

# Summary of “Music Growing Through Time: Late Works of Morton Feldman”

by Petr Zvěřina

*The following text is a summary in English by Petr Zvěřina of his book in Czech: [Hudba prorůstající časem: Pozdní skladby Mortona Feldmana](#) [Music Growing Through Time: Late Works of Morton Feldman] (Prague: NAMU - Nakladatelství Akademie múzických umění v Praze [NAMU - Publishing House of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague], 2018). The summary is reproduced here by kind permission of the author.*

In this book, I try to establish a theoretical framework for the better understanding of processes that occur in Morton Feldman’s late works, e.g. *Triadic Memories* (1981), *Piano and String Quartet* (1985), *For Bunita Marcus* (1986). These compositions are extremely long (the duration of Feldman’s *String Quartet no. 2* (1983) is approximately four and a half to six hours) and not goal-oriented (there is “no scenario”, we are constantly “in the middle”); we can observe “repetitions” of limited musical material; there is no general or privileged compositional system; musical sections can be freely interchanged or combined; acoustical qualities of the tone material are emphasized. In my opinion, these attributes are interconnected - they create a specific type of “musical assemblage” that I define as the *rhizomatic form* (in reference to the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophical concept of the *rhizome*).

First of all, I explore Feldman’s own texts, significant monographs, and current studies dealing with his music (e.g. Alistair Noble, *Composing Ambiguity: The Early Music of Morton Feldman*; Brett Boutwell, *“The Breathing of Sound Itself”: Notation and Temporality in Feldman’s Music to 1970*; Steven Johnson, *It Must Mean Something: Narrative in Beckett’s Molloy and Feldman’s Triadic Memories*). Feldman wrote quite a lot of essays during his life. He commented on various aspects of his compositional procedures, analyzed works of other composers, and described his own creative processes. Another important source of information is the numerous transcriptions of Feldman’s lectures and interviews. These materials are crucial for the comprehension of his musical language. For example, he frequently refers to the Abstract Expressionist painters (e.g. Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Philip Guston) and novelists like Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka or Marcel Proust. This is the reason why I also compare the composer’s overall attitude towards musical structure with

methods and techniques of the above-mentioned painters and novelists.

Subsequently, I discuss Feldman's compositional procedures in the context of post-war avant-garde music (the "New York School", dodecaphonic works of Anton Webern, the Adornian concept of *musique informelle*). I try to discover influences that had a direct or latent impact on his compositional procedures. Feldman was a member of the so-called "New York School" (a group of composers surrounding John Cage: Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff and David Tudor). Sound was a very important basis for these composers, they even referred to music as "organized sound". Feldman's artistic growth was bound up with early works of Christian Wolff (we can find similar procedures in Wolff's early compositions and Feldman's late works - e.g. the specific use of minor second chords).

Feldman was not a dodecaphonic composer but he intentionally worked with the 12 tones of the chromatic scale (he referred to certain musical sections as *chromatic fields*). In this aspect there may be some similarity between Feldman's extremely long compositions and short dodecaphonic pieces of Anton Webern (it is worth mentioning that Feldman's teacher Stefan Wolpe studied with Webern in the 1930's).

Theodor W. Adorno's concept of *musique informelle* was a reaction against the serial music and the rational compositional systems of the 1950's. In contrast, Adorno dreamed about music that constitutes itself in the "musical substance" (i.e. in the "acoustical phenomenon"): "*Musique informelle* would be music in which the ear can hear live from the material what has become of it." This concept directly relates to Feldman's personal compositional motto: "Leave the sounds alone; don't push them."

The main part of my book is dedicated to rhizomatic form. Before discussing this term, I focus on the related topics: *compositional and acoustic reality, difference and repetition, speed and intensity*. I also constantly confront my findings with Feldman's early works, e.g. *Projections* (1950-1951), *Intersections* (1951-1953) or *Intermissions* (1950-1953). This method helps in understanding Feldman's later compositional procedures and also shows the overall integrity of his compositional thinking.

*Compositional and acoustic reality*. The compositions analyzed are notated in a relatively standard manner; however, the symbols we face in Feldman's scores might not always be what they seem to be - rest symbols do not represent silence, but rather "decay of a sound" (e.g. in piano compositions where the sustain pedal is often held throughout). The boundaries separating the compositional and the

acoustic reality are challenged. It is not possible to unambiguously determine the angle through which to view these works, we find ourselves between different phenomena (“notation” and “sound”), *between categories*.

*Difference and repetition.* Musical patterns in Feldman’s compositions are not simply repeating - they are repeating and changing at the same time. Thus, we cannot determine one pattern as “primary”, all patterns are equally significant; there is no hierarchy, no apparent musical development. Patterns used are “copies without an original” or “copies of copies”. I define them as *simulacra* (Gilles Deleuze’s term). The process of continuous differentiation of the musical material can be, paradoxically, perceived only through endless “repetitions” of patterns.

*Speed and intensity.* Musical patterns have no recognizable identity, they are constantly transforming themselves. We can observe that Feldman frequently changes the speed of unfolding musical patterns (e.g. *Piano and String Quartet* can be characterized as a “study” of various speeds of broken chords). We cannot speak of *augmentation* or *diminution* of patterns because we lack a “primary” pattern (there is nothing that can be augmented or diminished). Pitches applied in Feldman’s works can be understood as “sound intensities” - this point of view corresponds with the “decaying” character of the tone material. We can also speak of various methods and degrees of sound control of applied pitches.

Previous topics are closely related to the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of *rhizome*. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari defined six principles of rhizome that we can also notice in Morton Feldman’s works:

*1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> principles of connection and heterogeneity* (“[...] any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be.”). In Feldman’s compositions, we can usually determine several divergent series of unfolding musical patterns that can be freely combined. These series are “arbitrarily intertwining”, they are creating a “musical assemblage” (we can also identify these qualities in Feldman’s early works, e.g. *Intermission 6*).

*3<sup>rd</sup> principle of multiplicity* (“[...] it is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, ‘multiplicity’, that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, [...]”). This principle coincides with specific interplay of musical difference and repetition in Feldman’s compositions (we are constantly “in the middle” of the multiplicity of endless “repetitions” of patterns) and it is also related to diverse compositional methods and processes that are creating a multi-layered and ambiguous compositional “system”.

4<sup>th</sup> *principle of asignifying rupture* (“[...] rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines.”). Feldman’s works are *nonteleological* (there is no apparent “climax” or “centre” of the composition). Thus, musical sections can be interrupted at any time and freely combined. Feldman’s musical material is rather “fluid”, boundaries between “notes” and “sounds” are not clear – this is one of the reasons why he can easily interrupt ongoing musical sections at any time (musical material itself is unstable and “interruptible”). This principle is closely related to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> principles of connection and heterogeneity.

5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> *principles of cartography and decalcomania* (“[...] a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model.”). Feldman’s compositions cannot be reduced to a simple scheme or a musical graph. We have to “experience them”.

As I stated in the beginning, cooperation of these principles in Feldman’s late works creates a specific type of “musical assemblage” that I define as the *rhizomatic form*. Feldman’s compositions are genuine examples of “musical crabgrass”. Following the concept of rhizomatic form, I try to analyze Feldman’s composition *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* (1981) for cello and piano (this work’s duration is approximately two hours).