

Departing Landscapes: Morton Feldman's *String Quartet II* and *Triadic Memories*

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"I know that when I write a piece [of music],
sometimes I'm telling people 'We're not gonna
be here very long'."
— Morton Feldman

I. *String Quartet II*

In the summer of 1996, the Kronos Quartet was scheduled to present Morton Feldman's *String Quartet II* (1983) at the Lincoln Center Festival in New York. The performance was being promoted as the centerpiece of a much larger Feldman tribute and retrospective that was to go on for several days. Feldman's legendary quartet had never before been given in its entirety, which, if faithfully done would last, uninterrupted, around six hours. Shorter versions had been performed in the 1980s—in Toronto, in Darmstadt—abridged by Feldman himself to fit specific programs, or to accommodate the pleas of musicians, but the composition in all its intended dimension had not been heard. Like a well-concealed object, the complete string quartet's *non*-performance seemed only to heighten the anticipation and the uniqueness of the upcoming event, the silence surrounding this monumental piece contributing to its growing aura. No one had heard it, and yet much had been heard about it.

More than any other contemporary composer, Feldman over the years had become known for the length of so many of his pieces, their extreme duration seen as both a compositional strategy and a recognizable signature statement of his late work. Asked about it, he would sometimes cryptically justify the unusual length of his music as his way of adding "a little drama" to the work, or that he was "tired of the bourgeois audience" and their conventional expectations, or, more seriously perhaps, he would quote Varèse's comment that people "don't understand how long it takes for a sound to speak" (*Give My Regards* 44). And though much of Feldman's music of the late 1970s and 1980s ranged from one hour to four (breaking what he saw as the stale durational mold of

contemporary classical music or, as he sarcastically explained it, “What the world doesn’t need is another twenty-five minute composition” [Smith]), the *String Quartet II* was undoubtedly the longest and most demanding of them all. With no breaks for the musicians (or the audience), and with the musical instruments almost constantly engaged from the beginning of the piece to its end, Feldman himself once described the quartet as if it were a kind of bad dream, an extended exercise in “disintegration” (166). However, in spite of the string quartet’s extraordinary challenges—reflected not only in its unusual length but also in its prolonged use of subtle and slow repetitions, modular chromatic patternings, and a sustained stillness that carries throughout most of the piece—the Kronos Quartet had bravely agreed to try to perform the composition for the festival, to finally realize that which had always before been deemed virtually impossible to complete, unperformable in its lengthy duration. As David Harrington, Kronos’s artistic director and violinist, described it, “The piece was larger than anyone’s imagination” (qtd. in Low).

Prior to the performance, the four musicians prepared themselves well ahead of time for the upcoming ordeal, approaching it more like an extreme athletic event or perhaps a kind of formidable religious ritual. For what would be required to perform and finish Feldman’s piece would involve not only instrumental virtuosity (of which the Kronos Quartet was already renowned), but a physical and mental stamina far beyond what was normally expected of musicians. Playing the instruments for so long, remaining focused upon the 125-page score, and simply staying seated upon the stage, would demand sufficient strength and tenacity (not to mention some degree of faith in the redeeming purpose and value of what they were to undergo; otherwise, why would one bother to try, willingly inflicting this on oneself?). Again, Harrington, in an interview conducted just days before the performance was to take place, described the quartet’s extraordinary challenges and the musicians’ preparation in the following manner:

The *Second Quartet* is physically so demanding that there are points—I think marathon runners must go through the same thing we do when we play the *Second Quartet*—you go in and out of feeling your body is going to break. Even right now when I’m thinking of the *Second Quartet* I have a shooting pain in my back ... It is the most painful piece of music physically for us to play.

Yet along with the described pain of this piece, Harrington goes on to speak of Feldman’s string quartet as “a fantastically beautiful idea of music,” as if the punishment of its performance and its fantastic beauty—the very idea of it—were somehow inextricably linked, the one allowing

the other to happen. Clearly, one of the major challenges in performing this piece (and to some lesser extent, in participating in it as a spectator) would involve a concentrated endurance of the pain, the pain of time, the pain *as* time, a kind of mind/body coordination that might finally allow that idea—"larger than anyone's imagination"—to be materialized and heard. Harrington goes on to describe the bodies of the musicians being further tested, the performance's stress and strain giving way to its own peculiarly rewarding pleasures:

To accomplish [Feldman's quartet] as a group over a vast period of time is really, really difficult. You need to be thinking of the absolute balance of your body. Every millimeter of the bow length. The concentration involved in it is enormous Everything is so slow it's like being in this dream state that takes place in ultra-slow motion There is this sense of accomplishment and mastery of one's own difficulties and one's own body. It is enormously satisfying in that sense. (qtd. in Low)

The unusual demands of Feldman's string quartet would seem in some manner to have transformed, or enlarged, the upcoming Lincoln Center event, making what was ostensibly to be a musical performance into something more than just that, into something resembling theater. Indeed, by drawing heightened attention to the trained musicians as engaged, vulnerable performers, Feldman would appear to have written a composition in which music and theater converge in the real time of performance, upon the real bodies of musicians. As either a dream or a nightmare (which would it be?), clearly this piece was likely to present itself as a very different kind of musical event than was normally encountered in a concert hall, or heard in a string quartet—something more vast and exacting, corrosive to everyone involved.

Compositionally, the piece seemed to promise as well a kind of conceptual ordeal that was theater-like in its formal efforts to project an acoustic scene upon a stage, a tangible site of sound ephemerally moving in and out of focus. Feldman, in one of his rare comments about his string quartet, spoke about the piece in such visual terms, as if the sounds themselves were to be made materially present, performing before us in "stages of disintegration," disappearing before our eyes:

The whole thing is a nightmare, it's like a jigsaw puzzle that every piece you put in fits, and then when you finish it, you see that it's not the picture. That was the idea. The jigsaw puzzle, everything finishes and it's not the picture. Then you do another version and it's not the picture. Finally you realize that you are not going to get a picture. (165-166)

As if dramatically presented upon a stage, the material sounds (about to be seen) disperse right at the point of their imminent appearance. Hour upon hour, the music is described in the above comment by

Feldman, via the visual image, as the acoustic movement of time and desire, the unpicturable sound itself of disappearance. For the composer, it is somehow these virtually entropic components of the music that ultimately are *to be* the music, with the dispersal, the disintegration, the disappearance—in their very corrosiveness—making the scene that is finally so poignantly unseeable.

There are some precedents for such a lengthy and conceptually ambitious performance as this string quartet: a contemporary of Feldman's, Lamonte Young, had written raga-like events in the 1960s and 1970s that went on for several hours, and John Cage had also presented performances that went beyond customary lengths. Even earlier, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Erik Satie wrote a piece for solo piano, entitled *Vexations*, built entirely around a single repeated pattern that, according to instructions, was to last for twenty-four hours. But no one was entirely sure if Satie was joking or not.¹ Feldman, on the other hand, appears to have been serious, with the six-hour duration seeming right at the limit of imaginable physical and mental endurance; if it were any shorter, though in its own way temporally and instrumentally demanding, the piece would be finally manageable (as several of Feldman's relatively compressed pieces were), while if it were any longer, it would move toward something that was simply impossible, becoming instead a kind of conceptual event—a fantastic "idea of music," no doubt, but remaining just that, never to be performed.

Other parallels to the upcoming performance at Lincoln Center could perhaps be found closer to theater itself, seen in some of the durational demands of some performance or installation art, or in the extreme physical, often painful exertions and concentrations of body art. One need only recall various contemporary instances of such events that often involve figures sitting for hours on end engaged in some endlessly repeated action (works ranging from Ann Hamilton's² to Stelarc's), or earlier, that of Ulay and Marina Abramović,³ Vito Acconci, or Chris Burden, each of them undergoing one perilous ordeal after another. The Kronos Quartet's performance promised an experience that somehow recalled aspects of these other events—the necessary, almost nightmarish endurance required, the strain of staying so still, the repetitive gestures forming an unpicturable scene, and the estranged, but implicated audience watching it all from a seemingly safe distance.

I suppose that the string quartet's extreme demands, the projected pain of the piece, had played some important role in the performance's overall appeal; no doubt, I desired to see the four musicians undergo this peculiar test of musicated endurance (as we in the audience, to some

lesser extent, were to undergo it as well), pushed to their very pain-inducing limits, their vulnerable bodies weakening, withering, while achieving, I hoped, something striking and memorable. With Feldman putting the bodies of the musicians on the line in this extended manner and by making a spectacle of the peril involved, his string quartet was to draw attention to the ontological range and boundary of musical performance, expanding and stretching thin just what the music and the musicians might finally achieve, what we in the audience might finally apprehend.

