

Looking for the space between the notes

An interview with Nils Vigeland about Morton Feldman

In March 2018, Nils Vigeland kindly agreed to be interviewed for the Morton Feldman Page website. Chris Villars compiled a set of questions from which Nils chose those below to answer. We are very grateful to Nils for his generosity in sharing with us these recollections of Morty, and his deep insights into his music.

CV: In Feldman's music, I am always struck by the interrelationship of one sound to the other, both in terms of time and also of pitch. I can see that his very complex rhythmic notation created these split-second spacings of his various sounds. I always wondered how a performer could even decipher all those duplets and double and triple dotted notes! Would you please shed some light on his notation choices?

NV: There are at least four different kinds of rhythmic notation running throughout Feldman's music, some for only certain fixed periods and others resurfacing at different times. The four types with some examples are:

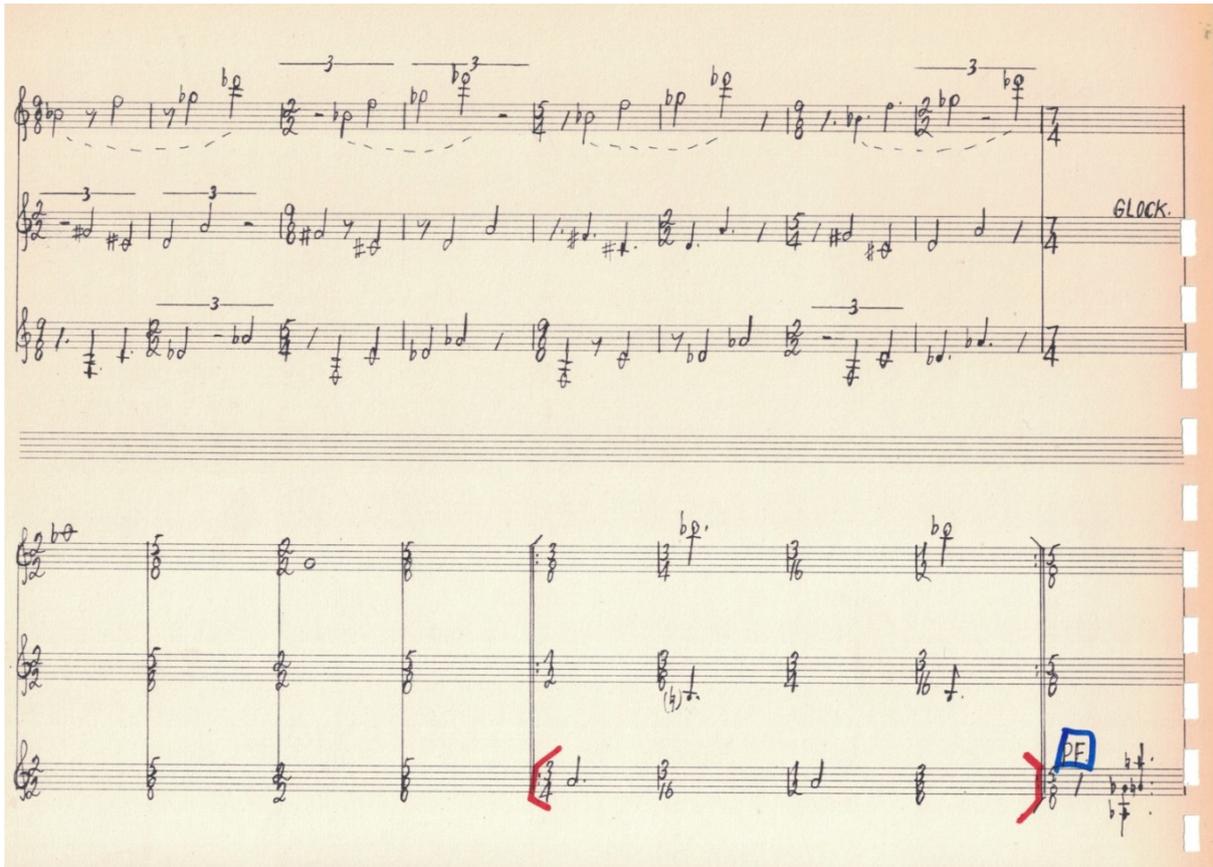
conventionally notated with synchronized fixed values
(*Journey to the End of the Night*/1947, *Coptic Light*/1985)

free duration in which each player realizes their part
rhythmically independent of others
(*Durations 2*/1960)

strictly notated individual parts but non-synchronized composite
(*Crippled Symmetry*/1983)

graph notation in which a number of notes must be played
within a given amount of time
(*Out of 'Last Pieces'*/1961)

