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 Hegedus. 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 film. 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 minutes.
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]

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/mfmercer.htm] and again in Session 10 of his “Johannesburg Masterclasses” (1983) [online at: www.cnvill.net/mfmasterclasses10.pdf].

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