Morton Feldman: The Johannesburg Masterclasses, July 1983
Session 7: Works by Bunita Marcus

Transcribed by Dirk de Klerk

Voices heard:
Morton Feldman (MF)
Barry Jordan (BJ)
Dirk de Klerk (DdK)
David Kosviner (DK)
Peter Klatzow (PK)
Jacques de Vos Malan (JdVM)
Kevin Volans (KV)
Jeanne Zaidel-Rudolph (JZ-R)
Unidentified Voices (UV)

MF: How she [Bunita Marcus] arrives at her skills, I have really no idea. At an early age, I would say 26 or 25, which for an American is old already because you have so much college to go through. Americans don't find themselves until their early 30's, unfortunately.

So I think that [she has] a natural penchant for doing what she does very, very well.

There's not anything in her music - and this is going on for four pieces - that I can actually criticise.

Now whether this thing is a learned thing or an instinctual thing I don't know. When you get hold of a gifted student, it's a phenomenon. One seldom ever gets gifted students. And most of the universities, the reason they teach all these things is because they're not geared for the gifted student. Remember Hindemith's remark, when he said to somebody, "I invented something." He says, "You don't even have to be talented to use it."

Here's a perfect example of looking at the score. The whole secret of the piece is in the notation. And it's the notation which created another synthesis between the loose and the tight, the loose and the tight. Which is essentially a dialectical piece. OK.

[A recording of Bunita Marcus's piece *Music for Japan (1983)* is played]

MF: It's not a question of saying, if you're going to study hard you're going to go to heaven. It's a question of, what are skills? Forget about whether you like the music or not, there is undeniable skill.

I think it's one of the best pieces to demonstrate to people that say that music or notation doesn't have to be difficult. And I think the piece demonstrates that they are wrong. That the only way you can get that particular type of instrumental presence is only because of what is done on the page.

I learned a lot from that piece. And it's quite eclectic in terms of the taste. For example, she hardly ever listens to classical music on a record. It's always a recent rock record: The Police, Blondie… Many times I walk in, and I have to walk out. [Laughter]

So it was very interesting. And you get that, you know, that flute thing... [Sings]. That wouldn't have entered into it from someone at Yale, for example, where you get a monolithic style and a monolithic approach, you know. So it's interesting how she opens up the window and lets things come into her music.

Again, remember I told you the instinct, or the reflex, of a performer for catching on to things? That is to me very demonstratable on that little thing, that little clarinet thing. Like, just where did it come from? And a lot of things in the piece is, *where did they come from*? Or that beautiful ascending line - I think it's gorgeous. Where is it? To me it's a startling moment.

I just want to find it.

KV: On page 19.

MF: Yes, isn't that gorgeous! Where did it come from? Of course, the *scale*, I suppose.

And to me the thing that freaks me out, and I looked at it over and over again, I don't think I have the skills to do it, I really mean it. Humbly. It's on page 21, before she goes back to those chords. The "slightly agitated." You look at it, and when you hear it, it's not the same. Which is very interesting about notation

and the phenomena of notation and the music. And *another* question - and a *serious* question - and maybe the most important question that I could raise here is, “To what degree should the music sound like the way it looks?”

This does not sound the way it looks, especially a passage like this. You have no idea of the… of that lacing, of that delicacy. It looks… I don't know. I looked at it a lot. I can't see, I can't see how the hell it comes out so clear and clean and elegant, you know. I'm amazed. I analysed and I listened to it at least ten times and I don't know how the hell... [...]

As you can see, I'm very enthusiastic about this girl. And I think she's something to be enthusiastic about. I'm never going to have [another] student like her as long as I live. Never. Skills.

PK: Is she prolific?

MF: Yes.

PK: She writes a lot?

MF: She writes enough. She writes in spurts.

She's always writing down notes. [...] You would find posters like, “*The Enemy: Feldman”* and “*The Enemy: Xenakis*”! It's like Berlin in 1934, like a propaganda ministry there: “*The Enemy!*”

And then she has cards. She keeps cards, and in the cards are all kind of attitudes - about instruments, about notation, about everything. Like, she's going to school with *herself*, and seeing through the weeks how she's changing her own mind. So in that sense she keeps also a diary of it.

