

Morton Feldman: Interview with Charles Shere (1967)

The interview below took place in July 1967 at the KPFA radio station in Berkeley, California. Writer, composer and journalist, Charles Shere, was music director at the station at that time. The transcript by Chris villars is published here for the first time by kind permission of Charles Shere and Other Minds.

Charles Shere: Morton Feldman, it's a real pleasure to have you in California, and I hope that you find it a pleasure too. And it's a pleasure to talk to you because you've been a composer who has been... Well, you've always made life more hopeful for me than other composers, and largely because of something that I think John Cage wrote in *Silence*. He said that when he first met you, you brought him a piece, and he said, "This is beautiful. How did you make it?" And you said that you didn't know, and he said, "How marvellous, he doesn't remember how he made it and it's so beautiful!" Did this really happen?

Morton Feldman: Yes, it did.

CS: What piece was that?

MF: It doesn't exist, I threw it out! [Laughter]

CS: You threw it away! Do you remember why?

MF: I don't know... it sounded... it was like the opening of the Berg *Violin Concerto*. [Laughs]

CS: Oh, well then I can understand how you might not have known how you made it! I assumed that you were talking about something like one of the *Projections*.

MF: No, the whole piece in a sense was... It wasn't Feldman. No, I mean it was an early piece, and I wasn't happy with it.

CS: How old were you then?

MF: I wrote the piece when I was about 22, 21.

CS: So would you say that you got off to sort of a late start, composing?

MF: I matured at 24.

CS: At 24... on Tuesday! [Laughter]

MF: I was a late starter.

CS: A lot's been said, and principally by Cage, about the Cage-Feldman-Wolff, and Brown I guess...

MF: Yes, definitely.

CS: ...School in New York. And some people who talk about this think of it as a Cage School with sycophants. And other people who talk about it think of it as a well worked out... sort of,

what?... quadrivirate? ... of four, you know, really individuals, who are working at sort of separate problems in a more or less shared manner... with shared attitudes, let's say.

MF: Well, what would Jackson Pollock and Rothko have in common?

CS: Well, this I suppose is really the question, you know. What, for example, do Cage and Wolff have in common?

MF: Yes.

CS: And even, what does Wolff and Wolff have in common, because, you know, one Wolff score will be considerably different from another. And yet when you listen to them, you can certainly identify Christian Wolff's music.

MF: Yes. Well, I think that the big impetus, the *Karl Marx* of our inspiration, was sound.

CS: And his prophet? [Feldman laughs] Did he have one?

MF: And we took it from there. OK, this is the name of an Earle Brown piece - *From Here*.

CS: You say "sound", but silence must have been included too.

MF: All sound was just a question of how we breathe as individuals. All silence was taken for granted.

CS: I don't know Earle Brown's music very well, and I know Christian Wolff's music not much better, but it strikes me that Cage's music tends to be either absorbed in what it's doing, or else quite nervous. That Wolff's music seems to be more or less reflective and, to a certain extent intellectual, while your music seems to me to be really breathing, more than anything else. Does this seem an adequate description?

MF: I think that's very fine. In fact, speaking of Christian Wolff's music as being intellectual, let's say he... it's intellectual in so far as that it's not hidden. And, in this sense, I always think of Christian as being the Webern of the future.

CS: A lot of his music is something like refined *Cartridge Music*. Refined to the point that the instructions are very clear, and sometimes almost elegant. His music, in other words, is more staged than performed, but not staged anywhere near in the same sense that Cage's music is.

MF: Yes.

CS: Whereas your music isn't, it seem to me, staged at all. It's really more concerned with sound than it is with procedure.

MF: Yes, I feel that I'm the closest to Karl Marx! [Laughter] Not that they're revisionists! [More laughter]

CS: I have sort of been thinking in the direction that the difference that I guess 1948 or 49 has made, when the new School was made, or whatever you want to call the events, was that, before then, classical music was concerned with a sort of germinal construction, taking something and building something out of it. Building maybe an elaborate construct sort of

thing out of it. Whereas afterward, and now, people seem to be more concerned with passing time.

MF: Yes.

CS: In other words...

MF: I was talking about this just last night with a friend. And he was asking me the difference, in the painting and in the music. And I said that you could actually catch the change of the era where, with the new stuff, there became less anxiety about time. It's so. So I think, where someone like Stockhausen has great anxiety about what he does with this time, a kind of historical anxiety. You see, Cage doesn't have anxiety.

