MORTON FELDMAN AND SOLOISTS
by Eberhard Blum

The following text was originally published in German as Chapter 8 of Eberhard Blum, Choice & Chance: Bilder und Berichte aus meinem Leben als Musiker [“An Illustrated Account of My Life as a Musician”] (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum für Moderne Kunst, Fotografie und Architektur, 2008). English translation by Peter Söderberg and Chris Villars.

Much has been written about the composer Morton Feldman. He himself wrote a series of essays on the fundamentals of his work and thought (collected in, Morton Feldman Essays, Beginner Press, Kerpen 1985 and posthumously in, Give My Regards to Eighth Street, Exact Change, Cambridge 2000). The interviews given by Feldman between 1963 and his death in 1987, selected and edited by Chris Villars (Morton Feldman Says, Hyphen Press, London 2006), can also be very much recommended as stimulating reading. However, most stimulating of all for me was without doubt working together with Feldman on his chamber music works: our many performances and concert tours together and above all the personal conversations in which he began outlining that which later received its final formulation in his articles and interviews.

Standing backstage just before a performance, only seconds before going in front of the audience to give an introduction to the concert, he would often ask us musicians to provide him with a starting point for his talk: “Just give me the first line!” Feldman was a master of the “gradual development of thoughts while speaking”, to borrow a phrase from Heinrich von Kleist, and he needed no more than a few initial words to be able to extemporize the seamless flow of his talk – intelligent, entertaining, informative, moving – whether as a lecture given in public or within an intimate circle of friends. Many a time did I listen to his descriptions of the history of American art and the development of American music, learning any number of remarkable things about art and music, artists and musicians.

Before beginning to write this, I listened to part of the famous C-major quintet (D956) by Franz Schubert. George Steiner once wrote that he holds this to be the best piece of music ever composed. Such a statement is fully in tune with Feldman’s approach: He loved the exaggerated and sensational as ways of polarising debate; and Schubert’s music often gave him the occasion and arguments for fantastic observations about his own music. Because at some point, Feldman’s conversations always returned to his own music, I would already know weeks and months beforehand, for all those works whose first performance I was involved in, what he had had in mind.

Feldman was an obsessive worker. When one visited him in his flat in Buffalo, he would either be sitting at the grand piano, inventing his sounds, or standing before the steep writing surface of his high “accountant’s desk” – found for him in a New York flea market by his friend Robert Rauschenberg – copying the final version of one of his scores onto “transparents” (the vellum masters from which his works were printed). He surrounded himself with the art of his friends Rauschenberg, Guston, Pollock and Rothko and lived for a music that derived its value from within itself, that was “not a metaphor of something else”.

In the mid 70’s in Buffalo, Feldman formed the ensemble “Morton Feldman and Soloists” from his circle of friends and allied musicians. The members were: Jan Williams, percussion; Nils Vigeland, piano; Eberhard Blum, flute/voice; Nora Post, oboe; Han de Vries, oboe; Martha Herr, soprano; and Morton Feldman, piano.

As well as works by Feldman himself – in which he initially performed as pianist, the inspired interpreter of his own work – we also included works by Toru Takemitsu, Erik

http://www.cnvill.net/mfblum.pdf

1
Satie, Iannis Xenakis, Kurt Schwitters, Gutama Soegijo, Nils Vigeland, and Bunita Marcus in our programmes. At the same time, Feldman was writing works for the Ensemble of the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts, to be performed in Buffalo, New York, and on tours in the USA and Europe, as well as composing orchestral works, which were at that time mainly performed in Europe.

