

## **Surviving Feldman's Second String Quartet by Francesco Sani**

*The following article was written after attending a performance of Feldman's Second String Quartet played by the Smith Quartet at Glasgow City Halls, Glasgow, UK, on March 25<sup>th</sup> 2012.*

Listening to Feldman's late works is not exactly every person's cup of tea: the obsessive quality of tiny repetitions, like the same few words uttered in different tones of voice, over an anti-social amount of audience time, leads many to distance themselves from playing or listening to such apparent insanities.

The bravest souls who entered the carpeted space in Glasgow's City Halls the fateful Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> March – day of Celtic vs. Rangers match (with the first chants booming their way around the neighbouring streets just as the hushed audience began to take their seats in the upper floor concert area) – were a collection of individuals to whom, clearly, this experience mattered more than that of a mere 'new music' fan: this may have been brushed with Minimalism advertising colours, but it was no Reich, nor Glass, and not even Young, and the paying audience faced the challenge not unlike those brave men and women who embark on a personal pilgrimage fraught with every probability of self-doubt and, ultimately, defeat.

What this combined fraternity and sorority of Feldman disciples, acolytes, and novices could not know with any degree of certainty was how they would face their own expectations, anxieties, and even prejudices about this piece: like any self-respecting 'Feldmanista' would take for granted, there could be no beating this piece for the ultimate experience, like a Feld-fest all by itself but all in one breath – incessant, uninterrupted, seemingly endless.

For all the self-annihilating ability of discerning Feldmanisti in the audience, I advance the theory that the subtle game of semitones, pricking their ears with twists and turns (like a needle placed under the skin and moved around a bit at the time, just enough to keep someone out of their comfort zone at regular intervals), proved for them a challenge on the basic level of human tolerance: in essence, this string quartet is an experiment in the annihilation of musical training.

For one, musicians – and anyone who enjoys music – are reliant on patterns in all matters aural: without these, there could have been no mediaeval chant, nor polyphony, nor Western 'art' music (if we wanted to be a little brave). It follows that the absence of melody – a succession of pitches that carries with it the promise of semantic meaning, or simply a sense of implied tonal tension (with or without resolution) – gives the listeners two problems: how to differentiate between different trails of notes, and how to feel they can truly grasp the linear ingredients of this piece.

While a shorter construction, like some Webernian jewellery encrusted with few, dodecaphonic gems, could enable every subtlety to be committed to our musical memory more precisely within the space-time continuum, the scale of Feldman's Second String Quartet makes even the beginning, usually a memorable moment in the listening process, impossible to pin down in one's consciousness as the performance progresses.

There is no novelty in this: the manic repetitiveness of Glass' *Satyagraha* or of Reich's *Piano Phase* showed us that there is truly no easier way to confuse our musical focus than to expose it to endless repetition. If Chinese water torture were somehow translated into music, we could find some similarities here, for a single musical utterance, no matter how initially unassuming or interesting, can turn into an oppressing and even intolerable test of sensory endurance through over-exposure.

It is precisely this repetitiveness which, combined with the scale of the work, turns the listening experience of Feldman's Second String Quartet into time-travel, whereby the rules of memory (by which a before and an after help us placing events in time) are turned upside down.

Throughout the entire five hours of performance that I sat through, with the score in my hands, there were surprisingly few elements that I could recall... It would be arrogant to expect a piece of this size to be metabolised in one sitting, of course, nor does one person's subjective choice of 'memorable' prove that it be universally applicable. My argument is that the lack of 'memorable' moments in the literal sense is itself Feldman's success in terms of deleting our conscious memory of this piece, for we do not truly remember it in the sense of pitch or rhythm, but rather, if at all, as a flow of consciousness. Even so, there remain some distinct elements, as I said, that could be classed as musical ideas in the standard sense, which I wish to recall.

Following the barrage of minor-second clusters in the first two pages, obsessively uttering the same clashing notes (C#, D, Eb, Dx or, more simply put, C#, D, D#, E) in varying dynamics, the next memorable soundscape comes at page 5, where the chord Eb, F, Ab, Bb is played in harmonics: given its sound, almost bell-like (or like a metallophone), and its foundation as a series of inverted perfect fifths (Ab > Eb > Bb > F), it is no wonder that it stands out as one of the purest and most concordant moments in the entire piece, almost leaving one wondering just how it fits in. There are other such moments in the piece, for example in the second system of p.24 and the first one of p.28, in which the quintal structure is easily traced as the basis of the G, A, D, E chords (also played in harmonics). The superimposed fourths/fifths, G-C, F#-C# (actually spelled G-C, Gb-Db) of p.74, bb. 1-9, also fit into this idea.

Of course, as anyone who has previously attempted some sort of pitch-set analysis of Feldman works would know, this is not the kind of piece that allows for easy answers in terms of its shifting pitch-scapes: one moment you are immersed in the fluted, quintal harmonies that we just described, and the next, literally, you are in the more widely used (a)tonal palette of this piece exemplified at the end of page 28, where the all-semitone runs are a marked departure from the concordant harmonics in the first system of the same page.