CS: Is it fair to generalise and say that, to a great extent, this is the difference between an Eastern and a Western way of thinking about things in general? I mean, sooner or later, the question of Zen is going to come up.

MF: What do you mean "Eastern"... New York?

CS: No, no, no.

MF: Or Tokyo?

CS: Yeah. [Laughter]

MF: No, I don't think so, I don't think so. I think it's a question, for example, I know in painting things changed when the painter no longer went, well, he could take his brush off the canvas.

CS: Actually, this is as Western and European an idea as Mallarmé is, and as Marcel Duchamp is.

MF: I think so. I don't think it has anything to do with Zen...

CS: Yeah.

MF: ... whatsoever. But I think this anxiety about time and the need to... You know that great W. C. Fields remark, "Let's get the"... What was it? "Let's get the cow by the tail and face the situation"?¹

CS: Yeah. [Laughter]

MF: I always thought of tradition as getting the cow by the tail. Anyway, for me that's a very significant difference.

CS: Well, it seems to me that it implies a different attitude toward justifying what you're doing. It seems to me that as long as a painter is terribly concerned about staying on the canvas, and within the edges, and as long as a composer is terribly concerned about justifying what he's doing...

¹ W.C. Fields: "There comes a time in the affairs of man when he must take the bull by the tail and face the situation."

MF: His continuity.

CS: Yeah. ...in terms of sort of a teleological attitude...

MF: Exactly.

CS: ...of working from something to something, that this taken at its extreme can almost be a psychosis.

MF: I feel it was tending toward that.

CS: Yeah, and I think possibly Schoenberg was, you know, the, hopefully the logical end, of this tendency. Because even when he decided he was going to get out of the, you know, out of tonality, he did it in the same procedure.

MF: And remember that he was very happy. And he said that, oh he was happy because he was extending Germanic musical tradition for another hundred years, unquote.

CS: Right. Yeah, and staying with the same forms, the same rhythms, and all of this business. I wonder how he really felt about Webern. I wonder how he really felt about, you know, the last... about the *Cantatas* and the *Variations for Orchestra*, and things of that sort. It must have been difficult for him. And this doesn't put certain American academic, international-style composers in a very hopeful situation, does it?

MF: If I just could skip back, and get back to what you just said, what he might have thought about Webern. I think that the European mind, say for example what Messiaen told to Xenakis, he said you could do anything as long as you could justify it logically, you see. And I think being that Webern did justify what he did so logically gave Schoenberg a sense of relief.

CS: Of course Webern is a very ambiguous figure because you can look at his music in a completely sectarian way if you want to, although I can't imagine wanting to. On the one hand it's terribly involved, and terribly logical and precise, but all you have to do is just sort of turn that function of your mind off and Webern can be completely ad libitum.

MF: Well, that was the whole situation in the early 50s. Don't forget that the whole Cage 'orphan asylum' went through - meaning Christian Wolff and myself, you know - went through the Webern experience, as well as a Milton Babbitt, or a Boulez, or a Stockhausen.

CS: What's the difference then?

MF: You know, as you were saying before, we turned it upside down. We saw something else.

CS: Well now, there's somebody in the audience at this point who always says, well, you know, obviously you did, and obviously the reason for that is that it makes life much easier for you. You don't have to think so much.

MF: We thought more.

CS: You can observe the imperfections in the paper instead of taking your inspiration from, oh, you know, I don't know...

MF: The imperfections of other masterpieces! [Laughter]

CS: Right. Precisely. In other words, it all comes down to imperfections. And whether these are to be considered in a moral light, or in simply, you know, the cold light of the observing eye. With no moral imputation at all.

MF: You know, it's very interesting, why was the moral role always such a conceptual one?

CS: Well, I suppose because it's the only road that we know.

MF: But perception was left to the dilettante.

CS: That's true, isn't it? And then there are always some of these great figures in the past who were both a dilettante who could perceive, and also intellectual or clever enough to come up with some kind of generalised results. And I'm thinking of people like Laurence Sterne, and, you know, maybe Shakespeare, and well, maybe Mozart even - late Mozart - who somehow in almost a childlike, naive fashion - Shakespeare excepted - could travel both of these roads. Could see the stones for what they were, and could also see the people, who were stumbling over them [Laughs], for what they were. And nevertheless able to do their work. But this gets off into a little philosophical business that probably won't go much of any place. But, you know, what do you do with the people who say, like Robert Frost, that they're not interested in playing tennis with the net down?