Thus, I came to take part in a total of seven first performances of works by Morton Feldman, in different contexts, between 1973 and 1986. An eighth first performance took place in Berlin after his death. In 1988, I remembered that Feldman had composed a short trio for flutes in Berlin in 1972 for his girlfriend at the time, the Hungarian film-maker Sophie Kotanyi. She had wanted to use this music in a dance piece but as the dance performance never took place, the trio disappeared and was never played. When, early in 1989, I received a copy of Feldman’s manuscript from Sophie Kotanyi, nothing more stood in the way of arranging a first performance of the piece. In the programme booklet of the concert, organized by the Artists’ Programme of the DAAD, I wrote: With the first performance of this trio for flutes, Feldman’s “large canvases” are complemented by a “small drawing.”

The dates and locations of the eight premieres were as follows:

— For Frank O’Hara for chamber ensemble; December 1973, New York
— Instruments 2 for chamber ensemble; 4 June 1976, Buffalo
— Instruments 3 for flute, oboe, percussion; 9 August 1976, London
— Why Patterns? for flute, piano, glockenspiel; 21 October 1978, Berlin
— Crippled Symmetry for flute, piano, percussion; 5 February 1984, Berlin
— For Philip Guston for flute, piano, percussion; 21 April 1985, Buffalo
— For Christian Wolff for flute and piano; 23 July 1986, Darmstadt
— Trio for 3 flutes; 31 May 1989 [posthumous], Berlin

All of these works are surrounded by stories and history, and have become pillars of 20th century music. Here I would like to talk only about the three works written for our trio – consisting of Feldman/Nils Vigeland as pianists, Jan Williams as percussionist, and myself as flutist – as well as the duo for flute and piano, which Feldman composed for Nils Vigeland and myself.

The first trio bears the title Why Patterns? and was composed as a “travel piece” for us: A work that could be performed at any time, anywhere, without great ado, that is, that did not demand long rehearsals or require the setting up of a lot of percussion equipment. Feldman wrote three conventionally notated parts which progress independently of one another, but are nevertheless closely related: Flute (also alto- and bass-flute) for me, glockenspiel for Jan Williams, and piano for himself.

A score does not exist. We had our common tempo (quarter note = 63) and began to play at the same time. Everyone performed his part “on his own” as precisely as possible until the end of the approximately half-hour long work. We were in a sense free and yet integrated into the strict system of the notation. This type of notation was new to Feldman, as well as to Jan Williams and myself – a variant of the open notation of Feldman’s early years: An attempt to combine freedom and precision. At first we had to gain experience with this. For instance, what would actually happen during the realisation of a part of such extended scale, consisting of complex and abstract rhythmical figures? How large are the deviations from ideal precision caused by agogic accents, articulation, and inaccuracies in performance? In any case, that which is actually played simultaneously at any given point in the piece will not be identical in every performance, so that any recognizable pattern of lines will always be slightly shifted.

At first, we played the work at Buffalo for Feldman’s composition students and a few other insiders in Room 100, the University’s practice and recital room. The first public
performance, still under the original title *Instruments 4*, and framed by works by Takemitsu and Schwitters, took place in May 1978 at the Music Academy in Basel.

After that, Feldman continued to work on details of the composition, eventually adding a traditionally synchronised coda. The first performance of this final version, under its new title *Why Patterns?*, took place on 21 October 1978 at the “Meta-Musik-Festival 3” in the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin. As usual, we began at the same time, each of us on his own, and, after having finished our part, waited to conclude the piece together with the coda. However, even the simple eye-contact necessary to establish communication on stage had become problematic as a result of Feldman’s extreme short-sightedness, and this premiere turned out be one of the last times that he played together with us.

One week after the performance in Berlin, Feldman attended my three-hour performance of John Cage’s *Sixty-Two Mesotics re Merce Cunningham*, for voice (with microphone), in Buffalo. Judging by the delighted enthusiasm of his reaction to this “concert”, one might easily say that the event made an important contribution to his considerations at that time pertaining to the concept of duration in chamber music. Be that as it may, in view of the development of Feldman’s later chamber music, the initial irritation caused by the half-hour *Why Patterns?* – even viewed by some as provocative – is difficult to comprehend. He himself was of the opinion that, in terms of its duration, *Why Patterns?* was in comparison with his next trio, *Crippled Symmetry*, a mere “minuet”.