Certain kinds of Feldman's notation look complex but aren't difficult to play because the rhythms are not polyphonic, they are breathing indications. For example this from *For Philip Guston*:



One could argue that this example is fixed in its vertical relationship as each part has a specific value. However, the intention of the notation is to shape similar material at different speeds free of the tyranny of a shared barline. The notation allows each player to play without accent, to float the sound, difficult to do when a conductor or a shared barline must organize different tempi under the control of a single pulse.

More important though than any performance difficulties that might arise from Feldman's notation is that rhythmic variation was for him essentially the most important generator of continuity in his music. Where historically pitch variation moved more rapidly than rhythmic variation, Feldman was one of the first to invert that formula. The first page of *For Christian Wolff* is a remarkable example. The pitch content while variable in sequence is fixed in intervallic content and register. What changes is the rhythmic iterations of the three notes in three instruments. Of the 39 iterations each contained within one 9/8 measure, 19 are different. Here is their sequence where a number represents an iteration and the return of the number its repetition. R indicates a silent measure. Each staff has nine measures, a grid Feldman used constantly in his extended duration pieces.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	7	12	13	2	4	14	5
11	14	15	16	6	17	18	19	16
11	R	15	R	11	7	R	6	10
18	R	4	12	16	18	R	19	R

Only one iteration is repeated 4 times and one might conjecture it was chosen because it is the clearest projection of 9/8 as compound ternary: Dotted Quarter/Dotted Quarter/Quarter/Eighth.

CV: How did Feldman come to invite you to be a member of his group, “Morton Feldman and Soloists”? When you first encountered and began to perform his music, what initial difficulties did you encounter, and how did he advise or help you with these?

NV: At the same time as I was pursuing a doctorate in Composition at The University at Buffalo (1973-1976), I was also formally studying piano again with Yvar Mikhashoff.

This led to a Masters degree in Performance and obligatory recitals. I also played and conducted a lot of student work as well. On one of my degree recitals I played the Ives’ *First Sonata* and Feldman heard that performance. He invited me to play it again, paired with Yvar playing the *Concord Sonata* on a June in Buffalo concert in 1976. The following summer he was invited to England for lectures at Dartington and Huddersfield and asked to bring musicians with programs of his choice. The musicians were Eberhard Blum, flute, Martha Herr, soprano, Nora Post, oboe, Jan Williams, percussion and myself.

I didn’t play any Feldman on that tour but did perform Satie’s *Socrate* with Martha Herr and the Charles Griffes’ *Piano Sonata* which Feldman liked very much.

In 1980 I started an ensemble in NY (The Bowery Ensemble) and its core repertoire was the New York School. On the first program was Feldman’s *Instruments I*. It was the first performances of *Crippled Symmetry* with Eberhard and Jan in Berlin however that marked the

beginning of my extensive performance of his music including the German premiere of *For Philip Guston* and the first performance of *For Christian Wolff* at Darmstadt.



Rehearsing *For Christian Wolff*-Darmstadt 1986 (l to r: NV, MF, Eberhard Blum)
Photo by Ann Holyoke Lehmann

In rehearsals Feldman never looked at a score and, once the music was under way, he would seldom interrupt. His participation in rehearsals was largely confined to placing the instruments on stage so that their projection was to his liking. I don't ever remember him singling out any detail of a performance in a critical way. While of course he knew the music better than anyone else, he listened to it in a different way than he had composed it because the real time experience of the performance was in a sense entirely new to him.