MF: You mean his reference to free verse?

CS: Free verse, yeah.

MF: I've never really thought of any kind of final solution for these problems. I mean, I don't think about it, actually.

CS: And you don't play chess with them, you just let them watch?

MF: It was always those fellas, in a sense, throughout history that were the ones that began to consolidate, and add, and take what they need, you know, from history. I always thought it was very charming when T. S. Eliot says, you use or take from history what you need. I once said to a friend, "Well, why do they need so much?" [Laughter]

CS: Particularly, T. S. Eliot!

MF: You know, kind of remark as if here on this really independent figure...

CS: Are you speaking against eclecticism?

MF: No. I'm saying how they don't wanna play with the net down, but, little by little, they found ways of playing the net-down game with the net up.

CS: Written out chance music.

MF: Exactly! You said it, not me! [Laughter]

CS: Which reminds me that while I was trying to figure out some way of dealing with the problem of Pierre Boulez [Laughs], I was reading back issues of *Perspectives of New Music*.

And somebody had an article on... I guess it was on your recording of your music on Time Records, *Durations*. No, it was a Columbia album. It was, *Projections*. And so what they did was simply write out the performances that they heard, and then discuss them. Of course, this is all very well if they want to analyse a performance, but it doesn't really have all that much to do with the composition. Do you agree with Cage when he says, composition's one thing, performance another, and hearing a third; what do the three have to do with one another?

MF: No, I don't. I find my composition one thing.

CS: Including the other two aspects?

MF: Yes.

CS: Well, let's see, we...

MF: That's why I'm less oriented to the concert hall than John is. In fact, if anything...

CS: He's a performer.

MF: Yes.

CS: And you're a composer then, you say?

MF: Which one is a dirty word?

CS: Oh, I like them both! [Laughter]

MF: Then I'm a composer! [More laughter]

CS: I find it easier to understand composers because performers... Well, let's not go into that.

MF: Yes, but this is another age of the great composer/performers. I would say that there is a kind of marvellous, brilliant balance between the both, as, for example, in Stockhausen's music.

CS: *Momente* is sort of the point at which composition and performance, and even the audience's function...

MF: Exactly.

CS: ... really come together.

MF: And when Boulez conducts his own music now, there is that aspect.

CS: Or even, sometimes, other people's music. I even heard a performance of *Zeitmasse* that was beautiful. And when that piece can be made beautiful, you've got somebody who's, you know, composing it and conducting it at the same time.

MF: And then, the more flashier, Hollywood-ish types of talents like Luciano Berio and Lukas Foss. It's all performance.

CS: That's true,...

MF: Almost in the Cagean sense.

CS: ...although I do think that in the one case there's more behind the performance than in the other. I mean, it seems to me that Foss is much more performance oriented than...

MF: Berio.

CS: Yeah, than Berio.

MF: Yes.

CS: Well, it seems to me, by the way, that some of these attitudes, speaking particularly about Boulez and Stockhausen, who, over the years, have come to be more and more identified with performance, as well as with composition. It seems to me that, and this may be a coincidence, that their composition has changed considerably. Boulez gave up the total serialisation, and so did Stockhausen.

MF: Yes, they got involved with the realities of performance.

CS: Yeah.

MF: But, you see, I didn't. So maybe I'll arrive at total serialisation, eventually.

CS: Do you think it unlikely? Do you think it as unlikely as I do?

MF: I don't mean it as a joke.

CS: Really? This would be just about the first case of anybody... Well, no, of course there's always Stravinsky! [Laughs] But that was earlier. This would be just about the first case of anybody reversing that particular road. Most of the people I've talked to seem to think that total serialisation was a historical necessity at one point, but is no longer viable.

MF: It's a very interesting thing, you know, this whole business of historical necessity comes around only because there's very little alternative.

CS: So that you can say that Mount Everest is a historical necessity!

MF: Exactly, there's very little alternative. But to me, once you walk up Mount Everest, or once you go to an indeterminate music, with all the new alternatives, what's wrong with the total serialisation of these alternatives?

CS: Well, then what's wrong with writing a piece in E Major?

MF: That's another story.

CS: Even a sonata-allegro in E Major. Why is that a different story?

MF: Because that's really had it, I think.

CS: It was bled pretty white. And yet it seems to me that there were...

MF: I wouldn't mind a piece in E Major, but they're just not happy with just staying in that E Major.

