ECHOES
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Time Present & Time Past

Words
Chris Villars

Photography
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Foreword
John Bewley

Essay
Jan Williams

Vincent Fitzgerald & Co.

New York City
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"There never was in my mind any doubt about the beauty of Feldman's music. It is, in fact, sometimes too beautiful. The flavor of that beauty, which formerly seemed to me to be heroic, strikes me now as erotic. This impression is due, I believe, to Feldman's tendency towards tenderness. He insists upon an action within the gamut of love."

John Cage
In Memory of Eberhard Blum
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Foreword

Thirty years have passed since Morton Feldman died at the age of 61 on September 3, 1987. During that period his music has continued to attract new performers and listeners, and it remains a multi-faceted subject of interest for researchers. It remains vibrantly alive.

Feldman’s own writings speak to his awareness not only of how his music might fare as it became intertwined with the fabric of music history, but also how composers’ perceptions of music history shaped their own work. This interest is revealed in the following excerpt from one of his typescript writings (available in the University at Buffalo Music Library’s Morton Feldman Papers and published in B. H. Friedman’s Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman).

“... I question whether the 20th century will be the mecca for a music no longer tradition bound. Quite the contrary. This is more an age that has been taken over by music history rather than music making. And an integral part of this history has been the element of control. It seems to follow; the less control, the less music history. What does control or non-control have to do with music history? Music history has no favorites; music history is a leveler. That’s what we have to watch out for. That’s why we’re in a hurry.”

And then, as if to counter his own statement, he added, “wonderful aphorism - but we can’t take refuge in aphorisms.”
The place of Feldman’s music in music history, the evolution of its reception, and the number of performances it continues to receive form but one component of Feldman’s continuing legacy. Kyle Gann eloquently spoke about Feldman’s lasting musical impact in his speech titled In Dispraise of Efficiency: Feldman, at the Seattle Icebreaker Festival January 27, 2008. Feldman’s approaches to dynamics, duration, and notation, and his rejection of compositional systems in favor of intuitive processes all contribute to the current musical environment in such a way that virtually all musicians are affected. In Gann’s words,

“For the first time, an enormous range of composers, from atonalists to tonalists, instrumental improvisers to laptop performers, feel free to work outside the idea of a particular musical language and to do so by intuition and feel. In a way Feldman completed what one might call the aborted musical revolution of the 1910s free-atonal years, granting us freedom from syntax or system and showing us how to use it, how to husband our resources in an open environment.”

Direct musical tributes - those works for which there is stated evidence of Feldman’s influence, whether as homage or as source material - are not unexpected signs of affection and influence for a composer of Feldman’s stature. One of the pages on Chris Villars’s singular Morton Feldman website contains a list on the Musical Homages page of 237 musical works either dedicated to, or written in homage to Morton Feldman. There must be dozens more works that intentionally, or possibly unintentionally, reflect or emulate some aspect of Feldman’s work.

This unique homage by Chris Villars and Zahra Partovi is evidence of an entirely different aspect of Feldman’s legacy: the influence of his work and its aesthetic on artists outside music. What may be even more interesting than Feldman’s influence on other musicians is the re-interpretation of Feldman’s aesthetic through the
visual and literary arts. Chris Villars’s Feldman site has two pages that list works by several visual artists and poets inspired by Feldman (the Art Gallery and Feldman Inspired Poems pages). It is justly fitting that visual artists should in some way try to re-interpret music by a composer who found so much inspiration in the works of visual artists. The circle is completed.

The synthesis of Chris’s words with Zahra’s images within these pages is mystifyingly evocative of Morton Feldman’s music. It is an homage that reflects how deeply Feldman’s music can seep into one’s consciousness and linger as an almost inaudible soundtrack to everything that follows first hearing his music.

