

On Patterns in a Chromatic Field

by Erik Ulman

*The following notes were first published in the program for a performance of Morton Feldman's *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* (1981) by Charles Curtis, cello, and Aleck Karis, piano, on October 6, 2010, at the University of California San Diego, USA. They are reproduced here by kind permission of the author.*

"I feel that I listen to my sounds, and I do what *they* tell me, not what I tell them. Because I owe my *life* to these sounds."

Morton Feldman defined composition as least as much in terms of attention as invention, as an attempt to elicit creation from his medium's essential nature, from sound in time. This is the core, at once mystical and materialist, of his aesthetic, in which existential responsibility and an ideal purity meet in "a unity that leaves one perpetually speculating."

But the nature of sound (especially for one who composes at the piano) is to disappear. 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. Feldman's work, from his early graph scores to the late epics, concentrates almost exclusively on quietness, near-stasis, nuance to reveal this essential ambiguity of

sound: “Decay, ... this departing landscape, this expresses where the sound exists in our hearing—leaving us rather than coming toward us.” Occasionally Feldman dramatizes this departure, rupturing the fragile texture of his music with vehement attacks; elsewhere he finds a structural analogy for it, letting the instrumentalists drift apart inexorably from a common beginning. *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* does not employ such strategies; it even seems to contradict them, in the blockiness of its construction, the resistance of its panels of ostinati to erosion. But erosion sets in nonetheless: the ostinati are imperfect, their variability of detail dissolving the identity of material in the very act of establishing it; and the work’s large scale is unsupported by apparent narrative, architecture, or functional harmony (which, Feldman objected, “hears for us, ... like going to a public accountant”).

In following this path, Feldman leaves behind Cage’s ideology of “sound in itself” without rejecting it. Metaphor inheres in the phenomenon of sound, making music an image of loss, of the approach of death. *Patterns*, like Feldman’s other late works, builds disappearance and remembrance into the musical substance as the piece “dies of old age.” Its continuity evades logic. Panels succeed others of utterly different character and scale, without transition or apparent consequence: minutes of near motionlessness follow unexpectedly on frenetic figuration. A fragment will recur in subtly altered guise—shifted in register, at a different speed, superimposed on something alien—without fulfilling recurrence’s traditional implications of stability or development. Some apparently fundamental patterns are forgotten and never surface again; other gestures, sometimes of bewildering eccentricity (a series of rising double glissandi, a single repeated ponticello tone, brief forays into the extremes of the piano’s range),

happen once and vanish. Such thwarting of expectation constitutes Feldman's "conscious attempt at 'formalizing' a disorientation of memory ... There is a suggestion that what we hear is functional and directional, but we soon realize that this is an illusion; a bit like walking the streets of Berlin—where all the buildings look alike, *even if they're not.*"

Disorientation arises not only from an elusive continuity but from the smallest details. Throughout his work Feldman is preoccupied with "in-betweenness," a reliance on values that resist perceptual differentiation. Feldman often spoke of the inspiration he derived from the variation of color ("abrash") and pattern he found in Anatolian rugs: "'Abrash' is that you dye in small quantities. You cannot dye in big bulks of wool. So it's the same, yet it's not the same. It has a kind of micro-tonal hue. So when you look at it, it has that kind of marvelous shimmer which is that slight gradation." The title *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* suggests the analogy with rug-making, the weaving of figures from narrow bands of neighboring pitches and rhythmic values.

Take *Patterns*' opening, variants and echoes of which pervade the whole work. The piano repeatedly alternates between two versions of the same three note cluster, the first low and in close position, the second high and open, whose adjustments of rhythmic profile and placement Aleck Karis conveys with painstaking delicacy in this recording. Against this, the cello, in husky artificial harmonics located, unusually, on its lowest string, permutes four neighboring tones in a slightly lopsided rhythm—always a version of 9 in the time of 8 thirty-second notes, always three sixteenths and one dotted sixteenth, but with the latter always shifting position. Feldman is aiming at the exact border between regularity and irregularity, at an almost imperceptible nuance: "The patterns

that interest me are both concrete and ephemeral, making notation difficult. If notated exactly, they are too stiff; if given the slightest notational leeway, they are too loose. Though these patterns exist in rhythmic shapes articulated by instrumental sounds, they are also in part notational images that do not make a direct impact on the ear as we listen. A tumbling of sorts happens in midair between their translation from the page and their execution.”

Realizing these “notational images” makes extreme demands on the performers’ skill and concentration. For the cello the complications of Feldman’s notation comprise not only rhythm but also consistently eccentric enharmonic spellings: its opening “chromatic field” is written not as, for example, A, A flat, G, B flat, but, awkwardly, as B double flat, A flat, F double sharp, A sharp, implying infinitesimal microtonal deviations and alienating sound from how the music looks. For Feldman, this difficult notation alters “the focus of the pitch,” and as such prevents a “hardening of the categories”: “Which gets us, believe it or not, to why I use the [microtonal] spelling ... When you’re working with a minor 2nd as long as I’ve been, it’s very wide. I hear a minor 2nd like a minor 3rd almost ... It depends on how quickly or slowly that note is coming to you, like McEnroe. I’m sure that he sees that ball coming in slow motion. And that’s the way I hear that pitch. It’s coming to me very slowly, and there’s a lot of stuff in there.” Charles Curtis projects this field of enharmonic discrepancy with particular care. When, for example, Feldman follows a G double sharp with a B double flat, Curtis’ inflection foregrounds the microtonal friction, both illuminating the underlying instability of the entire pitch world and attaining a moment of special poignancy.