CS: Well, I meant more in the Mahler sense than the Schubert sense, you know. [Feldman laughs] I don't know that it was completely exhausted...

MF: Maybe everything, maybe everything is in E Major.

CS: Well, the reason I said E Major is because, lately, to me everything has sounded like E Major! It's true! [Laughs]

MF: I know in one of the pieces which you're probably gonna play in connection with this interview. A piece, a new piece for three pianos². As I was writing the sounds they became so thick, that as I went from one sound to another, it had the feeling of a five-one, five-one, five-one, five-one. Regardless of what the sound was, I was making a gesture, a five-one, five-one... everything seemed. I actually felt I was working the way I did when I was fourteen years old.

CS: Well, this is a terrible problem, because it seems to me it stems from the fact that there is a gesture, which in the past has been called the dominant-tonic gesture, the cadential gesture. Consequently, we don't call it, you know, we don't call it that gesture any more - I'm waving my hands. You can't see but I'm waving my hands. Instead we call it the five-one. Now, if you make the gesture in 1967, it has the same function, it does the same sort of thing. Somebody will say, ah that's a five-one, when in fact it's not a five-one at all. But since that's what they've been calling it for several hundred years, that's the only thing they know to call it by. And then they transfer its meaning...

MF: Yes.

CS: ...from the one context to the other.

MF: Yes, I mean if you would go from a very thick chord - for example, a cluster-type chord - into a thinner chord, there is a gesture of five-one.

CS: Resolution.

MF: Of some kind.

CS: Well, there's a question which I guess I'm sort of working toward all along which I can't really formulate very well. Another way of going at it is going to be to point out that your music is sometimes criticised for being rather limited in scope, i.e. all those *piano* sounds, all those *pianissimo* sounds. So that, I don't know, to be flattering I suppose, as a composer you're like Emily Dickinson as a poet. In other words, a painter of a restricted colour. The same criticism was levelled at Webern for a long time. And I think people are beginning to stop doing that, finally, because they're beginning to realise that, even though the brass always has the mutes on, there's still a lot of other differentiations going on.

MF: Well, you know the Nietzsche remark, "the lie of the big form"³... I think that's a valid criticism. I don't know what they mean by limited palette. Actually, I never really knew what they meant, when it becomes obvious, in a certain context of a certain type of work, that the work exists on its own terms, you see.

² *Two Pieces for Three Pianos* (1966).

³ Nietzsche: "the lie of the great style" – a criticism of Wagner, made in, *The Case of Wagner*, Section 1, Paragraph 4 (Walter Kaufmann translation).

CS: Well, you know...

MF: It's trying to discuss something on terms that... You can't discuss something, you know, on *your* terms, you see. So, when they say about my work that it's a limited palette, then immediately they're thinking about something else.

CS: Yes, but they're not thinking of each work individually, they're thinking of the catalogue.

MF: I see.

CS: The composer of... You know, the small sound specialist. The composer without big climaxes.

MF: The big climax was the first note of the piece.

CS: Ah yes, it's funny that we finally have got back to this realisation that for a long time people thought the climax was in the last movement. You know, late Romanticism, the last movement's the very important thing. And then, people began to realise that actually it was the slow movement, the epicentre of the composition, is where the climax is. Which makes analysis very easy. You simply measure from the end and from the beginning, and when you get to the middle, that's it. And now we're finding out that the climax - you know, the frightening gesture - is the first gesture. Once that's done, anything can follow.

MF: Yes, once you enter into the work. You know, "Someone has been telling lies about Josef K"⁴... Now anything can happen! [Laughter] So my first note is saying, someone has been telling you lies about music! [Laughter]

CS: Well, except that it's very difficult to defend a position that says that there are lies and there aren't truths, about music.

MF: I'm very moral, you see, in a sense. I'm more moral than my enemies. Because they would listen, and they'll be interested in ideas. I don't listen, and I'm not interested in their ideas. I'm cold.

CS: Well, morally speaking, that seems to me a much more satisfying attitude. Because it's not open... It's not subject to hypocrisy! [Laughter] Anyway, the point remains. So it seems to me that if a piece is concerned about doing something, and it does it, then that's all you ask of it. You know, you don't ask of, well, let's say *Die Fledermaus*, that it be *Don Giovanni*. That's foolish criticism. And there are very few critics left who are subject to this kind of error, although they do ask of *Sonatas and Interludes* that they be the *Hammerklavier*. That happens occasionally. And, it seems to me that each piece has to find, you know, its own bag, and to operate within it. And then by extension, it seems logical to say that this is true of composers. But here the situation breaks down, because then what do you do with somebody like Babbitt, who, it seems to me, has decided he's going to do something, and has gone ahead to do it, untiringly, but it just doesn't seem to matter. It doesn't seem to relate. Do you think that there is some kind of necessity for music to relate? Is there a function?

