula. The material was somewhat like Bernstein with classy modulations like the way he does and the orchestration was Varesian to some degree. Only because we were on a low budget [Laughter] and Varese has shown us historically that you can get a lot out of seven instruments.

PK: I think it would be very good for both these guys to write a long seamless piece. A piece in which there is little change and minimal evolution. In a sense I mean this is where I was very impressed with Carl's *Sonatina*, in the second movement was the actual rate of change and the extreme limit that it was contained in, particularly the opening of the slow movement, which I think is very, very good. And I think that that kind of disciplined writing must be in a composer's composing repertoire.

MF: The problem with music and it's very interesting, especially when you are writing it, and Berlioz many times knew how to do this. For example, hardly ever would you find a composition teacher telling a student, the way Sir Joshua Reynolds in a most important job in England at that time would criticise a painting because there's an area where the young painting student was making too much of it. And this is documented. He said, "You're making too much of it there." If you really go back, say, and listen to something like *Harold in Italy*, and that marvellous suspended section with just the ponticelli and the just those arpeggios. The way he's holding those moments. [...] And that's what makes this piece for me formally too episodic in those terms.

PK: Which piece?

MF: Not Barry's. Barry's piece is also a kind of disguised episodic style but he can get away with it. [Laughter] Johan can't. You see that's what happens. Do we make it? Do we think in a sense…how do you make it in a sense…call it a piece of music rather than a piece of theatre? What could make it, what could he do?

PK: It's interesting because I think that the piece that we heard last night, the one that René played, because the programme is less tangible in a way and in a sense also more metaphysical, it works as a long piece better with it's sort of extended melody.

I wasn't aware last night listening of any sections at all, although I know that they are there. And in that sense I think that it would have been very instructive. And I think that next week we *must* discuss that piece, that piano piece, because it seems to me that you have actually chosen a particular direction to go in and you have already achieved something that we are criticising in this piece in a way. Well I'm not criticising it I don't mind if the composer's section allows us too much so long as it's clear that he's doing it.

JC: I don't see it as criticism, I mean I even put double bars there.

PK: Yes, I know it is your intention but that - the first piece *He Who Shall Raise Up His Soul* - is not a sectional piece at all, that's one long line.

JC: Yeah, but only because of the integration of the melody.

PK: Yes.

MF: But I never know... For example this section here: *The Gathering of the Children.* I don't know if this is musically children. And then, I'm no different to anybody else. To me all I hear is the last moments of *Wozzeck*.

JC: I like that!

MF: Great moment isn't it?

JC: Yeah.

MF: As a kind of programmatic image of what does a child do on a stage? Or what the effect of the kid playing while we know what's happening as the curtain is going down. I mean at that certainly fantastic programme, there's nothing banal about it and it's sensational and not only is it a fantastic children image thing but it's one of the most fantastic ways to end an opera. How could you do an opera without ending it like that scene in *Wozzeck*?

PK: Karl, sorry you wanted to say something?

CW: Yeah. It doesn't have too much relevance now but I was thinking of an episode in my third year at UCT. I had written the piece. This piece had all the devices of counterpoint that you could think about - retrograde, augmentation and canon etc and I was so excited about this piece that I decided to send a copy to Copland, because he should know about it, which I did and, believe it or not, he responded with a letter back in which he said it was a very clever piece, it was musical but it showed no talent for composition. And then at the end he had a statement that has been simply fantastic throughout my career. He said only the composer knows how deep is his urge to write and to what extent he's prepared to take the consequences for it. I think it's the most incredible advice I have ever had.

PK: Sometimes the consequences are disastrous. We have to wind up because our next session is due to begin at 11 o'clock. Thank you, I'm really looking forward to seeing all of you here.