Ever since a friend, several years ago, unexpectedly gave me a copied cassette of Morton Feldman's *Triadic Memories* (1981), a solo piano piece performed by (and dedicated to) the Japanese pianist Aki Takahashi, I'd been a fervent admirer of the composer and his music. What I was almost instantly drawn to in this work was the manner in which the music seemed to combine a formal, audible intricacy with an undeniable emotional charm, even, at times, an unabashed beauty. By joining a gently crafted dissonance with an enduring degree of melodic enticement, *Triadic Memories* seemed to be a rare piece of contemporary classical music that was both smart and sensual, conceptually complex yet utterly alluring. And, as I later came to understand, this piece possessed many of the familiar features of Feldman's other late works—the unusual length (lasting, uninterrupted, over an hour), repetitions gradually evolving into new patterns, and a sustained stillness held throughout, with surfaces of silence used as a kind of counterpoint to the performed sounds. I immediately began collecting as many of Feldman's recorded compositions as I could find, listening to them again and again, growing more and more drawn to his music. His *String Quartet II*, as I was to discover, was often spoken of—in articles, interviews, liner notes—and frequently referred to, almost reverently, as his most monumental of works, Feldman's unperformed, perhaps unperformable composition; never before recorded, there were no cassettes, no CDs of the piece for me to find, for none, it seemed, could ever contain it. Anyone interested in Feldman knew that this was the composition, perhaps more than any other, that always remained to be heard.

I had also been led to Feldman by my earlier interest in his older friend and mentor, John Cage. Their names were frequently linked as part of what would become known as the New York School of composers that was to emerge, alongside the parallel movement in the visual arts, in the late 1940s and 1950s, and on into the 1960s.⁴ Early on, Feldman

was motivated, in large part by his encounters with Cage, to write music in which one would hear the performed sounds in all their immediate, tactile qualities, to disrupt the deafening habits of our hearing so that we might finally listen in ways unencumbered by historical memory, inherited convention and fixed formula. Feldman, echoing Cage, wrote of his earliest compositional orientation that, "Only by 'unfixing' the elements traditionally used to construct a piece of music could the sounds exist in themselves—not as symbols, or memories which were memories of other music to begin with" (35). The stated desire of the composer was to penetrate beneath, beyond, the perceived historical obstructions to hearing, arriving unencumbered at the origins of unmediated sound, into the very heart of its sonorous matter.

Cage, of course, famously pursued throughout his life just such an endeavor to open the ears to a more profound, direct kind of listening. His infectious intensity and his endless means of invention would seem to have impacted an entire generation (or two, or three) to strive to finally hear "Just sounds, sounds free of judgments about whether they are 'musical' or not, sounds free of memory and taste . . . , sounds free of fixed relations" (116). And Cage, already by the early 1950s, believed that many of Feldman's first compositions effectively manifested such a liberated listening, the "live" performances of the younger composer's music seeming to offer access to the sounds in all their resonant power and purity. In his seminal book *Silence* (1961), Cage wrote extensively on Feldman's music and its capacity to deliver so movingly the "tender" and sometimes "violent" sounds to us, to make themselves present and accounted for, available for our immediate sensual enjoyment.

For Cage, there was the belief, the *desire* to believe, that sounds—any and all sounds—could be construed musically, and that in the final account "Everything is music." For Feldman, however, his "only argument with Cage" (29), as he described it (generously) in his own writings, lay here, believing as he did that *everything* was decidedly *not* music, and that there remained intractably, regrettably perhaps, an indeterminate realm apart, a distance, a detachment, by which his music was then to define itself, find itself defined. In a sense, many of the important questions that Cage had initiated about music, and of our own reception of sound and silence, were then taken by Feldman and ontologically pushed further. Indeed, pursuing ever more complexly many of the difficulties of writing and listening to music, Feldman was to come to conclusions that would often seem quite contrary to Cage's, risking that nothing—as opposed to everything—is music, while continuing nonetheless to try to make it, to listen for it.

For Feldman, alongside and perhaps dialectically in conflict with his desire to “hear the sounds themselves,” seemed simultaneously aware, in ways that perhaps Cage was not (or in ways that Cage simply resisted), of a kind of sound *barrier* between himself and the music, between the performance of the written notes and the seemingly inevitable delayed reaction to their affective reception. As a consequence of our own deflected awareness of the sounds, the performed music, existing *in* time, must always remain somehow off-limits, or out of sync with our hearing of it, just beyond the range of acoustic reception. Reflecting something of this estrangement, Marcel Proust—a favorite author of Feldman’s—was to write of his fictional composer Vinteuil, and of the “little phrase” of his sonata that was so elusively sought:

Doubtless the notes which we hear... tend, according to their pitch and volume, to spread out before our eyes over surfaces of varying dimensions, to trace arabesques, to give us the sensation of breadth or tenuity, stability or caprice. But the notes themselves have vanished before these sensations have developed sufficiently to escape submersion under those which the succeeding or even simultaneous notes have already begun to awaken in us. (I 228)

In place of the felt immediacy of the music, the performed, passing sounds were more likely to be heard in a kind of decayed, disintegrating retreat from their otherwise unlocatable source. For Feldman, affirming or perhaps circumscribing an even more radically ephemeral event than what Cage was proposing, what we hear is perhaps only what remains of the sound’s very vanishing—what we hear is, in a sense, *not there*, never *quite* there, always having just passed us by. Listening, one is unable to fix where the sounds exist in relation to one’s hearing, with each subsequent sound, as Feldman described it, “eras[ing] in one’s memory what happened before” (qtd. in Zimmerman 230). Any aspirations to a Cage-like, musicated immediacy, must consequently be side-stepped or bracketed, replaced by some other kind of hope or expectation, some other means of musical formation that takes into account what Proust elsewhere described as “that ineluctable law which ordains that we can only imagine what is absent” (III 905), we can only hear what is no longer there to be heard.

By working, as Feldman wrote “with the decay of each sound,” a piece of music performed by a musician, and listened to by us, would thus present itself as a kind of material manifestation of entropic dispersal and decline, a sounded site of time forever slipping away from our own awareness of it, our own resounding failure to apprehend anything at all. “Decay ... this departing landscape, *this* expresses where the sound

exists in our hearing—leaving us rather than coming toward us” (25). And instead of Feldman’s music reflecting Cage’s more sensual silence, or his famous “celebration that we own nothing,” one is more likely to hear something that, while perhaps less liberating and celebratory, resonates nonetheless, but more complexly, reflecting in part Feldman’s own enduring attraction to the work of Samuel Beckett,⁵ which resonated in him as “a kind of shared longing... this saturated, unending longing” (qtd. in Frost 51).

Into the 1970s and 1980s, Feldman was thus to further distinguish himself, apart from Cage and the others, as a writer of his increasingly long compositions, pursuing through his music a delicate arrangement of disintegrating sound, a kind of hermetic, Proustian investigation of the workings of memory, the subtle intricacies and evasions of how we hear. So often in these later compositions, Feldman repeats familiar patterns of notation, quiet chords, gentle dissonances soothingly played again and again. For long stretches of time (and contributing to the composition’s necessary length), we may find ourselves listening almost distractedly to the sounds, remembering the familiar arrangements as they fleetingly pass by, recalling what Nietzsche was to describe as “the kind of beauty that infiltrates slowly” (105). And then, abruptly, just when we think we know what we’re going to hear, just when memory has taken over and seems to be listening for us (relieving us of the burden of trying to hear at all), Feldman might change a single note, minutely adjust a chordal configuration, an unfamiliar key, played upon the piano, or a string of the violin unexpectedly struck. Involuntarily, and as if it were somehow permeating our memory, this sudden sound seems to echo from out of previously patterned arrangements. And contained within this newest sound, it is as if there is a weight of duration that extends it through two moments at once—like a memory materially heard, the past sound instantly recollected in the present. The sound, itself decaying, has thus proved itself dependent upon a field of remembrance, skating upon it, as if marking the movement of its own disappearance.

Such complex features of listening and remembrance were said to be important elements of Feldman’s *String Quartet II*, with the six hours of that piece perhaps allowing ample time for the functionings of musical memory to be more fully explored and developed. Indeed, the extreme duration of that composition might even permit something of the texture of time to manifest itself more fully—temporality sonorously, even painfully, presented as a perceivable image, or as Feldman wrote, “time...

transfixed... within the sound..., the breathing of the sound itself" (*Give My Regards* 13). Sharing something of the vastness of Proust's multi-volume novel⁶ and the manner in which that monumental work enlists the reader's real memory to recall characters and events occurring thousands of pages prior, in Feldman's quartet, enough time would also be taken so that memory itself might be stretched and strained towards its own tethered limit, a listener made to hear something of his or her own hearing, an audible absence, a "saturated... longing" in which one desires to hold on to that which is otherwise so rapidly vanishing.