The story of the work *Crippled Symmetry* began in 1983, when I had the opportunity to arrange a series of performances, “The Languages of Art”, at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. Nele Hertling, present Vice President and then Secretary of the Music Department of the Academy, gave me a free hand in putting the programmes together. As a result, I was able to construct them so as to emphasise the closeness of the arts to one another. Visual artists, dancers and musicians were all to participate, and installations, compositions and actions by Wolfram Erber, Lukas Foss, Gerald Humel, Helmut Lachenmann, Raffael Rheinsberg, Martin Riches and Wolf Vostell were featured. The performances of the visual/acoustic composition, *Phasen*, by Ann Holyoke Lehmann and myself are described elsewhere in this book [see Chapter 10].

Work on the programme began with my calling Feldman to ask him to write a new trio for us, the ensemble now consisting of Nils Vigeland, Jan Williams and myself. With great delight, he agreed to do so, and from then on I was kept abreast of everything in connection with the new work. Feldman gave me regular transatlantic lectures on his new discoveries regarding patterns and imperfections in handmade antique rugs, and in due course, closely connected to this preoccupation, the title *Crippled Symmetry* emerged. What he had begun in *Why Patterns?* was now carried on in a more refined manner.

The trio *Crippled Symmetry* also has no score, but rather three independent parts relating to each other. These were calculated by Feldman in such a way that the linking of the musical figures would always take place in certain ways, and not in others. Even the slightest inexactness in performing the complex rhythmical figures has the effect – as in *Why Patterns?* – that the three parts become superimposed in a different way. Feldman compared this effect – after experiencing it himself in performances of *Why Patterns?* – with the unexpected impressions one receives when viewing a picture from different angles. Naturally one could have calculated and notated exactly what – in accordance with note values – ought to be played simultaneously, but this would have destroyed the musical work’s innermost mystery. Feldman was prepared to live with the risk that one day someone would do the calculations and determine everything once and for all.

After the first performance in Berlin, we played *Crippled Symmetry* in Buffalo, London, Frankfurt/Main, Münster, Middelburg and Basel, among other places. It has probably been Feldman’s most successful work of chamber music.
INTERMEZZO

In 2000 the festival “June in Buffalo”, established by Morton Feldman, turned 25 years old. In honour of Feldman, a series of his works was performed during the festival. As a kind of farewell concert for our ensemble, Jan Williams, Nils Vigeland and I gave a performance of Crippled Symmetry as “The Feldman Soloists” – in Feldman’s lifetime the name of the ensemble had been “Morton Feldman and Soloists”. The concert took place in the Art Gallery of the visual arts department of the University, and many of Feldman’s friends, colleagues and former adversaries from Buffalo and New York had arrived for the occasion. The composer Steve Reich made introductory comments before the concert, emphasising how intimately connected to Feldman’s work he had come to feel, after more or less having rejected it as long as Feldman was alive.

This turned out to be one of the best performances that we had ever given together. The rare and indescribable “magic moment” of occasion and ambience seems to have inspired us. A recording of the concert, although not flawless technically, belongs to my dearest and most valued sound documents. It has unfortunately never yet been released on CD.

The performance material for Feldman’s trios that is available for purchase does not contain any reference to performance technique. Therefore, I would like to take the opportunity to make the following remarks on the subject, which result from the wide experience I have gained in performances of Feldman’s work and from performing with him:

— Firstly, the position of the three players in the room and on the stage is extremely important. The photo below shows the ideal playing situation. (In the first rehearsal of Crippled Symmetry, Feldman described, in his inimitably poetic way, the figure that we made on stage as being “like a butterfly”.) Each player forms his own centre of sound; the position of the players in the room underlines the independence of the three parts; the three independent sound worlds, which become connected with each other in the perception of the listener, must be able to unfold freely.