John Bewley, Ph.D.
Associate Librarian/Archivist
Music Library
University at Buffalo
There they stood, Morton Feldman and Edgard Varèse, at Town Hall, talking during intermission. It was the early 60’s and I was there too. I didn’t have the confidence to offer a hand in introduction. I simply watched them, intimidated by the moment as would be natural for a young student just beginning to delve into the world of the living composer. As a student at the Manhattan School of Music I had studied and performed Varèse’s Ionisation, his seminal work for percussion ensemble, a classic. I had heard several performances of Morton Feldman’s music and was surprised by this hulking figure of a man who wrote such soft, delicate, hauntingly beautiful music.

Ten years later, in 1972, Morton arrived in Buffalo as the visiting Slee Professor of Music at SUNY Buffalo, fresh from a DAAD residency in Berlin. I had been in the Music Department for eight years by then as a member of a group of young players and composers established by Lukas Foss. I had also been appointed to a position on the faculty as the percussion instructor. We presented a series of new music concerts called Evenings for New Music at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and Carnegie Recital Hall in New York City. The first performance of Morton’s music at an EFNM was in October 1972, the US premiere of Piano and Voices. Joining Morton as performers were no less estimable composer/pianists than Lukas Foss, David Del Tredici and Julius Eastman.

When I first began rehearsing and performing Morton’s music on a regular basis, with him ever present, it was obvious to me that he held a degree of wariness when working with performers on his music. I think that wariness was nurtured by a perceived lack of respect for his work by certain New York freelance musicians in
the 1950’s and 1960’s. What he found in Buffalo was a group of performers who recognized his unique genius and genuinely attempted to hold performances of his music to the highest standards. This was a new experience for him; one which led to a close bond with several musicians in our group, I, fortunately, among them.

Morton lived and worked in Buffalo from 1972 until his death on September 3, 1987. He was appointed Varèse Professor of Music in 1975. He didn’t drive, couldn’t drive because of his poor eyesight. He would arrange his teaching schedule to coincide with mine so that he could ride to campus with me. I would pick him up several times a week at the Windsor Apartments on West Ferry Street and we talked, oh, how he talked on those 20 minute trips. Our conversations would range from his latest commissions to his newest Persian rug purchase and everything in-between. We hatched plans for programs to take on tour and discussed which players he would want to tour with. He would invite me up to show me a score he was working on, see a new rug, play me a chord or a few measures from a new piece. The way he would just gently drop his hands on the keys, that Morty touch, not easy to duplicate, bespectacled eyes just a few inches from the keyboard, finding those gorgeous chords and then just dropping those hands.

After coming to Buffalo he received more and more invitations from Frankfurt, Cologne, Bremen, Berlin, Amsterdam, Rome, Stockholm, London and as far flung as Shiraz, Iran. He was not interested in traveling alone, he wanted to design concerts and to take some of us with him to present them. Morton Feldman and Soloists was born. He lectured, we played Feldman, Cage, Xenakis, Schwitters, Brown, Wolff, Takemitsu. “Swanky” concerts, as Morty would say.
The two composers who had the most lasting positive effect on the success of my career as a percussionist most certainly were Lukas Foss and Morton Feldman. Both recognized something special in my playing, in my devotion to new chamber music, especially theirs, and quite frankly, in my propensity for keeping things running smoothly. Percussionists need this skill set more than other instrumentalists given the logistics of organizing, lugging around and setting up all those instruments.

It's safe to say that those concerts as Morton Feldman and Soloists and, after his death, as The Feldman Soloists were the apex of my career as a musician. This was in no small degree because of flutist Eberhard Blum who Morty discovered in Berlin in 1971-72. He wasted no time in issuing an invitation to join our group in Buffalo. Eberhard was especially devoted to the performance of the music of Morton Feldman, John Cage, Earle Brown and the American avant-garde. He produced numerous concerts and festivals of their music in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany throughout his long and distinguished career. Eberhard and I became close friends and working partners soon after he arrived in Buffalo, performing Morton’s music internationally with pianist/composer Nils Vigeland, Morton’s revered former student, respected colleague and my long time devoted friend.