Feldman also departed from Cage in that his own later works were more or less conventionally scored, and performed by familiar instruments, traditionally tuned—as in a string quartet. And in ways that might at first seem at odds with the performative demands of his *String Quartet II*, Feldman was to resist many of the more overtly theatrical elements of Cage's compositions—the opening up of windows and doors to the surrounding noises, the use of randomly tuned radios and other odd objects, the chance-determined choreographing of the musicians' sounds and movements. For Feldman was more than happy to work within the closed, quieted confines of the concert hall and recording studio; indeed, he was to insist upon it. Having investigated earlier more aleatory types of writing (in particular, his celebrated "graph pieces" of the 1950s), and grateful for the manner in which these had usefully "washed out [his] ears," Feldman later returned to the meticulous scoring of his compositions, leaving nothing to chance, every sound deliberately determined.⁷ As Feldman came increasingly to recognize, chance and contingency need not be cultivated nor encouraged, for they cannot be escaped.

What was to be theater-like, or "dramatic," in Feldman's music was thus to emerge and make itself manifest in a more inadvertent, less noisy manner than that which had been celebrated and made famous by Cage. For if, as Herbert Blau has described music in relation to theater, music's "disconcerting presence," like theater's own, "is the appearance of time," then the strict, straightforward performance itself is likely to be theatrical enough, with the performed sounds of such an event registered as mere "shadows of time"—rendered thus, remembered only—and "as we hear it nothing in itself" (*Take Up the Bodies* 195-196). Marking and measuring the dimensions of its own vanishing, insistently demarcating a disappearance, the music might finally, ephemerally, be heard as the sedimented sound of time, time itself sounding. As noted in my earlier epigraph, Feldman once said, "I know that when I write a piece [of music],

sometimes I'm telling people 'We're not gonna be here very long' (qtd. in Gizzi 253). The irony, of course, is that it might take a long time—six hours perhaps—to get that message across, to make it finally felt.

With concerns such as these in mind, Feldman was to realize that other compositional methods would have to be attempted in order to accommodate a more complex form of musical writing and awareness, one in which, as Jean-François Lyotard describes it, the "sonorous matter, clandestinely inhabits the audible material" (*Postmodern* 230). For the earlier listening innocence had given way to a more hardened kind of hearing, one that was far more profoundly indeterminate and dispersed, resistant to being written, sounded out on instruments. The difficult task of the contemporary composer was now to compose music with this acoustic division and delay in mind, aware of a kind of Derridian *différance* that anticipates the sounds themselves as always elsewhere, never quite punctuating the piece at the precise moment intended, but echoing instead after the fact. And as Feldman himself succinctly described it, "We do not hear what we hear..., only what we remember" (*Give My Regards* 209).

The question however remains as to how we might hear *that*, as if, once-removed, the remembered sounds, decayed, might somehow be made to return (in some ghostly manner), to sound, perhaps inaudibly, in their own resounding absence.

In the spring of 1996, when I saw advertised in the *New York Times* that the Lincoln Center Festival would be presenting the Feldman retrospective, showcasing compositions from throughout his career, I immediately decided to go to New York to attend the festival. Undoubtedly this was to be an extraordinary opportunity to hear Feldman's work performed "live," and not just as the many recordings that I had come to know so well (and which, as Cage always insisted, were perhaps something else entirely). The Kronos Quartet's performance of the *String Quartet II* was to be a one-time event of such noteworthy proportion and expectation that all other scheduled pieces seemed set up to constellate around it. Clearly this was an evening not to be missed, for once done, when might the legendary piece ever be done again? Who would dare try?

Moreover, to my delight, in addition to Feldman's string quartet, I saw as well that the Japanese pianist Aki Takahashi would herself be performing *Triadic Memories* toward the close of the festival. This was the piece of Feldman's music—as performed by Takahashi—that I was most

familiar with, that first recording given to me several years before, the one by which my Feldman fascination had begun. This piece, unlike the never-before-heard string quartet, was likely to offer a very different kind of listening experience, one in which my own clear memories of the composition were bound to play an important part in what I heard, a hearing of what I'd already heard so many times before.

My tickets in hand, I arrived in New York, eager to attend as many events as possible. The performance of the string quartet was scheduled to occur two days later in Alice Tully Hall, beginning at five in the afternoon and continuing until late that night. I'd already given some thought to my own capacity for such an unusual event, how I was going to endure the extended performance, sitting so long—watching, listening—paying attention. For regardless of my great affection for Feldman's music, this was clearly going to be a taxing event for all involved, a test for performers and audience alike. And even though it was expected that people might come and go, drifting in and out of the concert hall, I intended to hear the piece in its entirety, to endure as much of the string quartet as possible. I wondered, however, what I was getting myself into, paying forty dollars for what was potentially to be so onerously undergone (indeed, paying more so I could sit right up front, to see and hear the performance better). No doubt, the aura of the unperformed string quartet was in itself quite the draw (knowing, like most others, so little else about it), its allure playing a significant part in my own attraction to the piece. I must have believed that something of its mysterious presence, the nearly monumental extremes that had in part constituted the string quartet's legend, would be made manifest that night, that all of us, together, were in for something special.

Perhaps not since 1985 when I had sat virtually unmoving through Robert Wilson and Philip Glass's four-hour-long production of *Einstein on the Beach* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music was a performance to require such stamina, so much sustained attention.⁸ That extraordinary event had also been preceded by an enormous amount of media attention and audience anticipation, a theatrical performance that had attained, like Feldman's quartet, a near legendary status, ever since its first brief run at Lincoln Center in 1976. One of the central, unignorable components of this performance involved a heightened awareness of temporality itself, the often excruciating amount of time taken for movements to occur, images to emerge. For as Herbert Blau has noted, Wilson's work frequently involves a kind of "deconditioning" of one's standard response to time, and even further, "require[s] time as the condition for forgetting

it" (*Eye of Prey* 163). In *Einstein on the Beach*, Wilson's theater and Glass's music had been radically conjoined in a manner that seemed to collapse time onto the extended scenes themselves, conjuring a powerful, almost apparitional effect through the crossed-currents of performers moving in slow motion, while the pulsating music raced breathlessly along. This protracted collision of speed and slowness onto the blank bodies of the performers created a kind of staged stasis, like a held breath incrementally inflating into tangible image.

Recalling that earlier performance, I wondered if Feldman's quartet might also reward the patient endurance of the audience, if the evening's extremes would once more grant such a "deconditioned" access to something similarly affecting and memorable. Seen up close—the musicians as *de facto* performers—would time itself again be somehow sensually materialized, apprehended, not just in the slow motion movements of the music and musicians, but also through the durational demands of the event itself, the minutes piling upon each other, the accumulating hours taking their attritional toll; again, the crossing of music and theater upon a stage? As was seen in *Einstein on the Beach*, Feldman also often spoke of a desire, through his music, to work with and manipulate time's felt presence, aiming for what he frequently described as a kind of "stasis," a music that might "achieve aspects of immobility, or the illusion of it: the Magritte-like world Satie evokes, or the 'floating sculpture' of Varèse" (149). A central feature of such a composition involved the immobilizing, illusory use of crafted "disorientations" of acoustic memory, the performed sounds intended to function much like Proustian metaphor—a familiar note is carried across a continuum, an arrangement of sounds is formed into progressively evolving dimension. Intended to open the ears toward a more complex mode of hearing, a past sound is presented in such a manner that it might be made to permeate the present with its recollected sensation. By applying in his lengthiest compositions "a synthesis between variation and repetition," Feldman hoped to create such patterned gradations of contiguous sound that would be both "concrete and ephemeral" (143), or as he elsewhere described it, "keeping that tension or that stasis" that is "frozen, at the same time it's vibrating" (184). Again, as with Wilson, with enough time taken as the condition for forgetting it, Feldman would thus give passing shape to that which he described as a kind of acoustic "object," an ec-static form, with the piece existing not "*in* time or *about* time, but... *as* Time.... Time as an image" (86).

Jean-François Lyotard, writing of a music sounding much like Feldman's in its intricate mix of lambent temporalities and sonorously "immobile" affect, described the "material event" of music as one that is "constrained to phrase pathos, to nuance it, to cut it up into pitches, measures, loudness.... Out of this duration without consequence music makes time that comes, that goes, starts up again, falls apart, is rhythmized into dead time and strong time, that tells itself like a passionate story. The art of tones cuts up the lament, defers its disastrous continuity, puts its sonorous fragments together, places them end to end" (*Inhuman* 228). Feldman's "passionate story" of time—the dislocated sounds heard as immediate memories of themselves—was not to involve an aspiration for the transcendence of time, but instead a more sonorously tactile perception of its felt duration, an awakening to it, time itself—forgotten but unforgettable—as the principal attraction upon the stage. With hearing thus understood as inextricably linked to remembering, Feldman writes that "A stasis develops between expectation and realization. As in a dream, there is no release until we wake up, and not because the dream has ended" (91).

As such, the upcoming six hours of Feldman's string quartet, if achieved, might not really be experienced as six hours at all, at least as time, conventionally told, is measured upon a clock. For awakened, other dream-like dimensions to the evening's duration might be made even more forcefully apparent, viscerally felt, a fleeting state of stasis somehow sounded in which time would be told differently. But how would it ever be done? With all the delayed expectations of the event, the ambitious aspirations for the piece, what was the Kronos Quartet likely to achieve that evening, and how was Feldman's legendary composition finally to be received and apprehended?