One aspect of the first performance of *Crippled Symmetry* is noteworthy and that has to do with the celesta part. During the first few minutes of our first rehearsal, Feldman came on stage and said to me that something sounded odd to him about the celesta. The instrument I was playing on was a five octave celesta which has additional lower octave than the at the time more common four octave instrument which has as its lowest note Middle C. Conventional celesta parts are notated an octave lower than sounding but I made the assumption (there was no note in the score) that Feldman had written the music at sounding pitch, hence the reason for the five octave instrument.

I was playing everything an octave lower than he had intended. However, he asked me to continue playing the music this way and after the rehearsal instructed me to do so in the performance. This is the only instance I know of Feldman ever adjusting a register. After Morty's death, Eberhard, Jan and I continued to play and record (on the Hat Art record label) as The Feldman Soloists the four pieces for flute, percussion and piano. Our last performance together was of *Crippled Symmetry* at June in Buffalo 2000. This live performance has been released on Frozen Reeds records.

Maintaining concentration and equality of sound projection are the primary difficulties of performing the extended length pieces of Feldman. Because they often have non-synchronized parts, much of the music cannot be rehearsed in the conventional manner of isolating particularly passages as the relationship of the instruments is not fixed.

For Christian Wolff is the exception to this notation in the four pieces I have mentioned.

The strangest thing about performing these pieces is that it is possible much of the time to be both a listener and a performer. In certain kinds of music in which traditional norms of difficulty – rapid articulation, register and dynamic shift, as well as polyphonic rhythmic interplay – apply, one has to concentrate on the act of playing the notes so hard that an appreciation of the composite sound is not possible. For long stretches of these pieces though, freed from a common barline with often just a few notes to play, a kind of flexibility is given to the performers in which they seem to be creating the sounds already written. This is something like what happens in improvised music though of course there the result is not knowable.

In conclusion I would say that Feldman wrote *Crippled Symmetry*, *For Philip Guston* and *For Christian Wolff* because he trusted that his intentions would be understood. This is especially true of Eberhard and Jan who performed *Why Patterns?* with Morty on many occasions as well many other of his pieces during Feldman's years in Buffalo. The existence of these pieces has everything to do with Morty's admiration for these players.

CV: As you mentioned another time, as a great teacher, Feldman never encouraged his students to compose like him. While you were

still studying with him, did you have an inclination to compose Feldmanesque music?

Feldman often appeared to say that composition could not be taught. Nevertheless he fulfilled the role of Professor of Composition and gave very many seminars and masterclasses. What, in the end, do you think his attitude to teaching was?

NV: I'll respond to these two questions together as they are intertwined. Feldman had two methods of teaching. The first was to show you what he himself was working on and to comment on what he was composing. He did this by actually playing the music or a part of it, often singing as he played. It was not uncommon for a very large portion of a lesson to be occupied in this way. However, his obvious delight in what he was showing you was difficult to resist and he showed how his discovery of the music was very much a result of his tactile and vocal relationship with sound. In the period when I first began studying with him (Fall 1973) he was working with very limited intervallic content, often two adjacent half steps – (0,1,2) in Fortean notation – in very long melismatic chains. I remember asking him why he didn't expand the range of the melos, to which he replied "I'm looking for the space between the notes". This kind of answer, both a joke and a truth, finds some expression in his penchant for notating the same pitches enharmonically. He didn't approach this in a "scientific" way, that is as an exploration of tuning, but rather, much like his rhythmic variation, as a way of extending the reiteration (he did to like the term repetition) of constricted material.

Feldman's other method of teaching was to find some passage in a student's work, isolate it, and turn it inside out. He had absolutely no interest in a global discussion of form or harmonic "planning" (etc.) nor, even if the student brought in, say, a piano piece which they could play, in hearing it played. Rather, having located a passage of interest to him in the student's work, he would subject it to two forms of variation – instrumentation and notation. These were, essentially the only things he felt were possible to comment on. And he was able to sustain your interest in his observations of so seemingly small a sample of the totality of a piece that it inspired one to focus on the potentiality of every detail to engender a continuation. That was his lesson! He knew that his students had their own private hierarchies of what they thought were their priorities and it was his (unstated) goal to rid us of them so that all the elements of a composition were approached and weighed simultaneously. This is of course his own achievement.

