

Morton Feldman: From the Film “Elliott Carter in Buffalo” (1980)

[Transcribed by Chris Villars]

In October 1979, Elliott Carter visited the State University of New York at Buffalo for a concert of four of his works, including the “Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Piano” (1961). A film of the visit was made by D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus¹. During the visit, Feldman, who was Professor of Composition in the Music Department at the time, invited Carter, the pianist Ursula Oppens and the other guest musicians to a dinner party at his apartment. Filming went on at the party and a short fragment of conversation between Feldman, Carter and Oppens is included in the final film². This is the only sequence in which Feldman appears in the film, which primarily focuses on Carter and the rehearsal and performance of his pieces. A transcript of Feldman’s exchange with Carter is given below. Feldman had just completed his first “hour and a half piece”, his “String Quartet” (1979), completed in September and premiered the following May.

MF: No-one gives a damn. Don’t be so audience oriented. This is not a field. And just concentrate on composition overall. In other words, I had a big discussion on...

EC: Back to your Cage.

MF: ...the twenty minute piece.

UO: One side of a record.

MF: Well... I said, what the world doesn’t need is one more twenty minute contemporary piece. We don’t need it. We need a good piece about an hour and a half in one movement that really starts developing forty minutes later when it’s about time. That’s what we need. We don’t need a twenty minute piece.

EC: Who are *we*? [Laughter] I mean... we need an hour and a half piece that isn’t played by anybody and not heard by anybody?

MF: What would you rather have, a twenty minute piece not played or an hour and a half piece not played?

EC: Same thing. [Laughter]

MF: No, they all write that practical twenty minute piece. It’s all predictable. The form’s predictable.

UO: It doesn’t need to be predictable.

EC: We seem to be playing a piece *I* think that is not predictable for twenty minutes³.

UO: We’re playing *four* twenty minute pieces.

EC: Yes exactly, *please*, we’re gonna play our heart out.

MF: Oh, I didn’t mean anything. There’s a marvellous point in having a go. But when the kids start thinking that that should be the length of a piece...

EC: It may be more of a strain to write for twenty minutes than for an hour and a half as a matter of fact. Because I find it more of a strain to write for five minutes. The fewer minutes there are the more trouble it gets, because you really have to have a good idea right then and there. While with twenty minutes, you can... [space it]. [Laughter]⁴

¹ “Elliott Carter at Buffalo” (Pennebaker Hegedus Films, 1980, 45 min, color). Available from: phfilms.com/films/elliott-carter-at-buffalo/

² The conversation lasts from 21:17 to 23:00 in the film. A clip of this segment can be found at: www.cnvill.net/mfcarteratbuffalo.mp4

³ Presumably Carter is referring to his own “Double Concerto”, the major work on the Buffalo programme, which lasts around 23 minutes.

⁴ Feldman refers to this party and his conversation with Carter in his “Toronto Lecture” (1982) [available online at: www.cnvill.net/mfmercercer.htm] and again in Session 10 of his “Johannesburg Masterclasses” (1983) [online at: www.cnvill.net/mfmasterclasses10.pdf].