Unfortunately, none of us would ever know. Glancing through the *New York Times* the day after my arrival in New York, to my astonishment and immediate regret, I saw a small notice at the bottom of one of the pages announcing that the Kronos Quartet had abruptly canceled its performance of Feldman's string quartet. The musicians had, at the very last moment, realized that they simply could not perform the entire piece, with the difficulties involved having proved far greater than they had expected (and more challenging than when they had performed the quartet's abridged version eight years earlier in Toronto—a shorter evening, and younger musicians⁹). In the days leading up to the event, practicing the piece had finally convinced them that they were unable to

make it through to the end, concerned, as they explained elsewhere, about physical and mental exhaustion, as well as the possibility of developing carpal tunnel syndrome and other such injuries from the piece's sustained repetitive gestures (a key formal component of the extended composition).

One recalls that the Kronos Quartet's David Harrington had clearly noted the extraordinary challenges of the piece, the very real pain involved in its performance. Then, however, he had more abstractly portrayed the pain as difficult but somehow redeeming, like a necessary obstacle to be gotten through, an essential component of the quartet's rich narrative; while in practice and with the actual performance approaching, it appears the pain had become just an unredeemable problem, viscerally real, with the musicians' stressed and strained bodies lacking sufficient recourse to any kind of cathartic recovery. Described earlier as being "larger than anyone's imagination," the piece may have in fact proved itself to be just that.

Of course I was deeply disappointed by the news of the cancellation, even, I remember, taking it quite personally. How could they do this to me? I'd come a long way for this highly anticipated event, spent a lot of money to be there, and now it felt as if a rug had been pulled out from under me. Annoyed at the musicians for their belated failings (and feeling little pity for their professed pain), at the very least I expected them to have discovered the problem some time sooner than two days before the performance was to occur. Something about it seemed "unprofessional" at the time—after all, this was New York, Lincoln Center, the big time! Later that day, I exchanged my ticket for some smaller event, though feeling as if the tribute to the composer was now to be considerably less than originally advertised, with a good part of the drama of the Feldman festival, as well as my reason for being there, suddenly gone. For if the *String Quartet II* had been set as a kind focal point for the entire event, its sudden withdrawal seemed to have sucked a lot of the air out of the rest of the retrospective. Yet the show would go on, as it must, a bit haunted however by this absence at its center.

In retrospect, this non-performance of Feldman's mammoth string quartet is now recalled several years later, as one of the more noteworthy events that I never attended, one of the more memorable musical evenings that I was not to hear. For in spite of the piece's abrupt cancellation, something nonetheless seemed—in the event's very refusal to happen—to have inadvertently presented itself to my attention, made itself felt in its failing. Yet with nothing occurring that night, what could it possibly

have been? My ticket exchanged, I was elsewhere at the appointed time hearing some other piece that has long since been forgotten. While the absent *String Quartet II* continues somehow to echo in my ears, making me wonder what I missed, what didn't happen that evening.

Realizing how Feldman's most ambitious work had, through its temporal extension and performative demands, come to owe as much to theater as musical performance, I began to think further about the theater that this event had turned out to be, or not to be. For after all, is that not the question—the event's appearing or its disappearing, the music's sounding or its silence? If, as is commonly said, one of the functions of theater is to *make present*, what type of theater was *this* that had refused to appear, to be present at all? And if, as has been argued by others (as well as variously enacted elsewhere in instances of performance and body art), there is a truth to be discerned in the body and body language, then there might also be something like truth in the body's collapse and subsequent absence, in its not showing up for its appointed endeavor.

Never making it out of the rehearsal hall, the string quartet had been canceled before it had started, as if the musicians had begun disintegrating before they had even mounted the stage or sounded a single note. And revealed upon the vulnerable bodies was perhaps something of time's own tangible, truthful interference with the event, an interference that would seem, through the very pain of the piece, to have absently exposed the limits of the musicians as performers, what Blau, in his own analysis of contemporary performance, describes as "the pull of the organism—its full gravity" upon an "ontological fault" (*To All Appearances* 118). There, at this site of time, upon this non-site of failed theater, a threshold of duration and endurance was crossed, a point of departure and disappearance made manifest.

In his own writings and interviews, Feldman often displayed conflicted feelings about the public performances of his compositions, and even a certain indifference about the need for an attending audience. (In an interview, for instance, he once went so far as to assert humorously [?], "I never fully understood the need for a 'live' audience. My music, because of its extreme quietude, would be happiest with a dead one" [57].) On the one hand, Feldman would often talk at length about the power and beauty of certain instruments, especially the piano, and the virtuosity—even the specific "touch"—of particular musicians (for instance, Aki Takahashi). He understood that *to be*, the music had to be performed, *to sound*, it had to be sounded *in time* by someone, by something, and most likely before a "live" audience. While on the other hand, he

would also often describe the instruments and the musicians as obstacles to the sounds that he was trying to achieve, the music as it was written, heard on paper. For Feldman was equally aware that the composer's most ambitiously conceived music, like his *String Quartet II*, must be made to conform to specific situations, and most importantly, perhaps, to the living musicians' actual capacities—their range of instrumental abilities, the extent of their physical extension and endurance. What could be imagined and musically thought, could not always be physically and mentally achieved by even the best and strongest of musicians. And even if it were, for all its "quietude," would the assembled audience, dead or alive, be able to hear it?

William Carlos Williams wrote poignantly on the final pages of his unfinished *Paterson* that "words are the burden of poems, poems are made of words" (237); while for Feldman, it seems it was the necessarily performed notes that were to be the burden of his music, a music that was made of, *had to be* made of these actual, physical sounds interpreted by others. And in this translation from notated page to public performance, more often than not, a diminishment and loss. In an early essay, entitled "The Anxiety of Art," Feldman wrote:

The problem of music, of course, is that it is, by its very nature, a public art. That is, it must be played before we can hear it. One beats the drum, then hears the sound.... To play is the thing. This is the reality of music. Yet somehow there is something demeaning in the fact that there is no other dimension for music than this public one. The composer doesn't even have the privacy of the playwright, whose play can exist as a piece of literature. The composer has to be the actor too.... What I want to make clear is that composers instinctively gear themselves to this rhetorical, almost theatrical element of projection in music. Their most delicate whisper is a stage whisper, a *sotto voce*. (24)

As indicated by this statement, music's performative "problem" left Feldman looking for some "other dimension" for his music, one less "demeaning" than the public one, a site from which a "delicate whisper" might be created in a manner unstaged, somehow escaping theater. However, in order to achieve this, Feldman was to seek, through his own compositions, what he himself strikingly described in the next section of his essay as "another type of aural dimension," or, extending the description even further, a "music where aural dimension is obliterated" (25).

Coming from a composer—a maker of music—this desire for an "obliterated" aural dimension is indeed provocative, and one has to wonder what Feldman had in mind. For how is it possible to have it both ways, acknowledging the "reality" of music's public performance,

while desiring at the same time some means of escaping it, even destroying it—to beat the drum and *not* hear the sound, but to hear something else, something elsewhere? It's as if Feldman, recognizing, and even often relishing the necessity of the materiality and theatricality of music (the notes, the musicians, the audience), was still somehow searching for a means and a medium that would grant access to something other than the merely material, the performatively present. For as "images of time," with the sounds complexly resonating beyond the elusively immediate moment, Feldman's music would seem to aspire to be both there and not there, audible yet inaudible—the sound of one hand clapping. And in order to arrive at this most subtle of sounds, a kind of sound barrier would have to be broken, a finer, more expansive form of listening achieved.

Wittgenstein, as if *sounding* the indeterminate depths of his own listening, asked himself the question: "And what do I point to by the inner activity of listening? To the sound that comes to my ears, and to the silence when I hear nothing? Listening as it were looks for an auditory impression and hence can't point to it, but only to the place where it is looking for it" (671). In a "live" performance, however, the musicians in a very real sense determine such a "place," provide a kind of "auditory impression," however fleeting, to be looked at. Upon this site of time, the sounds at their source rise up, the musicians remain grounded below. And the silence when we "hear nothing" resides within ourselves, within our own hardened heads, hearing—after the fact—only what we've always heard, again and again and again.

But what happens, as in the case of Feldman's string quartet, when even the "place" of performance fails to happen? What are we looking for, what do we "point to" then, when the silence seems to precede the event itself?

It's hard to say, but knowing of his own ambivalent feelings about the public performance of his compositions, Feldman himself might have taken some kind of perverse pleasure in the Kronos Quartet's cancellation of his string quartet, in their demonstrated incapacity to complete the piece, even perhaps some amusement at the "live" audience's inability to get what they paid for. For one could imagine that the string quartet—like Satie's twenty-four hour *Vexations*—may never really have been meant to happen publicly and completely at all, the composition written instead as a kind of vexatious, conceptual conceit in which, actually performed, it would somehow be violated, rendered "real" in a diminishing, inevitably disappointing sort of way. Indeed, years before, Feldman had

written of his emerging compositional aspirations that "I'm looking for something else now, something that will no longer fit into the concert hall" (57).

