

Away from the Big Cities: Morton Feldman Interviewed by Jean-Yves Bosseur (1967)

Translated from the French by Ivan Ilić

Introduction

This interview with Morton Feldman was conducted in 1967 by composer and musicologist Jean-Yves Bosseur, then aged twenty. Bosseur went on to study composition with Karlheinz Stockhausen in Cologne. The interview was conducted in English originally, but the audiotapes have been lost. Therefore until now this interview has only been available in French translation.

My “re-translation” to English was facilitated by Jean-Yves Bosseur’s French translation, which captured the spirit of Feldman’s cadence. Anyone familiar with Feldman’s copious interviews, lectures, and essays quickly recognizes the vocabulary and concerns that recur frequently throughout his career. Just as in Feldman’s late music, certain motifs return again and again, but they are never exactly the same, and it is this variation which is compelling.

Today interest in Feldman’s music is still limited in France, compared to Germany and the English-speaking world. Therefore it seems all the more relevant to provide access to this important interview to English speakers, despite the small transformations in vocabulary that will inevitably occur in any translation, let alone a “double” translation. The richness of the interview’s content will hopefully compensate for any discrepancies.

The interview was originally published by Editions Klincksieck (Paris) in their journal *Revue d'Esthétique*, in the "Musiques nouvelles" section of the 1967-68 edition, pages 3-8. It was republished in Jean-Yves Bosseur’s excellent book about Feldman, *Écrits et Paroles* (Éditions L’Harmattan, 1997).

Ivan Ilić (2015)

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The scene unfolds by a window facing the Invalides in Paris. Feldman grabs a coat-hanger that bears a striking resemblance to a bicorne hat, and puts it on his head.

MF: For most composers, Boulez is Napoleon, right?

(I respond that not everyone lives under the control of Boulez; there was also Stockhausen.)

MF: So what! Stockhausen is just Bismarck, that's all!

JYB: Are there any works which have influenced you?

MF: I love all music that isn't aggressive, [music] which lets you hear what you want to hear: Josquin, Machaut, Mozart.

JYB: ... and what about literature? Mallarmé, Artaud, Char ...

MF: NO! Just music!

JYB: Are you close to oriental theories?

MF: I am an oriental. *(laughs)*

JYB: Does silence play a role in your music?

MF: My music is inside the silence. That's all I can say. To use a fashionable term, it's a "*mystique!*"

JYB: What meaning do you give to musical time?

MF: *(prolonged silence)* I don't understand it.

JYB: Among the different musical parameters, is there one you favor?

MF: Objection, your honor! If you use terms like that in front of Morton Feldman, that means you'd like to think about his music in a different context. So, if you like, this question doesn't apply to me.

JYB: Do you feel that your work is developing?

MF: Ouch! Another one of those words, "develop," that one can't apply to me. I don't think that I belong to a musical continuity.

JYB: What about moment form?¹

MF: It's like a kid at play. First, he plays with lead soldiers, and then he gets sick of them. He goes and finds his doll; he tosses it aside. Then he goes back to his little train. That's moment form. It's the idea of the immediacy of what you're hearing, without the obstruction of any kind of dialectic. But when you're talking about moment form, you're thinking of Stockhausen, right? *(Feldman gives me a mischievous little look)* I'm right, aren't I?

JYB: Yes.

MF: So, Stockhausen makes a dialectic out of this state that others of us think is completely normal! You get it?

(I must admit that I don't really get it.)

MF: It's simple; we no longer have to make a system to live in the present.

JYB: What are the problems, in your opinion, that most composers face today?

MF: Problems are always personal, not collective.

JYB: What are the qualities that a young composer must have?

MF: Guts. The young are impatient, they want everything. This problem of having everything, it's what they've lived with, and it's the reason why they don't get much of anything. Outside of music, they want to make a life, a community. For an artist, that's not possible. This idea is my last vestige of an old-fashioned composer: working in solitude.

JYB: What do you think of the generation that followed Boulez's generation?

MF: After Boulez you get "pre-Boulez," with no philosophy.

JYB: What do you think about the influence of Cage?

MF: What do you think about the influence of Socrates?

JYB: A great man, without a doubt!

MF: Yeah, but they killed him.

JYB: So, you think that Cage might be ... ?

MF: That's what's happening, because we're starting to accept him.

JYB: What do you think about La Monte Young?

MF: In art, I never discourage anything that's "composive." If you do something once, it is "composive"; two times, it's "imposive."² Looking for correlations between my music and, say, paintings by my friends, can only be interesting in an oblique way. It's a problem of temperament more than anything else. For example, the temperaments of artists like Rothko, Pollock, [de] Kooning, and Kline are very similar to mine. I know their research intimately.

How does one define these temperaments, these attitudes?

They are, at any rate, fundamentally different than European temperaments.

Look, take a French painter — since this is a French interview, we can even take two: Delacroix and Poussin. They imagined art like an incredible machine. By the way, Delacroix talked about his painting like a machine. And then, he fabricates it indefinitely, this incredible machine where everything is thought through, where all the elements relate to one another.

Now, take the Americans: the artist himself, in principle, is the machine, by [virtue of] what he does: everything is inside him in the beginning, then he penetrates his work. His creation is not the machine, it's something else; there's a dialectic inside, [that's] included. We live in a great virtuosity, not in machinery, in a frenzied attempt to try to explain everything.

