

Morton Feldman: Excerpts from the 1986 Darmstadt Lecture

Transcribed by Ivan Ilić

The transcript below was made from the DVD, Morton Feldman: The 1986 Darmstadt Lecture, published by Universal Edition, Vienna, in 1997 (UE 45010V). The DVD was produced and directed by Günter Woog, assisted by Karin Malwitz. It contains excerpts from the lecture Feldman gave at the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, Darmstadt, on 24 July 1986 on the occasion of the world premiere of his piece For Christian Wolff, for flute and piano/celesta. The transcript is published here by kind permission of Ivan Ilić and the Estate of Morton Feldman.

Unidentified voice over opening titles:

The duration of the piece is three and a half hour[s]. And I beg you, if you leave, to leave very carefully. This room is very over-acoustic [sic] and you can leave very quietly there. But I hope you will stay here and hear the music of Morton Feldman. Thank you. [applause]

Music: Beginning of Morton Feldman's *For Christian Wolff* (1986) performed by Eberhard Blum (flute) and Nils Vigeland (piano and celesta) in July 1986.

Video cuts to the end of the performance. There is prolonged applause.

Feldman acknowledges the applause, and says:

I would like to say just a few words about Christian Wolff. His family owned a house in walking distance from this building. And, um... [pause]

Other than that... I'm sure that most of you know who he is, he's been here quite a few times. But when I wrote the piece, I just realized that [pause] that if his family wasn't exiled out of Germany, Germany would have had *another* great composer [Feldman laughs, general laughter, applause].

Video cuts to an informal discussion between Feldman and audience members, following the performance.

Feldman:

I was trying to orchestrate the flute. The hocket. I was trying to find ways of... I never use the hocket. But the hocket works beautifully in orchestrating (*completes explanation with gesturing*).

Audience member:

The relationship between the piano and the celesta is pretty fascinating.

Feldman:

Well, I like that after two hours you heard a chord [laughter].

Audience member:

Yeah... Right, right.

[Cut in video]

Feldman:

He said: "I feel like a child with all my notes".¹ And I said "I feel like a child with so few" [laughter]. I've always said, there are no hierarchical resolutions. Because once you get involved with either tonality or Serialism, you have to make hierarchical solutions. That's why the piece could last so long, because there were no solutions. You just... Kind of a... computer balance, you know.

Audience member:

But without the dryness of computer music.

Feldman:

What I meant by computer, I meant kind of like a... A yin yang. A kind of yin yang (*continues gesturing a balance, one hand rising, the other falling, then vice versa*).

Video cuts to Feldman's classroom lecture.

Feldman:

Not to glorify or romanticize Christian Wolff's image, so to speak. But I think he could use for a little myth making. He was sixteen and a half and he was sent by his piano teacher, Grete Sultan, to John Cage. John Cage saw his music, and didn't believe it. He never really studied with John. All John did was to lay out the score and just show Christian, more professionally, or essentially *neatly*, how to make a page. Evidently, that was the way John taught, because that's exactly what he did to me too.

[Cut in video]

John told me, that I should write a little bit, and then copy it. And as I'm copying it, I get close to the material. I see what I'm doing, and then I go on. I get ideas. And to this day, when I copy out a page, and I'm getting to the end of the page, there's no ideas... [laughs] It always works. Because what happens is you say: "I'm not getting any ideas" and then, of course, the minute you say that (*snaps his fingers*), you get an idea. So, it's a marvelous strategy and that's exactly how I work. I write for a half a day; I copy for the other half a day; and then, the following day, I continue the same sequence of events.

Very important, it gets you close to the work and it, more or less – not corrects – but makes you get more involved with what you're doing, rather than believing that the concept is infallible.

[Cut in video]

But now, it is very, very hard to get into a situation, about the importance of someone in a historical moment. Especially when their work, perhaps has proliferated in terms of style... That is, we milk it, and then we go on to something else. In other words, if you say Christian Wolff: "Oh, we had Christian Wolff already, didn't we?"

¹ Feldman is referring to his conversation with Iannis Xenakis on 4 July, 1986 at De Kloveniersdoelen, Middelburg. See "The Barrier of Style. Morton Feldman in Conversation with Iannis Xenakis, 4 July 1986," in *Words on Music. Morton Feldman in Middelburg 1985-1987. Lectures and Conversations*, edited by Raoul Mörchen (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 2008) p310.

What did his music have? Well, it's certainly the most European, of both Cage and mine. And what I mean by "European" is the marriage of concept and poetry. This is a great gift Western civilization has had. And he had it. He's very conceptual, and yet, there's a beautiful poetry.

[Cut in video]

But if the word "process" seems to reflect an American contribution, I would say it began with Christian Wolff. That's what Cage took.

[Cut in video]

There was something about his music, which I described to someone the other day, as if I was thrown out of Eden. There was something about his music, that I felt that *never again*, would it be possible for me to write glamorous music.

What is glamorous music? Monteverdi is glamorous music. [pause] I think about it all the time. It annoys me. Because we always want to... After all... Someone said to me the reason Charlie Chaplin was a universal figure, because people that saw him felt that they couldn't get any lower, than what was happening in his life. And that's why we perhaps like Fred Astaire, because we can never ever be like Fred Astaire [laughs]. And, compositionally, I've always wanted to be like Fred Astaire. After all, I'm a New Yorker [chuckles, laughter].

So, this whole business of being flung, or thrown out of Paradise, is his gift to me. I'm glad I got out. It was getting too hot anyway [laughter].