Whether or not I was conscious of “imitating” him I don’t know but one story will suffice in this regard. During the first year of studying with him, the grad students pressured Morty to have the resident ensemble at the university, The Creative Associates, perform their music. Fred Rzewski was the pianist to give some indication of the quality of these players. Morty finally agreed to this and came the day when the concert took place. We were as I recall a pretty heterogenous group and while the pieces were certainly different, they all had one thing about them which was the same – they were all remarkably quiet! So, I guess, he did influence us.

CV: What do you think Feldman’s music has in common with Cage’s and how do you think it differs?

NV: When Feldman and Cage first met in 1950, Cage was already the composer of the percussion ensemble pieces, *The Seasons* and *Sonatas and Interludes*, as well as the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship. He was then a well-known figure, if only to a somewhat limited professional audience. Feldman at this point had written but two pieces we would now recognize as his, *Journey to the End of the Night* and *Four Songs of e.e. cummings*. What is remarkable is how quickly after this meeting, both composers began introducing indeterminate elements into their music – Cage in *Music of Changes* (1951) and Feldman in his *Projection* series (1950-1954). I don’t think it’s particularly important to determine which composer instigated this development in their work. Rather it seems that the friendship that developed between them propelled both into this new direction. There is no doubt as well that Cage’s friendship with Boulez, beginning in 1949 played an enormous part in the evolution of Cage’s music. To a certain extent I think it could be said that Cage wanted to “keep up” with Boulez, whose intelligence amazed him, in the discovery of new materials and techniques. The initial interest of Boulez in Cage’s music was in the timbral and registral discoveries of the prepared piano music, but with Boulez’s total serialization pieces, Cage sensed that he needed to find a new means of time/dynamic/pitch sequencing. This he found in chance operations. While these certainly produced a new music for Cage, their usage instigated the waning of the closeness between Boulez and Cage, as Boulez denounced indeterminacy as a valid compositional tool. It’s interesting to note that Boulez showed little interest in Feldman’s music of the time. Their one meeting, at the closing of the Cedar Bar,

has been memorialized by Feldman in which, partly from pique, he claims the high ground because his metier is *sound* and Boulez's, *system*.

I mention this because I think that both Cage and Feldman, like Boulez, apart from aesthetic concerns, saw their dissociation from prevailing compositional "schools", notably neoclassicism, both diatonic and twelve-tone, as well as Copland's "American" style, as a form of artistic heroism. They might be ostracized by the establishment, from university music departments, but they could not be accused of imitation. Certainly for Boulez, who led the famous concert disruption of the recent Stravinsky pieces first performance in Paris after the war, the renunciation of neoclassicism, was a cultural protest as well. No more status quo. Cage expressed this by living off the grid for ten years and Feldman by supporting himself in the family business.

While indeterminacy is the obvious link between Cage and Feldman's music, it would be hard to find a piece by either composer whose authorship would be confused for the other. Their aesthetic aims were entirely different. A large part of Cage's abandonment of the delicate, often diatonic, *affekt* oriented pieces of the 40's was his acceptance of the idea that sounds were not expressive of anything except their own essence. This, with the resultant dilution of directional impulse, enhanced by his employment of silence, leads to a music in which the predictability of sequence, both temporal and sonorous, is almost completely thwarted, especially in the music from *Music of Changes* until the late number pieces. Feldman's music on the other hand is extremely self-similar. Contrast is, for the large part, avoided. I remember talking to Cage at the first performance after Morty's death of *For Philip Guston* which Eberhard Blum, Jan Williams and myself gave in Frankfurt. He thought the opening with its transformation of the four note Cage motif (E/B/C/G or when transposed diatonically, C/G/A/E) extraordinary, in his words "radical poetry". I asked him if he had the same response to the final 30 minutes which are largely devoted to re-orchestrations of a descending scale pattern, A/G/F/E/C/B over loops of ascending sevenths. His response was instructive in characterizing his separation from Feldman's music. "No, it's too beautiful".