The distinctiveness of certain ideas in this piece is exactly what allows Feldman to compose and de-compose the layering of constructive processes within our musical brain: by holding on to the illusion that recognising certain ideas throughout the piece will help us establishing a before and an after, we, the audience, find it difficult to deal with accepting that these ideas (albeit recurring) do not constitute leitmotifs, and that they do not carry the latter's semantic or narrative value. However, these ideas do

exist, and I have written down the ones which, during the live performance, capture my attention the most – in a fresh, immediate way.

A very easily recognisable figure is the group of four fast notes (demisemiquavers), either ascending or descending, separately bowed or slurred together: this is heard for the first time at p.7, then at p.12 and elsewhere in the piece (for example at p.80): when all four instruments play such material, the quartet begins to metamorphose into a swarming bee-hive. This sudden push, this *perceived* increase in pace, is short-lived and does not kick-start any further momentum, other than the subsequent nine bars of semiquaver triplets.

One of the most ‘memorable’ moments in the piece comes at p.9: a two-note (one-tone) ostinato in the ‘cello part, which not only continues for the entire page but also returns in other places, for example through most of p.16 and for a third of p.27; also, you may see a similar ostinato at p.21 (again, made of two notes a tone apart), this time used by all instruments.

The next idea I wish to highlight is the chord which, to my ears, captures the essence of Feldman’s sound: this “Feldman chord” can be found at b.10 of p.90, b.11 of p.119, and bb.20-27 of p.102, and if re-spelled as E-G#-D#F# (rather than as the original Fb-D#-Ab-F#) it would be a major ninth. This chord, spaced as two superimposed sevenths, and found with added notes in other places (e.g. b.5, b.11, and b.17 of p.71), has something about it so inconclusive that it pulls the listener in; yet, it is not such a strong or idiosyncratic idea as, for example, the two-note ostinati of p.30 (or the similar ones at p.9, ‘cello part) or the fifth-based harmonies of p.101 (related to those of p.5, p.10, p.19, p.24, and p.28).

At this point I should mention that a visual representation of the sound of the score seems to be suggested in some parts: how could one not notice that the lighter look of pp.70-71, and of p.85 or p.117 also corresponds to an airier, lighter sound, with every other bar left blank? Equally, one could see how in p.76 the tableau depicted in the first two systems has, to some degree, a definite visual identity which, in turn, leads to an almost brush-stroked sound-scape; also, there could be links made between graphic signs and resulting sound-scapes when looking at p.77 and p.118, where the sets of rocking harmonies are shown on the page as a rain of semiquaver signs, bobbing up and down on the page.

Truly, if all of the musical (and/or graphical) ideas we discussed hitherto were summed together, they would not make up the majority of the score...Even if we added other lesser ideas (in scale), such as the pizzicati of p.29 bb.2-7, p.113 bb.10-27, and p.114 bb.10 – 27, with their constant, mechanical pace, or the pizzicati in the violin part at pp. 93 -95 and 119, with their lonely, four-note ascending arches, we would not be anywhere near having a conscious emotional grasp of what the bulk of the musical content in this piece consists of; this leads to my next point, which is the following: how did one *feel* in the live experience, listening to this piece?

The answer to this question is as follows: there were very few moments, indeed, when one felt elated, excited, moved, or transported to a place that one could label as emotionally laden; also, it felt unimportant to choose between looking or not looking at the performers, for their mutual interaction as human beings was minimal, with

some subtle sideways glances but no other break from the utter concentration that glued their eyes to the printed page: in other words, there was nothing in the live experience, for me, that could not have been gained through listening to a recorded version.

The greatest disappointment to me came in the realisation that Feldman did over-indulge himself, and this is no more obvious than in his constant attempt to confuse the players with re-spelling of notes or accidentals, which is pointless from a semantic, graphic, grammatical, and any other sense: for example, what does the respelling of the Ab as G# or the F# as Gb add in the first system of p.113, from the point of view of the listener's or the player's experience? We must accept that this utter illogical, or even fanciful approach is Feldman's weapon against the academic intelligentsia – those music graduates who could nail him if only they found the right pitch-sets to explain his whole oeuvre in a simple diagram – and in this mixture of controlled improvisation and precise choices is the ultimate academic's victory over his critics: he baffled them all.

Still, my feeling at the end of the performance was that a fraction of the piece – a handful of pages, maybe – would have sufficed to make the point; also, the absence of a true 'beginning' and 'end' meant that any point of the piece could be chosen as the beginning and the closing of a performance, as a representative sample of the whole piece.

For me, personally, this experience felt more like an endurance challenge, and after page 80 I began suffering from intense frustration, because I truly did not feel more enlightened about Feldman's opus than when coming through the doors: it did not feel like this late work had shown me his crowning achievement, or summed up everything I had carefully pieced together through his 'lesser' (i.e. shorter) works: I felt, rather, that after so many repetitions of repetitions I was no longer truly listening, or caring.

We know that Feldman admired music by that unknown composer who, legend has it, wrote piano music that was never meant to be heard: he admired this composer's impracticality and, it seems, tried to point his Second String Quartet in that direction, making this a work so challenging that it discourages all but the bravest to either play it or listen to it in its entirety. Perhaps, this piece too should not be heard and is made so impractical as to stray into a near-mythical status of non-music, or music to be seen and imagined, rather than heard and played.

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