MF: Well, in a sense, that's why I feel much closer say to Milton Babbitt than I would to Stockhausen. Because that element of relating is a very easy thing to get. All Milton has to do

⁴ Opening line of Kafka's novel, *The Trial*.

is put in a vibraphone, instead of four very arid instruments. Let him put in a vibraphone to relate.

CS: And suddenly, he would discover that he was Luigi Dallapiccola!

MF: Or something or other. And I think it's his, it's his marvellous, unyielding talent that makes him a very interesting composer for me. Because I think these other things are just a question to what degree the composer's on the make in relation to his audience, in relation to his reputation.

CS: Well, I hadn't thought of it that way. And that certainly imputes not only an extra-musical, but also, possibly an injurious attitude to the composer who is, as you say, on the make. And it's easy to think of composers who have been and who haven't been. But...

MF: I don't know. I mean, you kind of, you kind of know. Oh, I'll tell you, historically, the big on-the-make composers are the one's that's made it.

CS: J. S. Bach...

MF: Well, I think that's finished. And I think that for a lot of people, after ten or fifteen years, Milton Babbitt is gonna be considered the most important serial composer. Without any extra-curricular cream puff element.

CS: Yes, but this brings us back to the question of sound, you know. And it brings us back to the question of the three operations. You know, composition, performance, and... what? Audition, hearing. And, when I say related, it seems to me that, what you call, you know, the cream puff areas, extends to the attitudes that are aroused from the audience by the sounds. I mean, your music, for example, it seems to me is very accessible. Very accessible. Anybody can listen to and enjoy Feldman. Because it has, you know, it's simply beautiful and accessible music. Whereas Babbitt's music is inaccessible to the layman, because he resists it, in other words. And it's not really a function of the music. It's a function of the person who's listening - whether he's going to resist it or not.

MF: No, I was being unusually - which is unusual for me - more specific. I was relating it to serial music, Babbitt. The whole *sense* of serial music. The whole quality, feeling of serial music, as being represented by Babbitt, and not the more luxurious, you know, opiate Europeans.

CS: Who are abandoning the Babbitt position, which they...

MF: No, abandoning, abandoning their Webern purity.

CS: Well, how do you differentiate the Babbitt serialism from the Boulez of *Structures Book I* serialism then? How do you differentiate them? What's the difference between Babbitt's attitude toward total serialisation and the early Boulez' attitude?

MF: Well, *Structures I* is much more... it's not as subtle as early Babbitt. It's a kind of rudimentary follow the, you know, right down thing.

CS: Yeah.

MF: And, colouristically it's more glamorous, just by its instrumentation, with the two pianos.

CS: That's what I was thinking of, among other things. There is still a concern with - even using as much pre-composed schema as possible - there is still a concern with coming out with a late Beethoven sonata. With coming out with, you know, an overpowering effect. Which may be based on the succession of movements, or on maybe the colours of the instrumentation. However it's based, there...

MF: Yes, there is a very literal element in relation to the technique in those early Boulez things. Boulez, you know, in those early days, got a lot of impetus from poetry. The early sonatas were very much involved with Artaud. Then he went on to René Char. Then Mallarmé.

CS: Hmm, I wonder where he goes next?

MF: Well, being a European, Europeans are very literary. That's European art. European art is literary.

CS: And ours?

MF: It's not. I mean, we really were really involved in finding some kind of hidden dialectic in the causality of what happens to sound.

CS: Well now, it seems to me that the differences between the New York School and the European tradition - already I'm making a big difference! - is that the European is concerned with... Alright, a literary germinal idea, or the tradition of the music that's been composed, you know, in the past, or systems of aesthetics. Whereas the New York School seem to be less concerned with ingredients of this sort than with process, than with interplay. And I mean this both on the social and on the artistic level.

MF: Yes, I... You see, the reason my music is limited is because I don't believe in Hegel.

CS: Oh, thank God! [Laughter]

MF: So I'm not looking for another element, on which to make my synthesis.