Cage's renunciation of choice is in part an expression of anarchy. The absence of a score, only parts, in his music after 1954 is a form of anarchic democracy, of social equality. A piece like *Variations IV*, in which the performers essentially decide, from a set of instructions,

what they will do, has no parallel in Feldman's music. One of the byproducts of this piece is to erase the distinction between the professional and non professional musician, between performer and audience to inspire a kind of utopian communality. Feldman's music, especially the extended length pieces, effect, at least in my view, the opposite phenomenon, in which the individual listener is confronted with their own isolation.

I'm not exactly sure what the following anecdote does to summarize an answer to the question but I'll conclude with it anyway. In 1972 Cage was one of the performers, along with Feldman and three other pianists in the Berlin premiere of Feldman's *Pianos and Voices*. The pianists also sing tones as well. All the notes are written out but not their duration nor their composite relation. The instructions suggest that the end of the decay of the piano sounds and the single breath of the sung sounds should indicate the length of their duration. Feldman and the other three performers all ended within a minute or two of each other but Cage continued on by himself for 20 plus minutes. After the performance, Feldman, who was furious with Cage, asked him why he did this, to which Cage, in his best Puck-like manner responded that he thought he was free to interpret the time element his own way. They didn't speak to each other for, I believe, a year.

CV: Which other composers did Feldman most often cite as precursors or influences on his own music?

NV: There's a wonderful story about Takemitsu and Feldman having dinner in Toronto at a graduate student's apartment. The student is preparing dinner and has a radio on which starts playing a Sibelius symphony. The student went to turn it off, thinking that Takemitsu and Feldman wouldn't want to hear it, at which moment both composers simultaneously shouted, "Leave it on!" I mention this not so much from the point of view of influence but rather to illustrate Feldman's unpredictable tastes and interests.

I recall a number of times, after student composer programs at SUNY Buffalo, we students and Feldman would go to a bar with a piano and he liked nothing better than to hear a medley of what he called "war songs", things like "Over There" or "Anchors Aweigh". I also recall him playing and singing Johnny Green's "Body and Soul". Like his literary and social references in his talks and writings which reflect "high" and "low" culture, so do his musical references as well. In his

1987 Middleburg discussion with Per Nørgard he relates that in the year he was born, 1926, two pieces were composed in New York City, Varèse's *Intégrales* and Gershwin's song, "Someone to Watch Over Me". That's a very characteristic Feldman juxtaposition of sources.

However, in a real response to this question, the most likely answer would be that cited by Feldman about Cage, whom he said "gave me permission" to be himself, to follow his own inclinations. The rapid way in which both of these composers evolved in the early 50's, after Feldman moved into the same building as Cage, suggests a mutual exchange of ideas and encouragement which is especially inspiring in that Cage was 14 years Feldman's senior, an age difference that often produces an uncomfortable rivalry, for example Debussy and Ravel.

In addition to private lessons, Feldman taught only one course at SUNY Buffalo. It was called orchestration but it was more a forum for Feldman to ruminate on any topic he had on his mind the given day. There was no curriculum, no assignments and no exams. Often the point of departure for a class would be a piece a student was interested in and after it was played, Feldman would give his opinion of it. He could be quite deflating in his remarks – witness in the Middleburg lectures of 1987 his belittling of the Bartok quartets to his Hungarian student. While Feldman was I think generally a supportive teacher, he could become quite angry if he felt provoked. He once ordered a student to leave the class when the student asked him why there was no happy twelve-tone music.

Of the classical composers, the two he referenced the most often were Schubert and Beethoven. In Schubert he found a difficult to describe distance from which the music emanates, a favorite example was the opening of the F minor four hand *Fantasy*. Beethoven he admired for the boundless invention, the constant striving to say something in a different way each time. I have virtually no recollection of him talking about Bach, perhaps because he had no relation to Bach's religious beliefs or the music that came from them. In this regard, although he programmed Ives' music at June in Buffalo. Ives was also outside his cultural milieu – he was too 'goyische' in Feldman's description.