You can see she's involved with the literary aspect. Again, speaking of *programmatic*, or *programme*, she's very, very concerned that notation cannot really get the character of what she wants. At first it bothered me somewhat. Words, you know, like “terse”, “mechanical”, this or that. But now I feel it helps. […]

[Gap in recording]

MF: Notice that [for Bunita Marcus] the influence did not come really from composition, but from something like Jasper Johns and Beckett, which gets back to a very, very, very important point, very important point.

You know, when Schoenberg asked Mahler to talk to his students, Mahler walked in, looked at all the kids […] and he said, “Read Strindberg!”

Well, we know what he means by that, what he really means is that musicians and composers are not educated. Or, they don't have intellectual curiosity.

I spent seven hours with Boulez, just talking about Melville. [...] How *knowledgeable* he was about all of Melville's books, and this and that, was actually very interesting.

Now Stockhausen is no dope either. And John Cage, I don't know what subject he's not an authority on. Except, he's a very bad poker player!

We used to play. You know it's difficult for two people to play poker. So the only way we could play poker was having everything wild except threes, or something like that. [Laughter] I got fifteen aces, or I got sixteen. And I was very rough like in the movies. We would play-act this. And he lost. And we were just playing for everything, gold and money and everything we had. And I was playing in his apartment. And he wanted to play his hand but he was out of money. He went under his bed - he wrote a film on Alexander Calder, the mobile man - and he brings out this thirty thousand dollar Calder! [They he played and] calmly lost! I took the Calder! [...]

That was marvellous. This bet on the Calder, like you bet on your ranch, your plantation. It was like those movies where you bet your whole plantation!

What was I talking about? Or what was I raving about?

BJ: You only said that John Cage wasn’t an authority on poker.

MF: Oh, talking about the lack of intellectual curiosity...

But really, I think it's extremely important. I never met a composer of any striking characteristics that's a dope. Very connected. Even composers I don't like. Virgil Thompson is the most erudite man you could ever meet. Things like that. So you know what I'm trying to say. Sometimes they go a little too far afield, like Wagner.

JdVM: Don't you feel that this piece is very beat orientated, even when she's getting away from the beat.

MF: I I don't think that it's beat orientated really. I feel that it's placement orientated.

BJ: Something that worried me - more about the performance, maybe, than the actual music - is that it comes back to what we were talking about, the measured silences. In fact, by my counting at any rate, almost every chord came too early for the amount of silence that was actually notated.

MF: Yes, but why criticise a gift horse in the mouth? Could *you* put on a performance of this piece in South Africa?

BJ: No, but that's not what I'm saying.

MF: No, you know what I mean... I mean, in a sense, I don't want that much out of a performance as you do. I really don't. Because I know that maybe the rehearsal was better. And then they did it again for a recording for the radio station, and that was maybe even worse. So the whole calculation of all the pieces that I know of, the big named pieces, that I've heard, is you get out of it a lot of experience and you don't expect that much.

That's the last thing I did when I got a tape of this piece, is to see how correct it was. Now there could have been a *lot* of problems. She conducted it, only because she could see they didn't have that much time for rehearsals, and obviously there are rehearsal problems in this piece. It was the first time she ever conducted a group. She did a little conducting, but not something of this nature.

So this is a very, very important group. And she was very upset and very uptight, getting out there for the first time, working with the group. She might have been at fault, not the musicians with their performance actually.

To me as long as the piece gets there, I'm happy. I think this piece gets there in this performance. But as far as beat oriented, I don't know. And is that good or bad? I mean, someone, Jacques, could say, “Hey, this piece is beat [Bangs on table] orientated, you know. By God!” So I don't know, is it detrimental or is it a virtue, the fact that something is beat oriented?

JdVM: I don't think it's either, but I think that one should just be aware of it.

MF: Alright, let's get back to the beat. Why has that become for a certain type of writing a kind of, like a, “the curse of the beat.” Why has it?