CS: Well, what does this do to continuation within a piece? You know, how do you get from the beginning, you know, to the end?

MF: If you don't believe in Hegel, how do you write a composition?

CS: Right, yeah.

MF: You know, because the whole business if you believe in Hegel, like the Soviet Union believed in Hegel when they signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. They thought they were going to swallow them up, being as they believed in Hegel. But then they realised that *they* might be swallowed up!

CS: Since Germany believes in Hegel.

MF: Since Germany believes in Hegel. It's the same thing when you set up with this multitudinous idea of how you're gonna utilise all these things, you know, and eat 'em up in a gargantuan way in writing a very impressive composition. But if you don't believe in that, then all this other stuff becomes indeed very superficial.

CS: And so, when you're sitting down at your drafting table, or wherever you write your music, what do you do with the paper? You don't start at the beginning and work through in some Hegelian fashion to an end?

MF: What is process? Process is how to get the hell out of it! That's process.

CS: Oh, of course, the easiest way is simply not to begin. So, is there a little bit of Hegel left in everybody who begins?

MF: Yes.

CS: And a difficulty, it seems to me, in choosing not to believe in Hegel, is simply the difficulty in getting on with those who still insist on it.

MF: Exactly. If people want my work to be more impressive, they want me to believe in Hegel. That's what it amounts to.

CS: Yeah. [Laughter] And this of course comes into every relationship with a conductor, or with a critic, and with nine tenths of the audience.

MF: I mean, the most beautiful example - myself at this particular time is not a good example! [Laughs] - but I think the most beautiful example is someone like Mondrian, in relationship to Picasso.

CS: Well, except that Mondrian is almost in a Webern position of being very ambiguous. It would be easy for me to believe that he had a very Hegelian attitude toward filling up his canvas. There's such carefully - or, it seems, carefully - worked out balance, construction...

MF: It's not worked out, it's felt out.

CS: Oh, then it comes down to a question of intuitive, as opposed to knowledgeable Hegelianism.

MF: Well, the great bit about say someone like Picasso, and then we could tie it up with Schoenberg, because if we think, say for example, it's Cubism related. In other words, with what ingenuity can you dissect the rectangle, you see, in relation to with what ingenuity can you dissect the scale, or the row set, you see. Then, where does someone like Mondrian come into the picture? Where the ingenuity is an intuitive process.

CS: Well now, where you are discounting a Hegelian behaviour... Alright, I'm getting back to the question of what are you doing at the drafting table. It's easy for me to understand how you compose a piece of music, but it's less easy for me to understand how you compose either a long piece of music, or a second piece of music. For example, does a long piece require some kind of formal or structural consideration?

MF: No.

CS: It simply requires that more time pass.

MF: No, I think it requires a sense of scale.

CS: A balance.

MF: No, just the scale, which could be a very intuitive thing. I mean, there's one thing of saying, "I'm gonna work on a ten by ten canvas." And another thing, "And I'm trying to fill it up." And another thing, finding that it's becoming a ten by ten canvas.

CS: Because something was too big in the first place for its original size.

MF: Yes.

CS: And this happens then also in music.

MF: In other words, I don't say, I'm going to write... I never say to myself, I'm going to write an orchestral piece. I never say to myself that I'm going to write a piece. But I'm shrewd enough always to start with twenty line paper, you see. [Laughter] So I can catch anything in the net, that's happening. And then, little by little, you know, we're not that brilliant, we always wanna try things together, we always wanna make a package. Soon as you finally settle on an instrumentation, you have a more realistic structure.

CS: Then comes a moment when you realise you absolutely must have an alto flute, in addition to the instrumentation that you'd already decided upon.

MF: Yes. Then you really begin to hear things.

CS: As soon as you roll out a possibility.

MF: So, my assumption is - and it has always been my assumption - is that this need for organisational principle is an intuitive one. Which is so strong to begin with, why burden it with the other. I don't think we have the talent to be, and I don't even think that it's advisable that it should be such. I don't think we have the talent to sit down and say, I'm gonna write a piece that throughout eternity will never have a sense of organisation. Because just the materials that I begin to use will tie it up in the mind, and in the ear.

CS: Or just the fact that you and only you worked on that.

MF: Exactly. Is the omnipotent organisational process behind the tree, you see.