In his own subtle investigation of music's ontology, of the divisions between the sounded and the unsounded, Lyotard wrote: "Music labors to give birth to what is audible in the inaudible breath. It strives to put it into phrases. Thus does it betray, by giving it form, and ignore it" (*Postmodern* 228). While left unperformed and unbetrayed, the vast dimensions of a piece like Feldman's string quartet might somehow remain the stuff of legend, the material of the unmanifested monument. And in the final account, the Kronos Quartet's inability to present the piece (and the audience's subsequent failure to hear it) may have proved only to increase further the aura of Feldman's work, enhancing its power and prestige by confirming its impossibility, its inaudibility. After all, how else are legends and monuments formed, but by keeping their safe distance, maintaining their aloof magic through an inchoate potentiality that finally affirms Proust's "ineluctable law" that one can only imagine what is absent?

Yet, in addition to this enabling image of absence, with his string quartet as just an extended series of painful, unobserved rehearsals ending in cancellation and defeat for all involved, Feldman may even be said to have gotten something of what he wanted. Or, as the saying goes, be careful what you wish for.... For in the composition's non-performance, there was nonetheless inadvertently affirmed something of what the composer had desired all along of his music, an "image of time" in the piece's quite literal enactment and embodiment of entropic breakdown. Like a negative imprint made by the performance's abrupt withdrawal, a kind of collapsed durational space was densely formed from the immobilizing failure, an emptiness somehow sounded out of the event's hollow core. One need only recall that the visual analogue that Feldman himself presented for the piece was of a nightmarish "jigsaw puzzle," in which through stages of temporal disintegration and deferral, "everything finishes and it's not the picture. Then you do another version and it's not the picture. Finally you realize that you are not going to get a picture" (165). What actually happened, of course, was to take Feldman's deconstructing formula one step further... or one step back. Instead of everything finishing, nothing began, for the exhausted musicians never made it out of the rehearsal hall.

And indeed, one might even go so far as to wonder whether, in ways wholly unanticipated, the kind of "obliterated" aural dimension of which Feldman had mysteriously spoken was indirectly achieved that evening.

It's certainly true that his extraordinary composition avoided the "demeaning" nature of public performance and elided the limitations of instruments and musicians. Out of the non-event there was nonetheless conceptually accomplished a condition of inaudibility, even a kind of silence, but one that seems worlds away from John Cage's more celebrated, and celebratory "silence." For here, in *this* silence, one was made to feel more forcefully a kind of ontological collision occurring, with the very ground upon which the music was to take place never forming—the concert hall, the four musicians, the congregated audience never happening at all. And in the event's obliteration, the silence was thus all the more devastatingly complete. Indeed, understood as involving a kind of negative listening, or anti-hearing, we were thus situated by the event perhaps to hear something of our own hearing, a hearing that, if actually heard, was to mean a kind of audible deafness, almost like the sound of nothing at all. Lyotard, writing of Cézanne's passionate endeavor "to make seen what makes one see, and not what is visible," describes the result of such an acute exercise as the affective ability "to grasp and render perception at its birth—perception 'before' perception" (*Inhuman* 102). Transposing something of this insight to Feldman's string quartet, perhaps we might now imagine that the canceled event may also have made us hear something of what makes us hear, and not what is audible—sound before sound.

However, before insisting too forcefully upon any satisfaction or glee that Feldman might have derived from his string quartet's failure, or suggesting too abstractly any inadvertent achievements that the "obliterated" event might have created, one should certainly remember that Feldman was a composer and not a conceptual artist (nor even a Satie-like jokester), a craftsman-like maker of music, and not merely its theoretician (though in an interview conducted in 1982, at about the same period that he was writing his string quartet, Feldman did say, "I don't think it's now a time for performance, anyway. I think it's now a time for work and reflection." And in specific reference to his longer compositions he suggested that perhaps they were not "psychologically... geared for performance" [qtd. in Gagne and Caras 170]). While it's possible to imagine him writing a piece of music that was designed to fail or even self-destruct, Feldman most likely intended the *picturing* of his string quartet to be actually attempted, its stages of disintegration to be materially presented and viscerally experienced, for any "obliterated" aural dimension, or compositional "nightmare" to be confronted and endured in performance. After all, Feldman would not

have been the first composer to write a composition that would have to wait for future performers—perhaps a future generation—to achieve it, those somehow better prepared to take on the task, see it through to the end.

Nor would Lyotard in the final account have chosen to leave the music that he was describing—and its “inaudible breath”—unsounded, while affirming some purer form of unbetrayed silence. For the music was for him as well perceived as a “material event,” and crucially, the notes were to be performatively presented as “sonorous matter.” Listening for *punctum*-like details involuntarily arising as ephemeral acoustic nuance and tonal timbre from out of the otherwise unhearable whole, Lyotard insists that the aim of music “can only be that of approaching matter... ‘touched’ by it: a singular, incomparable quality—unforgettable and immediately forgotten” (*Inhuman* 139-141). Elsewhere he described the necessary performance of music, the sounded assurances that it was tangibly to give: “With the appearance of audible sound, a promise is made. This sound promises that there will be other sounds. Hence that there will be something rather than nothing” (*Postmodern* 228).

Regardless, however, of what Feldman would have liked or wanted, in the peculiar case of the Kronos Quartet’s non-performance of Feldman’s piece, it’s as if this heavily weighted promise had indeed been broken, as if the performance’s elemental obligation to appear had been ignored. Like a piece of theater in which the stage curtain refused to rise, no “puzzle” or “picture” was presented at all that night but one—in absentia—announcing silently the impossibility of its own picturing; nothing rather than something.

Looking back, I now realize that the canceled concert of Feldman’s *String Quartet II* in many ways resembled a different journey of mine in 1998, when once again I traveled far, hoping to see another legendary, monumental work: Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* at the Great Salt Lake in Utah.¹⁰ Then, I was to encounter another kind of obliteration and disappearance, the massive earthwork itself inundated by the risen lake—canceled, so to speak, before I arrived. In both instances, the absences before me were to offer more than was immediately apparent to the eye (or ear), revealing in their respective vanishings the durational, disintegrative presence of time itself—indeed, images of time that in the final account were not to be seen at all.

For both the *Spiral Jetty* and Feldman’s quartet had as crucial components of their construction and presentation an acute awareness of time and dissolution, with each of the massive forms deliberately

impacted by entropic collaboration. While Feldman described working with the “decay of each sound” upon a “departing landscape,” and the string quartet’s notational, nightmarish “stages of disintegration,” Smithson often spoke of seeing “through a consciousness of temporality,” anticipating the absences, the material dispersals and the locational loss. In both cases, however, events were in many ways entropically to outrun controlled intentions, and as a consequence to exceed expectations—the *Jetty* rapidly vanishing into its own “departing landscape,” the string quartet quietly collapsing, disintegrating at its own rehearsals. Perhaps this was only to confirm further what I had noted elsewhere, that in choosing to collaborate with entropy, as both Smithson and Feldman so forthrightly did, no one should be surprised if entropy ends up collaborating back, materializing its movements in indeterminate directions.

Finally, from a personal point of view, might there be a developing pattern forming here out of my experiences with these two massive works that failed to happen for me—a pattern reflecting something of my own extended efforts to materialize absence, and in my own manner to collaborate conceptually with entropy? Might there be revealed as well aspects of my own obscure longing to be present at such events, traveling far—as if on pilgrimages—to encounter works of such scale and stature as Smithson’s *Jetty* and Feldman’s string quartet? For both of these pieces were finally to disappoint me, to cancel and conceal themselves from me, while presenting quite vividly reflections of my own high expectations of the uncooperative events, of my own deluded desire sought, my own desire denied.¹¹ Vainly chasing down auras, seeking out legends, was apparently to prove as frustrating and fruitless as finding fortunes at the ends of rainbows, or grasping the material makeup of mirages. And yet, inexplicably, the search goes on, and the journeys will likely continue. For there seems to be something in the failure, in the very evasiveness and vanishing of the events, that resonates with a peculiar form of accidental accuracy, with even perhaps a kind of deflected clarity arising from the repeated encounters with nothing at all.

CODA: On October 9, 1999, four young musicians from the New York-based Flux String Quartet once more took up the challenge of performing Feldman’s *String Quartet II*. Again, there were weeks of preparation and rehearsal for the extraordinary event, and in the days leading up to the scheduled performance in the Great Hall at Cooper Union, substantial media attention and audience anticipation. However, unlike the 1996 event, this time—for the first time—Feldman’s string

quartet was successfully completed. With the piece clocking in at the expected six hours, the four musicians, all in their twenties, were able to accomplish that which the Kronos Quartet had abandoned more than three years before, demonstrating that in fact the piece could be done, that Feldman's apparently impossible composition wasn't impossible after all. No doubt their youthful energy and enthusiasm (not to mention a desired one-upmanship toward the older, more esteemed quartet) had seen them through to the end. Well after midnight, at the close of what was later reviewed as an excellent and exhausting performance (attended off and on by around 300 people), amidst the sustained and well deserved applause, an audience member in the back was reported to have shouted out, "encore."