Those were heady days. The concerts, his lectures, the long train rides, the meals together, the cappuccinos Morty introduced me to in Venice, always “molto caldo”. Driving a van full of percussion instruments all over the UK on a British Arts Council tour, with Nils following in the car with Morty and the rest of the group. We all got along and made great music together — Morty was in his element and he reveled in it. “Those were the days my friend, we thought they’d never end.” They did. They always do.
It's been 30 years since Morton left us. I'm not playing that much now, but occasionally the opportunity comes along to play a piece of Morton’s again. This happened recently at New Music on the Point in Vermont, a summer festival devoted to the music of young composers and established faculty composers played by young performers coached by equally well known faculty instrumentalists and singers. Pianist/composer Amy Williams, flutist Tim Munro and I played Morton’s Crippled Symmetry for the 80 participants attending this year’s festival, a dream audience. The room was hushed for the 90 minutes it took us to navigate this world of stunningly beautiful music. The sentiments expressed by some of the listeners, “I’m not really a Feldman fan, but this was a religious experience I’ll never forget,” “I was moved to tears,” say volumes about the impact of Morton’s music.

I am delighted to have been asked to contribute this introduction to a loving and elegant tribute to the life and music of Morton Feldman.

Jan Williams
Buffalo
June 2017
Echoing pairs, whose ancestors he had seen that day on the Square, take flight again.

No, no! They are not free!
He said to his friend.
They are relentlessly searching for food!

His footsteps disturb the feeding birds yet delight the pilgrims as he pauses to tell stories and point the way.

Echoes of time past fly again in time present. Through light and shadow on the Square we reach out to find his memory.
He was 14.
She gave him money to buy his own piano.
He went to Steinway’s on 57th Street
and picked a baby grand.

Day after day
at the piano in the front bay window
of the family home,
he discovered new sounds.
It was sunny and warm. He went to the beach to swim and lie in the sun.

Closed eyes. The sun on his skin. Silence. Sea swell.


Music of soft sounds.
Racks of neatly buttoned children’s coats once stood against the walls.

Look now!

Frail and transparent lace reveals a blue vase and a small flying horse woven in gold thread.

Steam no longer billows from gigantic presses inside.

No workers can be found churning industrial sewing machines.

Contained and private, new life inhabits the space of life past.
Sounds hairsbreadth apart seem to slip away.

Patterns, asymmetry and lost memory carry the departing notes.

Listen to hear them come back again.

Echoes of patterns in memory found.
The composer in his studio tapes a piece of canvas to the wall and draws a graph.

"Slowly, with a painter’s eye, he fills out the grid, spreading sounds through time."
If you have a feeling, a tactile feeling for the instrument .... Then a single finger lowers to produce a B flat, and you just want to faint.

Was it on the B train he brought the B flat across? 326 Monroe doesn’t exist anymore. Where he found a friend. Yet beyond the bridge his sounds resonated to those capturing them as they departed. And suddenly today, in a downtown music store they were playing his piece with that departing B flat ....

Unbearable beauty.
We sprawled on the floor 
eschewing the few chairs. 
Hanging on to every word 
sound, silence, 
nothing, everything.

Amidst clouds of cigarette smoke and long drawn silences 
he fashioned a revolution. 
Sound climbed the barricade of old schoolroom furniture 
and raised its flag.
Eating, drinking, smoking.
Drinking, eating, smoking. Smoking, drinking, eating.

And talking. Talking, talking, talking.
For twenty years the two men prowled the city looking for movies and good cheap restaurants.

The painter finds a new voice.

Arms, legs, hooded figures, horseshoes, bottles, light bulbs, paint brushes, cigarettes, chips.
Nothing can halt the flow!

The composer turns his head and walks away.

Eating, drinking, smoking.
Drinking, eating, smoking. Smoking, drinking, eating.
And talking. Always talking.

Twenty years, with the friend he never knew.
1955: Lexington Avenue
Holed up in his apartment above where the pizza place is now.

“I’ve sent C to her parents and had the phone in our apartment turned off so I can work on another piano piece ....

But still I can’t work.”
Time for waiting.

He reconnects the phone, calls up his wife, goes down for a pizza.

“I accept the inexplicable
Things are born in this waiting.”
In his studio
the painter decides
to add a photograph
to the canvas.