CS: A couple of year ago, maybe one year ago, Christian Wolff came out here, and did a concert together with Robert Moran. And, on the programme was a composition called *The Possibility of a New Composition for Electric Guitar* by Morton Feldman. And I was very much charmed by the music, and I said - you know, we recorded the concert - and I said to him, "I'm really happy that the performance went so well because it's a nice piece, and we have a tape of it". And Wolff said, "Well, I don't think that Feldman's finished with the piece. I think that, you know, there are going to be some changes in it, so you'd better not do anything about it until we find out". And we've never found out. Have you ever found out?

MF: No, I never found out.

CS: Maybe it would help if you could give it a take! [Laughter]

MF: Christian came to me, and he asked for this piece, and... No, first Christian called me - he was in Cambridge, I was in New York. You know, he's a Professor of Classics at Harvard.

CS: That's right. Yeah, I remember...

MF: That's how he started the economic bit.

CS: People are getting out of trying to make a living out of music. They do it some other way.

MF: I'm trying to make a living out of music. As I told you, I'm now going to...

CS: You're turning into the enfant terrible of this whole...

MF: I wanna make a living out of music.

CS: You're thinking of total serialisation!

MF: I think of total serialisation! [Laughter] Total serialisation without a grid.

CS: Ah, well, that's a different matter altogether.

MF: Who was it that could draw a circle, a perfect circle, freehand? Who was it? Was it Giotto?

CS: I can't imagine it.

MF: Yes. Who was it? I'll find out, and...

CS: It was probably somebody who lived in the days before they had compasses.

MF: Well, that's my dream. In other words, I wanna do total serialisation freehand.

CS: You mean, to compose a piece of music which only upon analysis somebody would prove to you that it was totally serialised?

MF: That's right. I'm only half joking, you understand.

CS: Well, this is not so terribly surprising to anyone who's familiar with your *Durations*, and your *Projections*, which are chance pieces. Now, this is very interesting, because Boulez has been quoted as saying, it's not how something sounds that's important, but how it's made. And, you've been quoted as arguing greatly with this.

MF: Yes.

CS: In other words, you want how it's made to be kept a private matter?

MF: Yes. Totally.

CS: And how it sounds should be as public as possible, of course.

MF: Only [that].

CS: Well, then is this a part of the hang-up with *The Possibility of a New Composition for Electric Guitar*?

MF: Oh, no! Getting back to that story... No, it's just a little in thing. The title of the piece just came from a letter that I wrote back to Christian, telling him that, well, there's a possibility of a new piece for electric guitar.

CS: Well, there actually was a new piece for electric guitar, as it turned out.

MF: Well, it wasn't...

CS: It was heard by a good many people. Was it written?

MF: Yes, it was written, but he's the only one who has the score. I didn't give it to my publisher, and I don't even have a copy. There's still a possibility that I might write a piece some day for electric guitar!⁵ [Laughs]

CS: It's a very fine instrument.

MF: I'm getting to like it more and more.

CS: I think it's the vibraphone of the future. Well, that was going to be the next question...

MF: You know, that's always very interesting about music, it... I think that throughout history its only gonna have a great past. Never a future.

CS: Well, it doesn't even always have a present. At least, these days, it seems to have a present of some sort.

MF: Because, you know, like a kid I remember on the New York subways, it was always great to stand at the end of the train and watch the getting in the station at the last moment, by looking backwards.

CS: Yeah.

MF: And to me that's what music is. There's something about music that is not visionary. As much as people might talk about the music of the future, there's just something about music that only seems to come out of looking backward.

CS: So, it'll always be simply a collection of historical necessities.

MF: Exactly.

CS: Well, you know, composers, young composers these days are in a terrible situation because - and I know this is said all the time, but it really seems truer now than at any point in

⁵ Soon after this interview, the only copy of the score of Feldman's electric guitar piece was lost when Christian Wolff's guitar case - with the score in it - was stolen from his car. Just over forty years later, in 2008, the guitarist, Seth Josel, used the KPFA recording Charles Shere talks about in this interview to reconstruct Feldman's score. This was subsequently published: Morton Feldman, *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar*, Edition Peters (EP68492, 2014).

the past - pretty much everything's been done. The boundaries have been found. Not erected, but really sort of discovered. I mean, the minute you've got 4'33", that takes care of one boundary, certainly.

MF: Uh-huh.

CS: And so, now, there seems to be only a possibility of - at least when it comes to styles - an eclecticism.

MF: But it was always like that. I mean, Stravinsky paved the way, between joining his neoclassic mode with twelve-tone elements. The eclecticism of various serial composers incorporating chance. Consolidation, that's music.