As circumstances would have it, this time I was not able to get to New York to attend the event, and instead I was left to read about it in the newspaper.

And finally, in 2001, the Ives Ensemble from the Netherlands released the first recording of Feldman's string quartet. I immediately purchased a copy of the four-CD set and have been listening to it ever since.

II. *Triadic Memories*

"Let no one imagine that in owning a recording he has the music. The very practice of music, and Feldman's eminently, is a celebration that we own nothing."
-John Cage, "Lecture on Something"

"Everything is transformed into a stage setting. A dream world glimmers in the background of the soul. One feels a desire to toss on a cape, to steal softly along the wall with a searching gaze, aware of every sound. One does not do this but merely sees a rejuvenated self doing it."
-Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

In spite of the Kronos Quartet's cancellation at the Lincoln Center Festival, I still was eager to hear Aki Takahashi's performance of Feldman's solo piano piece *Triadic Memories*, scheduled for the close of the event. For this was the composition I was most familiar with—the one through which my fascination with Feldman had begun. I'd been listening to a compact disc of *Triadic Memories* for several years, playing it probably hundreds of times in the quiet and privacy of my own home. And

specifically, it was Aki Takahashi's recorded rendition of the piece that I knew so well.

It seemed, therefore, that the upcoming performance was to present a very different kind of listening experience than the string quartet ever could have—one in which my own vivid memories of the piece were likely to play an important part in what I was about to hear. And though I didn't feel as though I had ever *had* the music—as Cage put it—by “owning a recording,” I did feel as though I had had *something*. I'm just not sure what it was. With my knowledge and love of this Feldman composition derived entirely from its recording, the performance seemed to promise an actual, physical encounter with that which was already so well known—like finally meeting a friend that you've only spoken to over the telephone or corresponded with by mail.

In Proust's novel, Swann becomes increasingly obsessed with the “little phrase” in Vinteuil's sonata. In response to its mysterious beauty, Proust writes that “scarcely had the exquisite sensation which Swann had experienced died away, before his memory had furnished him with an immediate transcript, sketchy, it is true, and provisional, which he had been able to glance at while the piece continued, so that, when the same impression suddenly returned, it was no longer impossible to grasp” (I 228). Later, Swann believed that by obtaining a copy of its written score—a real “transcript”—and studiously examining the sonata's precise notation, “he held it safe, could have it again to himself, at home, as often as he wished, could study its language and acquire its secret” (I 231). For Swann desiringly believed that he had, with the score in hand, captured something solid and repeatable about the otherwise ephemeral music, holding fast to some vital aspect of the composition that could then be contained, continued. But how were the “language” and “secret” of music—as derived from either a recording or its written notation—to be apprehended differently when heard in the concert hall, when listened to “live”? And in the case of my own *Triadic Memories*, how would such a performance reinforce or disrupt the knowledge and appreciation that I already had for the piece? Or was I likely to discover that with the CD recording that I'd repeatedly listened to, I had, as Cage believed, owned something else entirely? For the recording that I'd come to know so well functionally existed as mere digits on a disc, disembodied sounds, without the pianist or piano present to remind me of how the music had first been made to happen.

Recalling Feldman's assertion, quoted above, that “we do not hear what we hear... only what we remember” (*Give My Regards* 209), that provocative claim was about to be put to a peculiarly literal kind of test

with Takahashi's upcoming performance of the very familiar *Triadic Memories*. It was almost as if I was about to hear what I'd already heard so many times before—that I was about to hear something of my own memories immediately presented. And I'm not sure that I really wanted to hear anything *but* that, or whether I was likely to hear anything else. It's true that in performance Takahashi might choose to vary her playing of the piece from her own recording—slowing it down, speeding it up, adjusting it in one place or another—while still remaining faithful to Feldman's written score. But I suspect a part of me very much desired a kind of repetition of what I already knew so well, as if I'd traveled to New York in order to listen to a "live" recording of the piece, the music's "live" remembrance.

Again, as with the situation of the *Spiral Jetty* at the Great Salt Lake, memory and expectation seemed to intrude upon and determine what I was to encounter. In my pilgrimage to Utah, it was as if I was somehow expecting the familiar photographs of the legendary earthwork to be laid out upon the landscape, the pictures projected onto the vacant scene. For facing the vanished *Jetty*, my memory-filled eyes appeared to precede momentarily their own perceptions, indeed, to *be* their perceptions, while finally leaving me in some sense blind-sided by what was found, inundated by the actual absence before me. Memories failing, the seeing eyes suddenly see themselves blind.

In Søren Kierkegaard's *Repetition*, he writes of an "experiment" that he undertook to discover whether "repetition is possible and what importance it has" (133). He'd been to Berlin several years before and had decided to return to the city to see if he might be able somehow to repeat the experience that he had earlier enjoyed so much. Arriving by the same train, he checked into the lodgings that he had stayed at before, visited the same café and restaurant, and even went to the same comic theater that he had earlier attended. On this second visit to the city, however, what our traveler ended up discovering, to his vexation and disappointment, was that there simply was no repetition to be found—the furniture in his rented room was out of place, the light through the café windows fell differently upon the floor, and most appallingly of all, perhaps, the theatrical performance he attended failed to present itself as it had before—"should not even that be capable of repetition?" he writes (169). Kierkegaard was thus to conclude something like this: if you can't have an experience twice, then you can't have it once; if it can't be repeated, then apparently it can't be had at all. With such a radical dispossession of events, what happens to the one so suddenly set adrift? Cast in an unrepeatable stream, "the individual [is]... not an actual

shape but a shadow, or, more correctly, the actual shape..., invisibly present..." (154). What remains to be seen, to be done, under such dire, unrecurrent circumstances? Defeated, Kierkegaard's traveler wearily decided to return home, ending his journey while nonetheless realizing that, in the final account, "My discovery was not significant, and yet it was curious, for I had discovered that there simply is no repetition and had verified it by having it repeated in every possible way" (171).¹²

Kierkegaard's unsuccessful voyage to Berlin, his hapless "experiment" seeking repetition, reminds me now of my own time in New York, my own high expectations of Feldman's *Triadic Memories*. With Aki Takahashi's upcoming performance, it seems that I, too, was in some manner hoping to replicate an event that had already happened to me, as though returning to a particular site and expecting it to be repeated, stepping into the same stream twice. But was I to experience a similar fate as Kierkegaard's disillusioned traveler, left as a kind of "shadow... invisibly present" to myself, or might there prove to be unsuspected dimensions to the evening that would allow me somehow to hear what I heard (even as I was hearing it), encountering a kind of repetition, its effects insinuating something productively different into the attended event? Perhaps what I was to find might sound something similar to what Wallace Stevens described when he wrote of a "A music more than a breath, but less / Than the wind, sub-music like sub-speech, / A repetition of unconscious things" (232).

A more intimate performance than the string quartet was ever to have been, Aki Takahashi's solo presentation was to be held in a much smaller hall than most other festival events, several blocks from Lincoln Center, at the Society for Ethical Culture on 64th Street. And though by the standards of most piano compositions this was still a rather lengthy piece (lasting uninterrupted over an hour), *Triadic Memories* had few of the monumental, legend-like trappings of Feldman's string quartet. And importantly, its performance was not to require the same degree of durational demands that had finally thwarted the Kronos Quartet's performance. The tests and rewards of the concert would be of another nature, with different challenges for all involved, appeals and responses to different issues.

I arrived early in order to get a good seat right up front (again, as with the string quartet, I was under the impression—disregarding Cage's belief that "every seat is the best seat"—that proximity translated into access, into some kind of immediacy to the impending moment). Not your typical concert hall, the unassuming room where the performance

was to be held appeared more like a church (which I believe it once was), with the limited seating made up of old wooden pews ranged around the small, barely raised stage. The grand piano, front and center, was already in place, and I was to be no more than ten feet away from the pianist. Two days had passed since the string quartet's infamous cancellation, and I'd already forgiven the Kronos Quartet for their failings. Though *Triadic Memories* had not been billed as the grandest of performances, in its own modest way—even in its peripheral placement down the street from the larger events—it promised something delightful and personally important. And at the very least, unlike the string quartet, it seemed certain that the performance was going to actually happen—the pianist showing up (all the way from Tokyo), the audience gathering. I had the best seat in the house and I could hardly wait for the event to begin.