The number of misinterpretations of Cage's philosophy is crazy. People took his ideas too literally. You know, when he talks about art being included in life, the two becoming one, when he says that everything is music ... well now! One can find that, in his music, not everything is music: he uses instruments, contact microphones, [but] he's not taking over Messiaen's aviaries. Really, there's a lot of life that he leaves on the side, he doesn't use Mallarmé, Char, Artaud; obviously you don't find that in his music. You see, there's a gap, a discrepancy between what he says and what he does — just an illusion.

Honestly, I couldn't live inside my art. I'd die inside. You understand? I like to live well, to eat well, I like to live fast, because in my art I feel myself dying very, very SLOWLY.

JYB: Which audience is the best?

MF: I don't know what to think. Everyone listens for different reasons. They like you for ridiculous reasons, they hate you for stupid ones — what I want to say is, the public surprises me more than I surprise them with my music.

JYB: How do you work, harmonically speaking?

MF: You know the expression “playing by ear”? You know, these people that sit down at a piano, and ... I compose by ear, and there you have it. Boulez, they say, doesn't necessarily care about the way a piece sounds; he puts the emphasis on the structure of a piece. I'm only interested in what I can perceive.

JYB: What do you think about composers who close themselves off in a technique, in a system?

MF: That's like those guys who are forty years old who still live in their mother's skirts.

JYB: Give some advice to a young composer!

MF: You know *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann? In it he said: “Farewell! You're going to live now, or fall. You haven't got much of a chance.” That's the only meeting point between art and life.

Cage studied with Schoenberg. One night, Schoenberg told him, “I ask myself why you persevere; you have no sense of harmony. And if a composer has no feel for that, it's as if he is banging his head against a wall.” And Cage replied, “Then I'll spend the rest of my life banging my head against that wall.”

That's interesting: how can one compose and continue without dialectics? Even someone like Kierkegaard, who one could imagine was less of a dialectician than Hegel — no, he was even more of a dialectician — thought that he wouldn't be able to think unless he knew dialectics like the back of his hand.

I was born differently: I am incapable of thinking if I haven't driven away all traces of dialectics from my mind. Dialectics has nothing to do with logic, [it] has nothing to do with reason; it's just an idea, fixed; nothing.

What does that mean? I have to have an idea, then another idea, bigger this time, then another, and that becomes a mentality. I leave one idea for another. I leave yesterday's form for tomorrow's form, for a “momentary form.” It's a

mentality, to live in moving ideas. An artist must throw himself in somewhere, stick to it, and not look for salvation ... or ideas.

That's what "moment form" is. "Oh yeah, but ..." the French are going to say, "Baudelaire insisted on the tyranny of the moment." OK, it's true; I'm constantly oppressed by the moment ... but only in my own art. (*laughs*) Without a doubt the French are oppressed every moment of their lives, but not in their art. (*a malicious laugh*)

JYB: Are you stimulated by electronic means?

MF: Can my music stimulate electronic means? (*laughs*) I have no idea. I don't like electronic sounds: it's like a beautiful woman ... who's bald.

JYB: What instruments do you like to work with?

MF: I like instruments that have a certain anonymous quality, that can easily metamorphose themselves to enter the musical world. If you really want to know the truth, instruments embarrass me. It's like musical time: I don't understand it. I hear a sound: an instrument makes it, for example by its breath, [the instrument] changes it, gives it its own color, destroys its abstract quality, or its reality.

Orchestration doesn't interest me in that sense. What interests me is that instruments should make beautiful sounds; not that beautiful sounds should make the instruments themselves sound good. That's what gives me a lot of problems. I have to find a compromise between the sounds and the instruments. I hate doing that. The problem is psychological: there are instruments, there is my music, and both have to be adjusted. One could ask why I don't invent other instruments; I don't have the time.

When we listen to a recording, we accept the compromise. The recording is not equivalent to the reality of the music: it's more than larger-than-life. The recording enlarges, [and] looks at the music through a microscope. What I want is to listen to music through a telescope.

JYB: Do you think your music can have the same effect on the public as a drug?

MF: I always thought that drugs could do you a lot of good.

JYB: So, you don't think that your music ... ?

MF: No. I think that hypnotism happens when people listen to music, that is to say very rarely. (*laughs*) The experience is so foreign to them!

JYB: What do you think of Pop Art?

MF: Socialist Realism for the rich!

JYB: According to you, isn't the musical life of Paris totally sophisticated?

MF: Not more than in the Congo! You shouldn't worry about it too much.

Last year, Cage was invited to the University of Honolulu. When he got back, I asked him, "What's going on over there?" and he replied, "They're one hour behind us!" The musical life of big cities like Paris, London, New York, Moscow (Moscow is a big city, you know!) is wrapped up in the artistic politics of the country. I would say, wisely, that an artist can never rise above the politics of his country. Whatever the politics, such will be the art. Let's take a city like Paris, which has its own politics. All the young composers can get caught up in its politics.

I've come to the conclusion that the closer you get to big cities, the more you realize that the intelligentsia there is rigid, jaded. Living in Paris or in New York is like having a passport for stupidity.

New York is no different than Paris; New York has its own pride. The people are from New York, they are New York, which they would like to believe can't be bad. I just came from Great Britain, I spent three weeks there. I left from Scotland. Their audiences are informed; they knew my music. Then, I went down, down, closer and closer to London. Cambridge? Stupid!

That's why it's best to stay away from the big cities; too many things, too many stupid things ...

Translator's notes

¹ The concept of *moment form*, and the specific term, originated with Stockhausen's composition *Kontakte* (1958–60). Music theorist Jonathan Kramer defined moment form as "a mosaic of moments," where a moment is a "self-contained (quasi-)independent section, set off from other sections by discontinuities."

² Apparently the words "composive" and "imposive" are neologisms invented by Feldman.