What I'm speaking of here is not influence but rather the music that Feldman did and did not respond to. One composer who I was surprised he spoke so little of is Debussy and I've thought often about why this might have been so. My thinking is that he might have been uncomfortable with the possible association of his music with certain qualities in Debussy's music – notably its surface

attractiveness and the equation of this for some people with ‘mood’ music. I recall some program notes of Boulez concerning Debussy’s *Clarinet Rhapsody* denigrating those who liked it for its ‘dreamy’ opening, as though such a response to its incantatory quality was unsophisticated. Similarly while Feldman’s music IS often incantatory, I don’t think he particularly liked it when this was the dominant impression his music made on a listener.

In that same discussion I mentioned earlier with Per Nørgard (a video of it is on YouTube), Feldman makes a very direct statement about Schönberg and Stravinsky. He says “Schönberg taught me variation and Stravinsky taught me repetition”. When one considers the late music especially, this is a very apt description of the processes by which the long durations of seemingly very little material are sustained. While one perceives the music as seemingly repetitious, each reiteration contains a small variation.

Of his contemporaries, apart from Cage, the two composers he spoke about the most were Boulez and Stockhausen. While there was initial enmity between Feldman and Boulez in the 50’s, when Feldman discovered towards the end of his life that Boulez acknowledged his work as an inspiration for *Éclat*, from that point on in the published lectures he became more complimentary to Boulez. As with Stockhausen too, he recognized their achievement – that they had successfully forged their own path in opposition to the more widely shared commonalities of their respective country’s contemporary music. He liked distinctions as well, for example describing Milton Babbitt’s music as intellectual and Elliot Carter’s as academic.

What I’ve tried to suggest here is that while Feldman had a healthy estimation of his own achievement, he was curious, flexible and often generous in responding to that which was not necessarily reflective of his own work. I can attest to this personally. In 1980 he invited me to present a concert solely of my own music at June in Buffalo. He never expressly told me what he thought of it – but he made it happen, which nearly forty years later, still quite amazes me.

CV: Feldman certainly did enjoy recognition in his short lifetime. However there seems to be a resurgence in the understanding and appreciation of his music. Why the gradual, yet continuous resurgence of his music?

NV: I've thought about this a lot and not only from the point of view of your question but also from the opposite side – why is most music forgotten after the composer's death?

A big part of my response to this is a growing suspicion that we are entering a time in which the sheer accumulation of music and its ubiquity of availability, not only what's called Western Classical but everything else as well, is diminishing our ability to hear the distinctions between different musics except the most exceptionally different. One way this manifests itself in the Classical world is a kind of gigantism of presentation – the marathon concert is one example and the Complete Works mania – all the *Brandenburgs* or Bartok *String Quartets* in one sitting (well, with maybe a dinner in between) is another. It's as though the single example is not enough anymore – we have to have it all. And of course, it can't be processed, at least in my thinking, this way. It's like seeing Europe in 3 days. These phenomena also lead to another kind of presentation of music – the “staging” of performance. New York City has in the past two years had the possibility of hearing the *Goldberg Variations* preceded by an obligatory 30 minute silent meditation before the actual hearing of the piece, as well as a concert of “water” pieces in which the piano was placed on a stage which had a floor of – yes – water!

One of Feldman's famous mantras of the late 70's was “What the world doesn't need is another 20 minute piece!” There's actually a film where he gets going on this with Elliot Carter to which Carter says “Well most of my pieces are 20 minutes long”. I think one of the reasons for Feldman's move into the extended length pieces is that he sensed that the old manners of concert giving and their implications for what constituted an acceptable length for a piece to fit in a “varied” program were dying, so he decided to withdraw from the enterprise. That music (Feldman's 20 minute piece) which still subscribes to the old concert model has difficulty in shutting out the noise of a hyper saturated culture. This is one reason why most composers are forgotten after they are no longer present to advocate their work. We seem to be returning to an older time in music – before the 19th century concept of repertoire took hold in which each generation dispenses with that of its predecessors.