Triadic Memories is a quiet composition made up primarily of intricately arranged piano patterns, a series of extending repetitions that only very gradually adjust and reconfigure themselves upon a kind of delicately woven field of sound. Like the beloved Turkish rugs that Feldman late in life collected and drew inspiration from, it is as if chromatic fields of aural tone have been carefully crafted and cast into thin air, threads of timbre and nuance interlaced and entangling. Familiarly melodic chords are placed alongside gently dissonant ones in a kind of seductive tension, the two opposite textures finally merging in such a manner that we are almost made to forget which is which, both simply present in contiguous arrangement. With our habits of listening deftly loosened, the asymmetrical patterns seem to circle ever more expansively about themselves, tracing Vinteuil-like arabesques upon what Feldman called his "time canvases," reiterating their own sonorous structure before dissipating into faint echo. The piano's atmospheric resonances decay into deliberately placed silences, absences of sound that act as contrasting but parallel elements to what is heard, a kind of counterpoint to the notes themselves. Indeed, elsewhere Feldman described his use of notated silence as "my substitute for counterpoint. It's nothing against something. The degrees of nothing against something. It's a real thing, it's a breathing thing" (181).

The "breathing" of silence encountered in this piece seems at times, if listened for carefully, to be something (of nothing) that one might actually hear, registered at least as vividly as any of the silences that John Cage was to more famously present or propose. Through a kind of negative space within the composition, we are positioned to hear more acutely what isn't there, alongside that which is—the sounded notations

surrounded by sections of empty score. And accompanying these intervals of silence, the composer instructed the pianist to perform much of the composition “*ppp*” —at the lowest possible volume— with the piano at times just barely to be heard at all, seeming at moments to submerge itself entirely beneath its own audibility. Also, within this sustained stillness, or perhaps collaborating with it, the pianist is instructed to hold the foot pedal halfway down through the duration of the piece, causing a kind of constant echo to ring through the room, the sedimented sounds entropically lost at the edges of their own acoustic resonance.

Where Cage, seeking silence, was famously to enter the anechoic chamber (only to encounter the sounds of his own functioning body), Feldman presents instead an acoustic space in which each of his listeners may become themselves something like an anechoic chamber, situated to hear aspects of their own hearing in the physical act of listening, their own directed ears as instruments of sensuous reception. The echoing nuances of sound, felt materially, move through the narrowing chambers of the ear, tapering off toward their own particled dispersal, lost at the nerve ends, in the spiraling channels of the cochlea. At these taut moments of suspended sound, Feldman did not intend his audience—as Cage would have—to listen for ambient noises within and beyond the concert hall, where “everything is music.” But instead, one is likely to hear a more indeterminate kind of call involving a more ambivalent enjoyment, a sounding out of ontological volatility and dislocation, “nothing against something” (a more active state than Lyotard’s “something instead of nothing”), the one abrading the other, chafing at the imperceptible edges of absence.

Two thirds of the way through the recording of Feldman’s composition, a particularly arresting set of patterns is suddenly heard. In a section lasting no more than seven or eight minutes, similarly spaced chords are slowly repeated one after the other. Aki Takahashi strikes a set of notes, pacing the varied arrangements by raising and lowering the tones, gently accelerating or slowing down the reverberating effect. In a brief statement given prior to *Triadic Memories*’ American premiere at SUNY-Buffalo in 1982 (with Takahashi), Feldman spoke of this specific section of his composition:

One chord might be repeated three times, another, seven or eight— depending on how long I felt it should go on. Quite soon I would forget the reiterated chord before it. I then reconstructed the entire section: rearranging its earlier progression and changing the number of times a particular chord was repeated. This way of working was a conscious attempt at “formalizing” a disorientation of memory. Chords are heard repeated without any discernible pattern. In this regularity (though there are slight gradations of tempo) there is a

suggestion that what we hear is functional and directional, but we soon realize that this is an illusion; a bit like walking the streets of Berlin—where all the buildings look alike, *even if they're not*. (137-138)

Sounding something like a room full of clocks consecutively striking, in this most extraordinary section of the composition one has a sense of time both being told, and of time winding down. Indeed, by simultaneously marking and erasing the moment's duration, the varied chords would seem to be thermodynamically deconstructing toward their own directionless standstill. As for the "stasis" of which Feldman so frequently spoke—his desire to somehow shape through his music a form "both concrete and ephemeral," "frozen, at the same time it's vibrating"—this section comes closest to manifesting just that, *making stasis happen*.

As its title indicates, *Triadic Memories* was written as a kind of acoustic investigation of memory and, as noted above, "a conscious attempt at 'formalizing' a disorientation of memory." For if, axiomatically, we do not hear what we hear but what we remember, then perhaps it is only by disorienting memory that we might be made to hear anything at all, to hear something of our own remembrance. Of this particular composition, Feldman explained that "I was always very interested in writing music, where you thought one way and yet it sounded another" (155). And as the piece unfolds, finally arriving at the distinctive section of repeated chords, memory and thought are indeed both enlisted and disrupted towards a heightened awareness of hearing and of having heard, a more thoughtful listening, and perhaps, a re-remembering of ephemeral sound. Two different chords durationally separated may be recollected as a kind of inaudible overtone, a sounded absence that creates "its own type of... equilibrium" (156). In what might be imagined as a virtually silent synthesis (or perhaps an "obliterated" aural dimension) of the two chords—one past, one present—a memoried triad may be finally intuited, an ephemeral affect recalling those described through Proustian metaphor in which impressions, as Proust wrote, "are experienced... at the present moment and at the same time in the context of a distant moment, so that the past was made to encroach upon the present and I was made to doubt whether I was in the one or the other" (III 904). Like the buildings of Berlin, a crafted illusion is somehow conjured in which sound, and the memory of sound, can be heard collaborating—time as an image is thus briefly apprehended, *even if it is not*.

Of course, these were all impressions gathered from repeatedly listening to the recording of *Triadic Memories*, in thinking about the

composition in the controlled context of my own home, the music heard on my own stereo. Aki Takahashi's "live" performance in New York, however, would perhaps present dimensions to Feldman's piece that were not likely to be imagined without her actually being present, indeed without her—unlike the Kronos Quartet—showing up to perform.

At the small concert hall, Takahashi entered the room dressed in an elegant black gown and briefly bowed to the audience's opening applause. Seated at the grand piano on the low stage, she lifted the cover from the keys and adjusted her cushioned seat. The audience settled into position for the long performance, which then very quickly began. Seen up close, Takahashi looked just like herself, very much as she always had in the photograph that I knew, the one accompanying the liner notes of the CD.

Immediately, as the performance got underway I began to hear *Triadic Memories* in the exact manner in which I remembered it so well, the notes on the piano sounding just how they were supposed to. Playing without a score, having committed the piece to memory, Takahashi was scrupulously following her own recorded rendition—its precise tempo, its overall tone and texture—as she remained, like the known photograph, remarkably faithful to herself (and to my memories). And for those initial moments of the performance, it seemed as though I was somehow achieving what Kierkegaard's traveler to Berlin had been denied—a real repetition of events. Hearing what I'd always heard, Takahashi was in fact giving me exactly what I wanted, a kind of "live" recording, an immediate *lived* remembrance of the very composition that had for so long enchanted me. Sitting motionless and surrounded by others equally so, I recall being extremely happy as the performance unfolded, sensing what might even be described as a kind of emotional stasis emerging from the event, a convergence of all the right effects. And while listening more and more attentively, I found myself feeling vaguely present at my own contentment, as though I were watching myself listening—*while* listening—a spectator to myself and my own narrated fulfillment. As the music progressed, sitting right up front, I recall wishing that I had chosen a seat further back so that I might feel myself surrounded by others, so that I might better see others seeing, seeking perhaps a kind of corroboration of aesthetic contact. For even with my eyes trained upon the pianist, I wanted to look around the room at those sitting near me (though convention and decorum discouraged it), to see if others were feeling what I felt, hearing what I heard, if we were indeed sharing the power and pleasure of this performance in the same way. Having known this composition privately as a recording, there was now some real,

unexpected satisfaction in hearing it with others, as a member of a congregated audience—something more than just me.

As time wore on, however, this contented self-perception of events, though delightfully seen while it lasted, was gradually to interfere with what I was hoping to hear, as if by seeing myself hearing (and seeing it with others), I could not continue to hear completely what I was seeing. For hearing—like Lacan’s seeing—in the shape of my desires, the shape would not stay still and static for long. What in the opening moments of the performance had seemed virtually synchronized, between what I was hearing and what I was expecting and remembering, suddenly began to move in and out of alignment, as my perceptions of the performance kept either anticipating themselves—hearing what I was about to hear, or hearing what I was not wanting to hear—sounds interfering and unremembered. As Takahashi performed, because I knew the recorded composition so well (like the pianist who knew the score by heart), I found myself listening for sections of the piece that were about to happen. For once I realized the fidelity that Takahashi was maintaining with her recording (and with my memories), involuntarily I kept hearing the chords that were coming, anticipating them. Oddly, a kind of temporal, acoustic disjunct was phenomenologically occurring in which I was hearing what I remembered and then hearing it again moments later. As the notes echoed implausibly ahead of themselves, my memory-filled imagination was actually outrunning my ears, moving even more quickly than the pianist’s fingers upon the keys.

