

Feldman's *Five Pianos* and Sibelius's *Fourth Symphony*: a Speculation by Chris Villars

From time to time in his many talks and writings, Feldman expressed his enthusiasm for the orchestral music of Sibelius. In particular, he seems to have greatly admired Sibelius's *Fourth Symphony*. For example, in a 1984 lecture he told the following anecdote: "I remember a graduate student of mine – I'm raving about the *Fourth Symphony* of Sibelius – and he says, 'You really like that?'"¹

The third movement of Sibelius's *Fourth Symphony* is in the key of C-sharp minor. The main theme of the movement begins with a rising sequence of notes starting with C# and using all notes of the C-sharp minor scale except B. The first eleven notes of this rising sequence are:

C# – G# – A – E – F# – G# – C# – D# – E – F# – G#

This sequence is introduced five times in the course of the eleven minute movement². The repetitions are separated by sections of other material.

In his piece *Five Pianos* (1972), Feldman introduces a rising sequence of nine notes which is used as a recurring ostinato, repeated 16 or 17 times by each piano over the 30 to 40 minute duration of the piece. The repetitions are loosely clustered into four sections separated by sections of other material. Feldman's recurring ostinato also starts with C# and also uses all notes of the C-sharp minor scale except B, though Feldman also adds C and A#:

C# – D# – E – G# – A – C – E – F# – A#

Feldman's ostinato and Sibelius's theme are thus similar both in the notes they use, their ascending character, and the way their repetition is used to structure the piece. Whilst it is possible that these similarities are coincidental, it seems unlikely, given his enthusiasm for Sibelius's *Symphony*, that Feldman would have been unaware of the resemblance. The similarities therefore seem more likely intended as a deliberate reference – perhaps even a homage – to Sibelius and the work Feldman once "raved" about.

The following audio file juxtaposes Feldman's ostinato with the start of Sibelius's theme:
<https://www.cnvill.net/mf-sibelius.mp3>

¹ "Darmstadt Lecture 26 July 1984" reprinted in *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964-1987* (London: Hyphen Press, 2006) p 192.

² At rehearsal letters B, C+4, D+6, E, and F.