

# On Morton Feldman's *For Bunita Marcus*

by Marco Lenzi

[English translation by Roseanne Rogosin]

*The following text was written as a liner note for the CD recording of Feldman's For Bunita Marcus played by Gianni Lenoci on the Amirani Records label (AMRN 035 02-C).*

What shall I do? Say what I want? Yes sir, and with no detours.

So the first thing that strikes us when we listen to a piece by Morton Feldman (1926-1987) – and especially one from his last flourishing in the eighties – is its incredible *beauty*, its irresistible charm.

*That's* where its first and 'rock-bottom' characteristic lies. Everything else comes after. We are bewitched, hypnotized, spellbound by the *quality* of his choices as a composer.

I can't say how, but it is as though this beauty were self-sufficient, with no need for a well-constructed expression or to be shaped and developed according to an inclusive formal pattern, to fully reveal itself: it may sound bizarre, but this is shapeless beauty, *absolute* beauty.

Whereas other great composers, not only modern or contemporary ones, are appreciated also for their constructive, syntactic and discursive approach (the structural and mutual roles of the parts in which the piece is split), when we listen to Feldman we can just be *in the instant*, we can just *gaze* at what we are listening to. Every single moment of his music is an expression of beauty, is always *full* of its beauty: it's, as Cage wished, at its center and therefore doesn't need to be related to anything else to express its meaning.

That's why a piece by Feldman can last up to six hours: because we aren't in a discursive expression, in a linear series where every instant's meaning depends on its collocation in time; we *have sunk* into the instant, and the instant itself is never-ending space, not time. Each composition is like an extended moment that neither starts nor ends, but just as it suddenly appears vanishes suddenly.

Feldman himself admitted that he had taken this viewpoint from Kafka, one of his favorite writers: the idea of being in the midst of things, of not being 'introduced' to something, but set immediately in front of a metaphysical world of sound, an 'abstract' but not less sensual, less 'present' one.

As in the short stories and in the novels of the great Bohemian writer we are immediately plunged into their atmosphere ("Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was arrested."), in Feldman's latest pieces the initial pattern may be more weighty than others, i.e. it could stick in your mind more easily, but it doesn't have the prevailing role of a fugue subject or a sonata theme: its one and only purpose is to reveal immediately the piece's overall and unalterable atmosphere, each fragment being nothing more is nothing more, as for Spinoza, than a particular affection of one substance.

So the pattern is the *only* founding element of all the works Feldman composed in the last ten years of his life: it is just a sound scheme, a rhythmic and melodic structure, a little autonomous 'form' ending in itself, but open to innumerable changes, not meant to be functional to their development, but only as constant 're-articulations', variations on the same and always recognizable figurative theme: transpositions, swapping voices, rhythmic extensions and contractions, permutations, suppressions or integrations of other – however few – elements.

Just a few units or various dozens of them can be used in a piece, their same or varied recurrence being unpredictable at all times, never reckoned beforehand, but 'felt' as a need during the composer's

*performance* (because we are always dealing with a performance in Feldman's work, not with a theoretical project).

*For Bunita Marcus* (1985) – the second of his three last works for piano, written after *Triadic Memories* (1981) and before *Palais de Mari* (1986) – is characterized in fact by its rarefying texture and a limited use of patterns, referable to four categories:

1. a cluster of three or four notes played in a slow series
2. sequences of more compact forms repeated constantly with minimal rhythmic variations
3. alternating-hand arpeggios
4. chords floating in their resonance (a definitely minor category compared to the other three).

The metronome (crotchet = 63-66) never changes, and the right pedal is always down with only two exceptions – two points occurring in the first half of the piece, where there is a kind of little sob that for an instant breaks its continuity.

Above and beyond these few facts, to which we could add lists of recurrences that would certainly show some sort of apparent organic unity in the piece, Feldman's music flees from any kind of analysis, and it's impossible to detect a genetic code that could disclose its deepest structure.

Just as a painting by Rothko or Newman, this is 'surface' music, music that discloses itself totally in a listening experience, that doesn't refer to anything but a longing for perfection, a sublime feeling. The peaceful inertia of free-of-shock time, the slow decanting of the forms in approximately an hour and fifteen minutes of music make *For Bunita Marcus* a monument of mystical contemplation, of ecstatic rapture and deeply affected attention.

Marco Lenzi, March 2013