— The next consideration is to reach agreement on the meaning of Feldman’s well-known instruction to play “softly”. What does “softly” mean? In particular, what does “softly” mean in relation to the room where the work will be heard? How is the pronounced sound presence preferred by the composer to be reconciled with the concept of “soft”? Since there can be no predetermined answers to these questions, each ensemble will have to find new answers for themselves for each of their performances.

— Furthermore, the percussionist must under no circumstances use a different set of mallets for each figuration. The sound should first and foremost be defined by the attack and not by the “tool”. The pianist must hold the pedal of the celesta down (and secure it) to ensure as long a reverberation as possible of all the notes to be played, whereas the sustain pedal of the grand piano must be in constant use in order to modulate reverberation. This is absolutely imperative for certain figures occurring in the course of the piece, though it must remain a matter of aesthetic judgement, depending primarily upon acoustical conditions in the room.

In Berlin, immediately following the first performance of Crippled Symmetry, Feldman announced a new trio for our ensemble, and worked on it for the greater part of 1984. The date for a first performance was set for April 1985, and the title of the new work was soon established: For Philip Guston. This first performance – in which, as an exception, Yvar Mikhashoff played the piano and celesta instead of Nils Vigeland – took place in the auditorium of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, and lasted around four and a half hours. The walls of the room surrounding the audience were made of glass, which meant that one had a view of the park surrounding the museum. The weather conditions on that Sunday afternoon of the 21 April were as if made expressly for this long work: a strong wind driving massive, fast-moving clouds, dramatic changes of light and shadow, and an early twilight. All this could be observed from the auditorium and continued to change throughout the long performance. Sound, light and clouds seemed at once to influence and result from one another, while the music and the passing time accompanied and mutually commented upon each other. I believe this was the only performance of a piece of music after which I talked about the weather!

Before the concert, Feldman spoke the following words to the audience (later transcribed from a tape recording by Sam Mirelman):

One of the things that I always remember, and I tell my friends or my students, is that the most memorable concert I ever went to, when I first started composing in New York, was a concert where the audience was very small – but the concert was very important in my life. I feel that if I have an epitaph, it’s that I began with a small audience and I am going to end up with one.

Another thing about writing a large piece or a long piece, and this piece is long, is that you find that if you want to talk about it, or even write about it, it has to be very short, very concise and very clear. I do feel that the piece requires a little knowledge of some of the literary or… the references… what used to be called “more involved with life than with art”, although they are very interconnected in this piece. But it is a literary piece, in the sense that I was re-visiting my life with this extraordinarily gifted artist, who I think was the most important person in my life, besides my mother of course. I don’t think I would have become an artist if I didn’t have that luck in meeting Philip Guston.

It begins with a very famous show now, historically, in late ’49 or early ’50, the first Abstract Expressionist show at the Museum of Modern Art. I went there with John Cage, who I had just met, and we came across a painting of Philip’s. Unlike the Abstract Expressionists,
he did have a kind of notoriety... pages in Life Magazine for much more representational work than was in this show. He got a Guggenheim, went to Europe, and when he came back his work started to become abstract, but there was still an aspect of the representational in the work. It was the early red paintings.

The piece begins with looking at this painting with Cage, and the tune [Feldman plays C, G, A-flat, E-flat on the piano]... spells out CAGE, but not in that order. We were discussing it today; if I really spelt out CAGE the tune would sound Indonesian. [Audience laughs.] You hear that throughout the piece in many manifestations; that is, changing keys. So, essentially this is the idea of the piece. It’s varying degrees of representation treated abstractly, and abstraction treated as varying degrees of representation. That is, abstraction that seems to be almost a thing in itself... has the mood of a thing... almost the figuration of a thing. But it’s not discernible; it’s difficult to read.

Essentially that was the piece, and it kept me very busy with... what essentially I would refer to as a literary idea, then translated into musical equivalents.