Actually, what was beautiful about her piece was the loose writing, and then, when you got to the pattern and the *back and forth* between. I think the biggest influence actually after all my accolades and everything, I think the biggest hero essentially- though I might have wanted it to be me! - is really Stravinsky. Especially in terms of that “no dynamic” which he has, that “no dynamic,” and just putting everything in the right place and the tight chord. Everything is tight, everything is equalled out, and that fantastic instrumental presence. If the piece has *anything* it certainly has that instrumental presence. And if she uses the beat, then maybe it cannot get that instrumental presence without it. I'm on her side, not even on my own. Because I'm the first one that murdered the beat. It was like Rasputin what I did to the beat. I banged the beat on the head, I drowned him, I shot it, I cut off its neck, and it’s still beating! [Laughter]

[...]

PK: The thing I find actually very interesting about this piece particularly is this kind of stratification that occurs, instrumentally, throughout the piece. And it becomes even more interesting when it's stops occurring, or occurs between just a few instruments, as it does from time to time. But the layers are actually very well defined, and you hear them.

MF: Does it look apparent on the score that you could hear them, without hearing it?

PK: Yes, you can.

MF: You can see it on the score.

PK: But you can also hear them.

MF: Yes.

PK: I think maybe the big Stravinsky influence in this piece, since you mentioned it, is the way it's divided up into block structures. Very clearly.

MF: Yes.

JdVM: That actually worried me. Not the fact that it's divided, but the fact that two blocks are never allowed to merge.

JZ-R: But they do I think And I thought it reminded me so much of the Stravinsky’s *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*. Exactly the same kind of….

MF: Which is a favourite piece of hers, she wrote a marvellous paper on it.

JZ-R: But in its placement and also in the way it was constructed, it just kept reminding me of that piece.

JdVM: I don't see where the blocks merge. I hear them very separate.

MF: The thing that we've got to remember that she is into this sort of doing it again another way, and that's I think the way the blocks work. Because they don't work as blocks any more, because they're being done another way, I think. You can hear the connection.

PK: Page 10 going onto 11. It's interesting in the way that she drops out the xylophone very gradually. That's a kind of emergence.

JdVM: It's all part of the same block, in comparison to what comes on top.

PK: It's working its way to a different kind of material, in a sense. And then the overlap occurs, for example.

JdVM: And there is another place towards the end where it also happens. Where things start dropping out. But that's, well, maybe that's the exception that proves the rule.

Do you feel that a notation like this encourages a kind of knife-edge tension in the performance, and that it could be useful from that point of view?

MF: It gives them just a little bit… How much room do you need? How much room do you need? For example, with the violinist that played my piece and he'd never played music like this before. He didn't understand it, he was nervous. What do you tell someone like that? You tell them, "Come right on the stage, don't play until you're relaxed." You know what I mean? "And then play." He doesn't realise that all he's waiting is just three seconds. But what the hell is three seconds? As they're settling down in their seats, he has to come out, go out on the podium and he has to start right away, otherwise he's going fall to the floor.

It's the same thing with her notation. It relaxes the player to make that move within just a *little* bit. You don't *need* that much. It's this is a compromise between "composition", in quotes, and "performance".

UV: Is this why she writes those rests in page one?

MF: Pardon me?

UV: On page one, why she writes rests and not on the beat. Just empty. A certain uncertainty.

MF: Well, she thinks it gets the sound she wants. She herself is a performer, she's an excellent clarinettist.

KV: So you breathe on the down beat?

MF: Yeah. [...]

I'm using this piece as a model in my my orchestration seminar.

The big run, the big scale on page 8, try orchestrating a section like that. And you really actually see is that… well, let's put it this way: She hears an instrument in a certain place and she finds a note. She doesn't find a note and then orchestrate it for the instrument. So she has this coming out, whatever her notes are. She just finds that right note for the instrument.

That's an extremely technically hard thing to do, to get that tightness on that kind of… Oh, by the way, she hated this instrumentation. It took a month to get started. She didn't like this instrumentation at all. "*What the hell am I going to do with a harp?"*

DK: Was it a commission from ARK [Sound-Space ARK Ensemble, Japan]?

MF: It was a commission.

I like the way she uses the harp. She uses the harp in a very dangerous register, thinking that it would speak with these instruments.

So the orchestration of this passage, even the orchestration of the bottom with the xylophone and the temple block and the harp. It's just marvellous the way she adds the clarinet too.