In Kierkegaard’s return voyage to Berlin, the traveler encountered at the theater “the little dancer who last time had enchanted me with her gracefulness, who, so to speak, was on the verge of a leap, had already made the leap” (170). Similarly, I kept hearing—complexly and not without its own peculiar kind of pleasure—the pianist who, on the verge of making a sound, had already made it, my dislocating memories intruding onto the actuality of the event, interfering with the immediate material of the performance. And though I was indeed encountering a repetition of Feldman’s composition, my own memories of *Triadic Memories* were going in and out of sync with themselves, or perhaps as Kierkegaard was to note of his own experience, there was repetition but “it was a repetition of the wrong kind” (169).

And of the surrounding audience and the initial satisfaction gained by its corroborating presence, there emerged as well occasional interferences to my contentment, as those around me coughed or shuffled about in their seats, breaking the spell that I had cast upon them. Well into the long performance, even the old wooden pews that we were all

sitting in, those that in their churchliness had instilled a certain reverence to the room, began to creak at awkward moments, as audience members shifted their restless bodies about. Uncushioned, the hard wood kept uncomfortably reminding us of where we were, and how long we'd been there. I recalled Feldman's desire for a "dead" audience, rather than a "live" one and for a moment, understanding, I wished that I was alone again, to once more hear privately what, publicly, was being muddled by the noises and movements of others. If silence was intended to function for Feldman as "a real thing...a breathing thing," a counterpoint to the notated sounds themselves, in the midst of *this* performance it was often the real breathing of those around me, the counterpoint of the real room itself, that in actuality couldn't help but be—perhaps Cagily—heard.

Hearing in advance something of my own memoried hearing, and hearing it alongside (or in spite of) others in the audience, what was, however, to most forcefully mark this event, making it finally most memorable, was the performance of Aki Takahashi ten feet away from me as she, from moment to moment, played the piano. Immediately seeing something of what I had always before only heard, here was a vital difference from what I had known, a difference that the familiar recording had not really prepared me for and which had therefore been so much overlooked, taken for granted—an actual person performing upon a real piano, instead of simply the disembodied sounds of the CD. This awareness seems obvious now, but at the time it struck me like a quiet revelation. For there she was on the stage, before me, playing the piece just as I knew it, indeed performing my memories for me, but presently, physically.

Samuel Beckett, writing of what he calls the "Proustian solution" to one's "automatically separated consciousness of perception," describes in Proust a temporal condition that "is at once imaginative and empirical, at once an evocation and a direct perception, real without being merely actual, ideal without being merely abstract, the ideal real, the essential, the extratemporal" (75). Could it have been that somehow what I was hearing and seeing at this remarkable performance shared something of Beckett's "Proustian solution," and that the performance was offering a solution of its own to the questions of how I was hearing and what was being heard? And was I perhaps experiencing a repetition, not "of the wrong kind" that Kierkegaard had described, but of a different kind, "at once imaginative and empirical," in which my own memories were conjoining with what I was seeing to form, triadically, a third thing, real and breathing, my own mediated remembrance immediately heard?

With the Kronos Quartet's canceled *String Quartet II*, it had been the punishing theater of that piece that had finally destroyed it by rendering its performance "impossible," causing a kind of "obliteration" and disappearance of the event that was to take on—in absentia—a life of its own. Yet it was the theater also of Takahashi's performance that was now distinguishing *Triadic Memories* by making it strikingly apparent how the music was materially made. Feldman once described how he composed his music by sitting at the piano, playing the notes as he wrote them. "Having the sounds continually appearing as a physical fact wakens me from a sort of intellectual daydream" (206). With Takahashi's performance, there was for me as a listener what seemed a similar kind of awakening. Through the notes being materially sounded, and the "physical fact" of the pianist herself performing before me, it was as if I was seeing the music appear on the stage, watching the very making of my extensive memories of the piece. The effect of this awareness, however, was not really to diminish any "daydream" associated with the music, but instead somehow to enhance the dreaming, making it more vivid and real.

As much as Feldman was of two minds about the public performance of his compositions, he seemed to have nothing but undivided reverence and respect for Takahashi's abilities, stating that in performance she "appears to be absolutely still. Undisturbed, unperturbed, as if in a concentrated prayer.... The effect of her playing to me is that I feel privileged to be invited to a very religious ritual" (155). The stillness and concentration that Feldman spoke of was now convincingly evident for me to see in this performance. The pianist's physical involvement, even the cost of her concentration, were rendered extraordinarily clear in the exposed tension of her extended efforts, in her rigorous self-possession, and what in Takahashi's case can only be described as a kind of professional assurance. Like having a front-row seat to watch a tightrope walker delicately inch forward, I observed with amazement, as if "privileged to be invited," as she carefully, unerringly moved through the long composition, faithfully carrying my memories with her. Unlike a recording that at the will and whim of the listener can be stopped and started, paused and repeated, in Takahashi's "live" performance it was as if, with each sounded gesture, she was on the very precipice of time's incremental movement, indeed embodying its imperative pull, balancing its burdensome weight. And in listening, I was suddenly on that precipice too, feeling time being told, projected into its own dimensional disclosure.

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Notes

I would like to dedicate this article to my friend Michael Lazarin.

1. John Cage organized the world premier of *Vexations* in September 1963 in New York where a group of pianists took turns in performing the piece.
2. I discuss the performative aspect of Ann Hamilton's installation art, and her use of what she refers to as "guardians," in an article entitled "Theater as Installation: Ann Hamilton and the Accretions of Gesture." *Mosaic* 37: 1 (March 2004): 119-133.
3. Marina Abramović has continued, alone, with such work. Perhaps most exactly, in 2002 she performed a twelve-day, silent, fasting event in the full view of a New York gallery audience, in a piece entitled *The House with the Ocean View*.
4. Others included in the New York School were Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, and the pianist/composer David Tudor.
5. Two pieces were later written in collaboration with Beckett, *Neither* (1977) and *Words and Music* (1987).
6. Feldman spoke of this parallel also. "I can compare it [the *String Quartet II's* composition] to *Remembrance of Things Past*, where you begin idealistically, and then you get more into reality as your experience grows. For example, there is one section in the *String Quartet II* which comes back all the time. Every time it comes back now, the modules are different than any time before. But if I did it the first time, it would be less acceptable for your ear. As it becomes saturated and saturated, you accept it more and more and more" (qtd. in Zimmerman 206).
7. One explanation for Feldman's having eventually stopped working with more indeterminate modes of composition and performance was that he appears to have come to feel unsatisfied and untrusting in leaving so much to the performers' own choice. For left to their own devices, it seemed the musicians were likely to play again and again patterns and forms that they remembered. And instead of "freeing" them of their tastes and memory, such compositions placed the musicians in the uncomfortable, often unconscious, position of repeating themselves, while imagining themselves as (delusionally) unrepeating, breaking new ground, while remaining upon the well trodden.
8. Of course, by the standards of early Wilson, *Einstein on the Beach*, was relatively short. His *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* lasted twelve hours.
9. Harrington, recounting the completion of the 1983 abridged performance in Toronto that clocked in at around four hours, humorously tells of Feldman's own response to the event. For the composer was in attendance, sitting unmoving through the entire piece: "Morton was not one not to respond to applause for his work and I remember motioning to him to stand up and take a bow. But he didn't. I thought he didn't like the performance. I wondered what was going on—it was just not like him. There was a party after the concert, so I went over to him and asked him about it. And he said, 'I had to take a pee so bad that I was afraid to stand up.' So I said to him, 'Well, maybe the next piece shouldn't be so long'" (qtd. in Low).
10. I discuss my travels to the Great Salt Lake to try and find Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in "Quiet Catastrophe: Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Vanished." *Discourse* 24.2 (Spring 2002): 84-118.
11. While reviewing this section, I recalled a comment Derrida made in an interview on the subject of disappointment: "What is disappointment? It urges you at least to ask yourself why you were waiting, why you were expecting from this or that, from him or her. It is always the best incitement to questions and reflections" (*Points* 364).
12. Derrida, writing of Artaud, evokes what seems a quite different sense of repetition—the desire to escape from it entirely: "Artaud wanted to erase repetition in general. For him, repetition was evil.... Repetition separates force, presence, and life from them-

selves. This separation is the economical and calculating gesture of that which defers itself in order to maintain itself, that which reserves expenditure and surrenders to fear. This power of repetition governed everything that Artaud wished to destroy, and it has several names: God, Being, Dialectics... As soon as there is repetition, God is there, the present holds on to itself and reserves itself, that is to say, eludes itself" (*Writing and Difference* 245-46).

13. I want to thank the pianist Louis Goldstein for his insightful comments concerning this section of Feldman's composition. In conversation, as I described this part of the piece, he immediately said, "Yes, that starts on page 41," textually grounding the music in a manner that, as a listener, I so frequently forget. Various of his other comments proved helpful for completing this section. Goldstein's own recent recording of *Triadic Memories*, considerably longer than Takahashi's, offers a beautiful additional version.

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