[Cut in video]

Naturally, I don't feel that my music is sparse or minimal. Perhaps the way that fat people never really feel they're fat [chuckles, laughter]. I never really thought of, I mean... There are articles where I'm like "the father of Minimalism" or such and such. I certainly don't consider myself a minimalist at all.

But I would like to tell you a little bit about certain attitudes I have. And essentially, a lot of my attitudes – unfortunately – came from teaching. And the students believe in "the system" or what they call "the overview", which I find very disturbing. Disconcerting. I know the importance of this overview, and I know how difficult it is to work without it. One of the first things I did, when I became a professor at Buffalo – about seventeen years ago – is that, you know, on a doctorate, you have to give what you're gonna do, you have to give the overview before you do it, and discuss it rationally.

I took it out. I said: "All we want of you, all I want, is serious work". Serious means *work* [laughs]. That they work hard, that's what it means. I have no other stipulation², is that they work more than an hour a day. They work four hours a day.

[Cut in video]

I can't give you, specifically, in a sense, some of my compositional strategies. And I have

² This word is unclear as spoken by Feldman, but in context, it is likely to be a synonym of requirement.

them. I have a *lot* of them. But Sigmund Freud said that the best way – or the only way – to really understand something, is to first generalize. And I always generalize the problem to myself, before I begin. And the problem is usually very realistic. There's so much given to us, before we really *begin*, that it's absolutely incredible. You're getting thirty thousand marks to write the piece? That's a lot of information [laughs, laughter]. It helps our ego. We feel a little bit optimistic. With me, it's the instruments...

[Cut in video]

If I had to think of a flute as a *flute*, without just one or two people playing it, it doesn't exist. Like that note I was telling you about. If I want to think of a flute, and the state of the art, I hear a vibrato... [grimaces] That doesn't sit well... So I don't know what a flute is, unless the person plays it for me. I don't know what it is. I know what it is in terms of its [pause] “role-playing”.

[Cut in video]

O.K. [pause] This whole business of generality has now influenced my compositional thinking. Rather than looking for specifics.

[Cut in video]

[Feldman sings a rising melody] We don't have that anymore. All the...ideas... We act as if we're lucky that we don't have that anymore.

[Cut in video]

People like me, could make it out of anything. Take my word for that also. 'Cause I heard Kevin³ complaining, you know. Kevin was a... We have Cage cripples, and we have Stockhausen cripples. And Kevin worked with Stockhausen. I heard that he told somebody that Stockhausen was *lying* to him [laughs]. I love the idea! Of course he wasn't lying to you [laughs]. That's a problem, listening to people like me or anybody who you feel might have – uh – *secret* information.

[Cut in video]

Listen to me: you're lost [laughs, laughter].

[Cut in video]

The generalization is this: black notes, white notes; short durations, long durations. In other words, re-investigating, in a general sense some kind of reality principle. Not a conceptual principle, but a reality principle, of what the hell music is. And then finding some way, not conceptually, but in listening to the piece... And not listening *that* profoundly, which stops me from getting a compositional idea [laughs]. I go ahead and write the piece, with a very conscious [pause] yin-yang aspect [gestures up and down, with alternating hands, to signify balance], in its equilibrium. Do you think I don't know how to cadence? [smiles] If I cadence, I'm dead. It's like Scheherazade [laughter]. Or resolution?

³ Feldman is probably referring to South-African composer Kevin Volans (b. 1949). Volans studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen at the Cologne Hochschule für Musik starting in 1973. He was Stockhausen's teaching assistant in 1975-76.

[Cut in video]

[Feldman sings the first phrase of Beethoven's 5th symphony, *ta-ta-ta Ta*
Right over the bar.

[He sings second phrase: *ta-ta-ta Ta*]

Of course, I'm not preaching "born-again meter". But, being that I feel that if one is involved with parameters, it seems to me to understand that meter is a fantastic parameter in getting fantastic compositional information.

[Cut in video]

| Let me tell you a little bit about what I mean... I wrote a piece, "For Bunita Marcus", it started there in that piece, where I use meter as an aspect of construction, of rhythm, of everything. Everything we know of. And a few others. A surrogate harmony, in terms of tension; this way or that way.

[Cut in video]

Glamorous... And so, what the structure of meter does, is to *slow down* the rate of variation.

[Cut in video]

Now, an important strategy – and if I didn't think it, I wouldn't have written the piece⁴ – was that any professional knows that the flute and the piano is a *boring* combination. And all you're gonna arrive at is a kind of that typical, gestural *crap* [laughter]. Right? You might agree, though you wouldn't call it the gestural crap.

"What am I gonna do?", I said, "what am I gonna do?" Not to make it interesting; to write a piece. You know Mies van der Rohe's remark: "I don't want to be interesting; I want to be good" [laughter]. I wanna write a piece! I decided: don't change the flute. Stay with the C flute. Because then I'm involved with an important strategy. Known as the Houdini School of Composition [laughter].

[Cut in video]

Most people think: "what *could* I do?" I think: "what *shouldn't* I do?" That's why when you feel, that the music is going this way and should go that way, and I went this way (pointing into a different direction), is that you're following what you feel is the logical course of its continuity. Doesn't work that way.

But that psychology, what I shouldn't do, perhaps is involved with the fact that I'm Jewish and what is known as "Jewish paranoia" [laughs]. I don't feel comfortable enough to feel that everything is on my side, that it's going to work just the way that I want it. I'm not suspicious, I'm just careful [laughter].

End credits

⁴ Feldman is now talking about *For Christian Wolff* (1986) again.