CS: Well, that's what composition means...

MF: Yes. You see, my - it's not my hang-up - my *secret* is that, at very early life, I became very friendly with a group of painters, who were terrific painters. I was caught between two disciplines. And when I would think about music I would say, why is it you get involved in process, and the musician is always an academician? And why is it that the painter gets involved in process and he becomes a Cezanne?

CS: When you're talking about process here, you're talking about compositional procedures...

MF: Yes.

CS: ... not about process in the Cage-Tudor sense of the word, where the process is the composition. You're talking about the process as distinct from composition.

MF: Yes.

CS: It seems to me a differentiation that it's really necessary to maintain.

MF: Yes.

CS: In other words, what you're concerned with then, I would guess, is that the composer simply allow his music to exist, and to examine itself and its surroundings...

MF: Yes.

CS: ... halfway objectively, and detachedly, but without a sort of analytical preoccupation in mind. In other words, maintain a procedure which is un-Hegelian. It seems to come back to that.

MF: Yes.

CS: Un-teleological. The idea of a piece of music in which one can wander. Certain places in Mahler. Most places in Webern. I think all of your music. All of Cage's music. Most of Wolff's music. This is what you wind up with, this sort of garden of sounds.

MF: Yes.

CS: With no path, no paved path, which it's necessary to follow.

MF: I wouldn't say that, at least for myself. I would still say that my mind, my instinct, is a path.

CS: But, as far as I'm concerned, when I hear the piece, I don't know that path. You want to keep the way it's done private, and leave only the sound public.

MF: Yes.

CS: Isn't this the reason that you want that? Isn't this the effect that that produces, namely that I am left free to wander without, you know, having the thread to hold on.

MF: Yes, because the thread is that which creates a veil between you and the sound. You see, if I'm anti-process as you defined it, it's only because... Again on my own terms, being that I'm totally involved in the sound, I don't want anything to interfere with my intention. At the same time, how can I present my work without an intention?

CS: Well, it seems to me that this is a re-statement of a remark that you made earlier, that there is no future, and that the whole thing will be a collection of backward vistas. Not only in the large picture of music as a whole, as a tradition, but in the small picture of a composer at work on each composition, or an audience at work on each performance.

MF: Yes.

CS: And even of the connection possibly between the composer and the performer, which is another matter.

MF: Yes. Also, I don't think about art as a kind of living thing. I think about art, really, as a dead thing, that you look back at.

CS: Rather than as a live process in which you become involved.

MF: Yes, I mean, what's the point? It's a very interesting thing... I mean, to talk about performances that you've heard, and then you hear what happens to it after fifteen or twenty years. Or to walk into an old Franz Kline show in 1950, and then just see individual Klines in various museums, you know. That initial experience drops dead. Nothing keeps it alive.

CS: Except that it becomes another piece of art.

MF: Yes. In that sense, the Cagean idea. But it's not a kind of simultaneous division. That division takes place in big time gaps, the difference between the work and the performers. *Anyways...*

CS: Well, we seem to have come full circle, and I can't really think of any reason to add... But you maintain a complete sense of detachment?

MF: Well...

CS: I mean, to art, to works of art.

MF: Yes. Well, getting back to what interests me about Milton Babbitt, in a sense, is that I do admire things that are only what they are. And, in that sense, I do admire him. Just as I would admire Racine, with all its rhetoric, because it's obviously...

CS: That's a part of it.

MF: It is what it is, you see.

CS: Yes. Well then it's very difficult not to admire anything.

MF: No, it is... Well, you know, it's like camp, when Susan Sontag would talk about, say De Gaulle's speech, as being camp. Only, you have to be very shrewd in your assessment, what type of rhetoric is aesthetic. [Laughs]

CS: This is a subject for another discussion some day, because now we're getting into... well, something that could be called, instructions to a young critic, or to a young historian.

MF: Oh I mean, you listen to a piece, and you say, "Oh gee that's overblown stuff!"

CS: Yes.

MF: You listen to another piece that's overblown, you don't say it's overblown stuff. What's the difference?

CS: Simply what you bring to your decision.

MF: You're looking at a kind of minimal art, and you say, well this is certainly minimal art. Then you look at another minimal art, and you say, well this certainly has an aura about it. What's the difference?

CS: Well, do you think that it will ever be defined? I've never heard it defined.

MF: Well, it's what separates the boys from boy scouts!