The reds, the yellows,
and now suddenly
a photograph of
Kennedy.

Suddenly now,
after years of avoidance,
the composer writes
a complete melody.

Breaking into the
quiet succession of discrete sounds,
like a photograph in a Rauschenberg,
he collages a melody.
Whiteness of purest marble.
A marble frieze. Marble figures wait.

With the first notes,
the procession begins.
Don’t change the flute.

Long into the piece,
the pianist is playing a single note.
The concentration is tangible.

Then the flute,
a single note repeating.

Whiteness of purest marble.
An act without words.
Faintly from his apartment one hears “Death and the Maiden.”
All day, same record.

Are you crying?
You are crying.
Mother died in 1984.
He wrote a piece.

He mourned his mother.

He mourned his friend.
“For Philip Guston”
In the desert at Mari,
the ground plan of an ancient palace
is a grid-like structure with many rooms.

Sustained resonances blur and merge the patterns.
Music hovers and dreams.

Time becomes a far horizon.
By now we are lost.
You tell me you’ve seen that tree before.
Do you mean you have heard that chord before?

The biggest butterfly in captivity
opens its wings
of iridescent silver
treble G - bass D, G sharp.

G flat - C sharp, F, half pedal through.
Hands cross over a departing landscape
of memory forms
lost in suspended time.
Grey sky over the lake.
Grey water below.

She is here again,
the soprano,
revolving it all.

From machine-like pulse
to gentle dream,
by way of neither.
His piano followed him about like a mischievous dog. If you tried to play any music other than his it snapped at your heels until you complied.

It followed him all the way to the end. It sat in his apartment on the day he died. It sat by the door, whimpering softly, until someone gently closed the lid.
In slow motion the finger descends with trepidation of the first touch in love-making. Tenderly, tenderly.

Heroic to erotic.

Harmonics sound. The hand gently eases back the key and the fingers steal noiselessly away.

An action within the gamut of love.
This door, as he approached, gently opened.

When he left, it gently closed.

Left alone inside, his apartment cleared its throat, and sang softly to itself Neither.
A hand spoke to stone
of the softness and frailty of flesh.
The stone endured.

A hand spoke to stone
of the love and strength of the spirit.
The spirit endured.

The hand laid stones
light as feathers
upon the stone, solid in ground.

The stone endured the weight.
The stone accepted the gift.
The stone nodded.

MORTON FELDMAN
1926 – 1987

Devoted Son, Brother
Beloved Husband
He first met her when he was a child. She sat by his side as his mother picked out a simple tune on the family piano.

She was beautiful and he fell in love.

Beauty stood by his side while he worked in the factory. She took his hand and swayed him away from the portals of Ivy League.

She touched his soul and he never forgot her.

She guided him through soft decibels of sounds. He followed her through vast, unfamiliar places.

Beauty became his perpetual quest.

Listen now, you shall get a glimpse of her passing through as a shimmering tapestry of sounds unfolding .......
Echoes
Washington Square

Mother
Woodside

Child
Far Rockaway

Time Present & Time Past
Woodside

Enigma
Washington Square

Canvas of Music
Manhattan Bridge

Time Present & Time Past
Manhattan Bridge

Silence
Eighth Street

Friend
Washington Square

Time Present & Time Past
Lexington Ave.

Canvas of Music
East 87th Street

Sounds
Washington Square

Heroes
Washington Square

Death & the Maiden
Washington Square

Mourning
Far Rockaway

Patterns
Woodside Subway

Memory
Eighth Street

Neither
Lake Erie

Piano
Erie Canal

Touch
DUMBO

Feldman Leaving Us
Buffalo

Resting
Beth Moses Cemetery

Perpetual Quest
Washington Square

Echoing pairs, whose ancestors
he had seen that day on the Square,
take flight again.
No, no! They are not free!
He said to his friend.
They are relentlessly searching for food!
His footsteps disturb the feeding birds
yet delight the pilgrims
as he pauses to tell stories and point the way.
Echoes of time past fly again in time present.
Through light and shadow on the Square
we reach out to find his memory.