As I say, the piece is long. Don’t feel that you’re a captive audience, and don’t be embarrassed if you have to leave. A lot of good friends might have to pick up a daughter from a birthday party. Other friends who are here have to pick up someone from the airport... so it’s perfectly OK.

The first performance of For Philip Guston was an unforgettable experience, and to this day, whenever I travel to Buffalo or New York and look at Guston’s pictures in a museum, I hear the voice of his friend Feldman: ... You know what he did in this picture?... I saw him the same evening... When I called him up, he said come over, I just finished a new picture... Perhaps some parts of the stories he told were made up, or “freely remembered”, but I am certain that everything could have been exactly the way he described it.

After the memorable performance in Buffalo we – this time, as usual, with Nils Vigeland – performed For Philip Guston at a Feldman Festival in Middelburg in the Netherlands, and after that in Berlin in a series which was organized by René Block for the Berlin Artists’ Programme of the DAAD. After Feldman’s premature death in 1987, we performed it as a memorial concert in the Städelmuseum in Frankfurt/Main, with an introductory talk by John Cage.

In 1984, Feldman had enjoyed great success during the Darmstadt International Summer Courses as the composer of his Second String Quartet. He had become one of the central figures in Darmstadt, delivering – along with Wolfgang Rihm and Brian Ferneyhough – a series of noteworthy lectures. For the sessions of 1986, Feldman composed For Christian Wolff for Nils Vigeland and myself. He said it was finally the solo flute piece that I had wanted for so long – simply with an accompaniment!

Christian Wolff is the youngest in the group of composers which includes John Cage, Morton Feldman and Earle Brown and is often labelled “The New York School”; the pianist David Tudor was also allied with them.

Wolff was born 1934 in France, where his parents, the German publisher couple Helen and Kurt Wolff, had fled. They eventually emigrated to New York, there founding Pantheon Books, a publishing company specializing in English translations of European literature.

As a boy, Christian Wolff had piano lessons with the pianist Grete Sultan, a native of Berlin. She introduced him to her friend John Cage, who in turn gave him composition lessons. One day, Wolff presented Cage with the English translation of the I Ching: The Book of Changes, published by his parents’ company. The book was to have an enduring influence on Cage’s compositional technique: Chance operations began to play a central role in Cage’s work.

http://www.cnvill.net/mfblum.pdf
In the 1950’s, while still at school, Wolff composed minimalist pieces using just a few sounds. Morton Feldman called him “the most European” of the New York composers, and also “my European connection”. In 1963, Feldman composed a work for choir with the title *Christian Wolff in Cambridge*, and in his work *For Christian Wolff* the austere sound material is reminiscent of Wolff’s early compositions. During the Darmstadt International Summer Courses in 1994, I performed Wolff’s extensive work *Exercises* (1973-75) with a group of musicians. This series of “exercises” reflects Wolff’s social engagement, extending beyond the purely musical. The performance has been released on CD.

Early in 1986, Feldman was a guest professor at the California Institute of the Arts, where large parts of his work *For Christian Wolff* were written. In January that year, he wrote me a letter on the progress of his work and by March I was able to hold the finished score in my hands (in this case there actually is a score). So I had sufficient time to study the work and to be clear about details of the realization. The first performance of *For Christian Wolff* was in the Orangerie in Darmstadt, where the concerts of the summer courses took place. Originally estimated to have a duration of approximately two hours, in the event, the performance took three hours and twenty minutes. It requires enormous stamina and concentration to play the flute continuously for three hours, and mastering the performance of *For Christian Wolff* in high summer became a major achievement for me. As the composer, Feldman was once again celebrated by the audience and our performance accordingly appreciated.

A little more than a year after the Darmstadt concert, Feldman died in Buffalo at the age of 61. In a last telephone conversation with his friend John Cage, he had asked, “But didn’t we have a wonderful life?”