Her balances are pretty precarious. I think the whole idea… I don't even know if I like it. I never heard of a xylophone solo. Do you know any xylophone solos? Do you know any piece of any decent reputation with the xylophone solo like this? I don't know of any.

PK: There's something in Shostakovich, but I'm trying to remember what it is.

MF: Oh that name again! [Laughter]

DK: Oh, there's lots of percussion. It's not actually sort of solo in that sense. He often uses it more to highlight sort of the whole thing.

PK: No, but there is a long solo in one of the ballets, I think it's *The Bolt*.

MF: The only time I ever use it as a kind of instrumental image is in my cello and orchestra piece. And all I would have it going, just like... [Sings] against the... [Sings] in a conventional way, the way you use a xylophone.

So I thought aesthetically this was a little bit off-colour. Like for me, out of my aesthetic, the whole extension of a xylophone would be an off-colour joke or something. She believed it. Again this whole business about, she's also a person who really believes in her material, even though her material doesn't seem to be like material. And you can get something like those obbligatos between the piano and the harp. I think it's just gorgeous that thing. Now if you're just going to think of an obbligato... [Sings] It's elegant. It's a little bit out of me. I could have written it. In fact [like] my obbligato in *Why Patterns?* a little bit. That kind of elegant, just the right note. But the way she would take it and orchestrate it, and it becomes other than just an obbligato.

Also, my last comment. And I'm really using it as a kind of discussion thing in terms of: *What's material? How important is orchestration to a piece? Do the notes alone tell the story? Does orchestration alone tell the story?* And all this kind of thing. Very, very important.

Can we dismiss it? Like Schoenberg dismissed Stravinsky? "Mere orchestration," that's the way he got rid of Stravinsky. "Mere orchestration." So it's interesting.

Would we consider a scale material? Do you know what I mean? How to make it abstract? I think it's pretty gutsy to get an idea of a scale. I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't do it in a million years.

PK: It's interesting. If you're going to use chords like, then why not use scales? It's like sort of filling in the gap between the top and bottom. It's doing one thing and doing it another way. I can see, in a sense, how she arrives at that. It's just a different kind of space.

[...]

MF: She has a dialectic going on in every parameter: the tight and the loose, the tight and the loose. And I think she got it from that marvellous paper she wrote on Boulez, in which she discusses the tight and the loose in Boulez.

She really is a theorist with a lot of talent, rather than a composer who is a good theorist.

PK: Why didn't you bring her with you?

MF: It was too expensive and also she is just moving from Buffalo into New York, she's looking for a place. But she has some other pieces which I am going to send to Jacques. A marvellous piece for a long flute solo [*Solo (1982)*].

One of my favourite pieces, even more than this, is a piece for two pianos and violin [*Two Pianos and Violin (1981)*]. That aggravates the hell out of me, it's so beautiful!

JdVM: Just the combination is annoying.

MF: Oh, it's sensational.

PK: Is she going to publish?

MF: Well, you know, when you try to push a friend and a student and you have the connections... We were in the lobby of Lincoln Centre. And there's the publisher I know from another company that I'm involved in. And we start talking and everything, and I mention aside about Bunita. And he looks at her, and he says, "Why don't she call me and come to see me?" So she thanked him graciously. And I wait a week and I say, "Did you ever call up that guy?" And she said, "No, I'm not ready for a publisher yet."

But let's close the afternoon with this whole idea about skills and non-skills.

I always felt just like that student that said to me, "How can you write for a piano today?" The kid doesn't play the piano, he doesn't know piano literature, he doesn't know the difference between one piano and another piano. And they say, "How could you write for the piano today?" And that's the aggravation I have as a teacher. I feel there is a possibility in that history has changed. Usually for two reasons: Either the new generation doesn't have the skills of the older one, or the new generation has more skills than the older one. [Laughs] I have a very *personal* sense of history. I relate *personally*. I get upset about history.
This marvellous painter, De Kooning, he once was sitting at a table. And we got into a discussion about Mondrian, his countryman. I thought he was going to have a heart attack! He started to say, "That son of a bitch, that son of a bitch, is he going to tell me that painting is over?" He took it personally, you see. And you *should*.

However, if you listen to someone with a lot of skills, are you going to say to yourself, "This person is telling me that I don't have much skill?"