As Feldman remarked, the unity of what he called the Abstract Experience leaves one “perpetually speculating.” This speculation

is another form of the in-betweenness, the neither/nor, the shimmering one finds throughout his music. It is both anxiety and pleasure, the attention to an ambiguity that both tempts and eludes rational formulation, emotional absorption, relaxed sensuality. "Death is the mother of beauty," writes Wallace Stevens; only her terror and "sure obliteration" can yield "fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires." As *Patterns* moves inexorably into silence, frustration and loss yield, if not fulfillment, beauty; near the work's end, as a last variant of the opening material opens with unexpected lyricism into a higher register and then finds its way back down, this blossoming of melody from stasis hints at a paradise lying just out of reach of permanence.

Quotations from Morton Feldman, *Essays* (Kerpen: Beginner Press, 1985: 237; 104; 89; 159; 203; 127; 193; 132; 192), and from "Sunday Morning" by Wallace Stevens.

♩ 63-66 Norton Feldman

50nd. *pppp*

no ped. →

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The first page of the score. The space of the page resembles a rug, the four horizontal bands “ornamented” with repeating, slightly varying patterns. The second strain in the cello is an exact retrograde of the first strain, except for the ninth bar, which repeats its corresponding bar prograde, perhaps because of its parallel position on the page.

The image displays a handwritten musical score, likely for a piano, organized into four systems. Each system consists of three staves: a top staff (treble clef), a middle staff (treble clef), and a bottom staff (bass clef). The notation is dense and complex, featuring numerous accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals), dynamic markings (e.g., *pp*, *ff*, *mf*), and various musical symbols such as slurs, ties, and articulation marks. The score is written in a cursive, handwritten style, suggesting it may be a composer's draft or a personal manuscript. The first system spans 8 measures, the second 8 measures, the third 8 measures, and the fourth 8 measures, totaling 32 measures. The notation includes many complex chords and arpeggios, particularly in the middle and bottom staves, and a more melodic line in the top staff. The overall impression is one of a highly technical and expressive musical composition.

The second page.

Handwritten musical score for piano and cello. The piano part (top staff) is marked "Pizz" and features a sequence of five chords, each with a $\frac{17}{6}$ time signature. The cello part (bottom staff) features a sequence of five chords, each with a $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature. The notes in the piano part are mirrored in the cello part, creating a reciprocal canon effect. A "ped." marking with an arrow is at the bottom left.

The first three pitches in the cello are echoed by the last three in the piano, and vice versa, although spelled differently; a kind of reciprocal canon. Three durations are distributed each time differently across each bar, such that the two instruments only rarely coincide.

The second bar elongates the durations of the first bar, just barely.

Handwritten musical score for piano and cello. The piano part (top staff) shows two measures of music with a $\frac{7}{8}$ time signature. The cello part (bottom staff) shows two empty measures, indicating that the piano part is playing alone in this section.

Later in the piece, the elongated durations from the previous example are notated differently (with exactly the same rhythmic value); the piano punctuates these with attacks on the $\frac{7}{8}$ pulse.

Handwritten musical score for piano and cello. The piano part (top staff) shows two measures of music with a $\frac{7}{8}$ time signature. The cello part (bottom staff) shows two measures of music with a $\frac{1}{2}$ time signature. The piano part is punctuated with attacks on the $\frac{7}{8}$ pulse.

From the second note of the second bar, a five-note “micro-chromatic” descending scale: g-double-sharp, b-double-flat, g-sharp, a-flat, f-double-sharp.

A microtonally compressed “dies irae”-like motif, in which the third note is subtly lower than the first.

Pizz.

arco

$\frac{1}{2}$ ped. $\rightarrow$

$\frac{1}{2}$ ped. $\rightarrow$

$\frac{1}{2}$ ped. $\rightarrow$

$\frac{1}{2}$ ped. $\rightarrow$

Late lyrical material. Clearly an echo of the very opening of the piece, each bar is now fractionally longer, giving the melodies some breathing room.

Handwritten musical score for piano and cello. The score is divided into four systems. Each system has a piano part (bottom staff) and a cello part (top staff). The piano part features complex rhythmic patterns with many beamed notes and accidentals. The cello part features a series of sustained notes, some with accidentals, and a "tutti" marking. Pedal markings are present at the beginning of each system. The notation is in a handwritten style with various accidentals and dynamic markings.

From the third bar of the top system, the cello quotes the opening pitches of the piece for seven bars, with exactly the same sequence of notes and the same spelling, but different rhythms (ten "real" thirty-second notes rather than nine over 4 sixteenths); the piano refers to its opening material without quoting it verbatim.