Of course it's one thing to have an idea to write a one, two or six hour piece and another to actually do it. I don't think all of his late pieces work as organisms because of the strain of their duration. *String Quartet #2* in my way of hearing, just collapses under its determination to keep finding ways to restate earlier material. And to

a certain extent I think the same thing happens in *For Philip Guston*, though the conclusion of it is truly ecstatic because of how long it has taken to get there. The pieces that do for me go from start to finish with no loss of direction are all about 90 minutes – *Crippled Symmetry*, *For John Cage* and *Piano and String Quartet* immediately come to mind. I do though acknowledge that the extreme listening (not to mention performing) experience of the 4 plus hours pieces produces a new sense of time perception in music, not to be confused with Wagner in which the distraction of forces and visuals do not compare.

The extended length pieces are an attempt to shut out the noise of a culture of instant gratification/information overload. Invited to listen to one voice for 6 hours, one has to either get up and walk away or confront the challenge and fatigue of actuality. While their extreme duration could be considered a form of gigantism, there's a disconnect of production value with their modest instrumental resources.

I seem to be denigrating these very long pieces but in fact I'm pointing to a reason why Feldman's music has survived his death – it commands attention. Those who respond to it find themselves in another place, far removed from the appreciation of a well written, even inspired piece. They've crossed that line into a confrontation with self. Why am I here listening to this?

It's clear why Feldman sought out Beckett for a text to his opera. They are kindred souls, both engaged in the world they lived in yet extremely selective in their reflection of it. It has often been remarked about Feldman that his personality was ribald and appetite oriented. He was fun and noisy to be around – full of conversation and quotidian observation – none of which occurs in his music. That absence was his fortress – nothing of the reflection of anything but inner loneliness would enter his music, except for tenderness which is his form of nostalgia.

Although Feldman was hesitant to discuss the emotional response to music, especially his own (there was no music at his memorial service), I think there can be no doubt that one important reason for the continued interest in his music is that it does make an emotional impact on many people and it does this by a radicalization of traditional modes of expression. *Madame Press Died Last Week at Ninety* is a wonderful example.

The piece begins with an arpeggiated chord on the celesta – a life begins. Then two alternating flutes play their rhythmically unchanging descending major third (a representation of a cuckoo clock) above evenly paced harmonies. In the middle of the piece, the figure breaks down as does the instrumental texture. The trumpet now plays the cuckoo motif but too quickly – the clock is being rewound. Then the flutes retake the motif as before with the same harmonies as the opening but in a condensed recapitulation. Then the celesta plays its arpeggiated chord – a life has closed. What a remarkable and touching dramatization of the passage of a person’s life.

Feldman found a special place which no one else occupied and, for those who care, it’s inimitable.

Nils Vigeland was born in Buffalo, NY in 1950, the son of musicians. He made his professional debut as a pianist in 1969 with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, Lukas Foss, conductor. He later studied composition with Foss at Harvard College, graduating with a B.A. in 1972. He earned his PhD at the University at Buffalo where he studied composition with Morton Feldman and piano with Yvar Mikhashoff. With these mentors he was fortunate in developing long personal and professional associations.



His first orchestral piece was conducted by Foss with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra in 1970 and Foss gave the first performance of *One, Three, Five* with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra in 1983.

Mikhashoff was instrumental in the commission and performance of many pieces, including the *Piano Concerto* (1984), premiered by Mikhashoff and the Oslo Radio Orchestra, Christian Eggen, conductor, *In Black and White* for piano and chamber orchestra, and *False Love/True Love* (1992), premiered by the English National Opera at the Almeida Theatre, London.

With Eberhard Blum, flute, and Jan Williams, percussion, Vigeland toured for eight years with Feldman as “Morton Feldman and Soloists”, performing the extended length works for flute, percussion and piano that Feldman composed for them. They recorded these pieces on HAT ART.

For eight years (1980-89) Mr. Vigeland directed The Bowery Ensemble which gave an annual series of concerts in Cooper Union, NYC. The ensemble was strongly associated with the music of the New York School and gave the first performance of over thirty works by composers including Pauline Oliveros, Christian Wolff, Leo Smit, Chris Newman and John Thow.

His own work appears on CDs from Mode, EMF, New Focus Recordings, Lovely Music, and Naxos. His choral music is published by Boosey & Hawkes. He taught at Manhattan School of Music for thirty years, retiring as Chair of the Composition Department in 2013.