

Morton Feldman: Interview with Howard Skempton (1977)

Howard Skempton writes: This is the interview I did before writing "Beckett as Librettist". In my appointments diary for that year, I have "Interview with Feldman 3.00" on 13 January. The location was Bill Colleran's flat (5 Mansfield Street, London W1). I had a small cassette tape recorder and a single 90 minute (2 x 45 minutes) cassette. We talked generally for 45 minutes and then I turned the tape over. We talked for another 45 minutes and then I realised that we were running out of tape and had hardly started talking about "Neither", so I turned the tape over again. After another 45 minutes, the taped part of the interview came to an end with Feldman's line about Beethoven's big problem being not just another composer! So, we lost the first 45 minutes, but I had what I needed for my "Music and Musicians" piece.¹

Bill Colleran was Feldman's publisher at Universal Edition (London) Ltd. He makes a brief - but hilarious! - appearance [p8]. Feldman brought along a manuscript score of his opera "Neither" - still incomplete at the time - which he and Skempton consult during the interview. Page numbers in square brackets refer to this score.² The premiere of "Neither" (a commission by Rome Opera) subsequently took place at the Teatro dell'Opera, Rome on 13 May 1977. Skempton's article appeared in the same month. The transcription below by Chris Villars currently lacks the final 10 minutes of the taped part of the interview. The transcript is published here for the first time by kind permission of Howard Skempton. Special thanks to Lars Werdenberg for providing a copy of the audio recording.

[the first 45 minutes of the interview are irretrievably lost as explained above]

Howard Skempton: What I was saying about your own work is that, in the earlier works, you were trying to achieve a certain weight; in the graph works, you were actually notating a weight of sound.

Morton Feldman: Yes.

HS: And you were juxtaposing certain weights.

MF: Right.

HS: Because this was raw sound you were dealing with.

MF: Yes.

HS: And you've gone on doing that. Possibly in the graph pieces people would do things which would distract from what you were trying to do. You were trying to create a weight, and they would play a major third, or a triad. You would say that's not a weight of three notes, that's a triad. So, this is probably what led you to fully notate works.

¹ Howard Skempton, "Beckett as Librettist", *Music and Musicians* (May 1977) pp 5-6. Also [Online] www.cnvill.net/mfskemptn.htm

² Morton Feldman, "Neither: opera in one act on a text by Samuel Beckett", for soprano and orchestra (1977), Universal Edition (UE 16326). The published score is dated: "1/30/77".

MF: I found that - and Cage talks about this now himself continually - people mistake freedom for licence. And I feel that there's a problem. There's also a problem in terms of the conventional training of musicians. Say, for example, a flute player, who could jump around much more readily than a clarinet player, huh? Because the training of a clarinetist is conventional.

HS: That's right.

MF: They would play a very conventional type of passages, you see. That's the problem. Certain instruments had to prepare passages because the whole make-up of the instrument, in a sense, is diatonic. Like the harp. You know, I'd never adopted a pitch structure, how to get my pitches. But I hear them. I hear them like this! [snaps fingers] No problem! I hear and I write down the pitches. There's no problem! It's just nothing! So I decided to do it myself. Also there was a problem where everybody was very metric-oriented.

HS: That's right.

MF: That they were only interested, and still are only interested, that if they see a note on the beat, it's a note on the beat. And everything people cannot understand, say the difference between breathing a sound and its metric unit. And, to this day, if they see change of measures they think it's Stravinsky. Stravinsky in one of his conversations talks very knowingly about the difference between his concept of rhythm, for example, and Webern. Even though, in a sense, his work like "Movements for orchestra" looks like Webern. It's not! It's still very beat[snaps fingers]-oriented[snaps again]. And so, those placements of sounds in this given ictus were still very beat-oriented. The whole idea, in a sense, if they came down, they would come down on the beat. And it was very discouraging. I gave it a long time. But at the same time I never did it exclusively. I never had just a long run of just writing graph music. I was writing notated music at the time. And there was one period where three types of music was being done simultaneously. There was the graph music, and then the free durational music, and precisely written music.

HS: That's right, yes. Sort of late Fifties that would be.

MF: Now, I feel, in a sense, that what I'm doing now is very, very difficult. To take long blocks of breathing durations, and just get it there, you see. It's very difficult, without being de-oriented. For example, the imagery of that very long section between the viola divisi chord and the solo cello. Do you remember that? That goes on, and on and on. And then the soprano later on takes it.

HS: Let me see that. That was... [starts looking through the score]

MF: I think it's the perfect example in time.

[long pause while the score is searched]

MF: Here we go. It begins on page 21... One, two, three, four, five... It goes on essentially for about six long systems [the six systems with solo cello, pp21-23]. I mean, for me to hear that

particular musical image in that length of time is something that I couldn't have done in the Fifties. You see now the Fifties also was very close to the paintings. That is, it was overall.

HS: Yes. And really this is the very interesting thing. I want to see to what extent...

MF: Yes, well, it was very overall. Just like "The Swallows of Salangan" was very overall. And I loved it. I still love a kind of, er... What's the correct term?

HS: Static...

MF: No, er... [long pause] When one thing is just one thing completely? What's the term that is used for that?... [long pause] With an "M"...

HS: Ah, such mono...

MF: Yes.

HS: Monolithic.

MF: "Monolithic" is the word! I love monolithic, you see. And I try to get back to them [the painters]. And they give marvellous quality. It's what gives the work the kind of ex cathedra quality. I'm not saying that ex cathedra quality... I think it's fake, and could be fake. Or, let's say, not the word "fake". It could be "easy". The way the sound of a bad a cappella piece could get by, for chorus, you see? It's built-in. The homogeneity is built-in. And it's a little bit much more safe than one realises. I'm speaking as the composer that's doing it.

HS: A bit like Palestrina you mean, with flair?

MF: Yes. That's why they could turn it out by the yard.

HS: That's right.

MF: And, as the composer I like slightly more possibility for distinction, in something as it passes in time. Of course, as soon as you lift up your hand from the paper, as soon as you break the line, it's very impossible for you to not get involved with a kind of cause and effect kind of situation, because you're making a move, you see.

HS: Yes. In a sense you've got to concentrate very hard to avoid that.

MF: You have to concentrate.

HS: That's why concentration is so important. Because you've got to.

MF: Right. Now, in my opera, if I'm making moves... Actually, if I'm making moves in the opera it's because I feel, in a sense, it's the theme of the Beckett. Just the opening line of "to and fro...". And the work, in a sense, is a little scary. It's like a dream where you're in one world, and now, without any preparation, you find yourself in another world. I think that's from the start with things when you look at the page. And I turn the page and it looks like, "How the heck do you get into this one?" They look startling on paper. It's gonna be less startling when you hear it. I hope! I mean, I hope it's gonna be very natural. You gotta accept

the nightmare! Now that to me is a very important situation, because everybody is monolithic. Boulez is monolithic. Everybody is monolithic!

HS: Yes certainly, I think of you, in a sense, as the father of a whole group of composers who work in quite a different way. People like La Monte Young and Steve Reich...

MF: Yes.

HS: ...and Philip Glass.

MF: Yes.

HS: All these composers are doing this. They're creating these monolithic [the phone rings] pieces. But of course they're using a system. They're using... [phone rings again] And they're saying, in a sense, the construction is more important for them than the sound.

[interview interrupted by the phone ringing repeatedly, and the actions taken to deal with it]

MF: [resuming] Now, how do you feel about my recent work in relation to the old?

HS: Well, my enthusiasm dates from about '65, when I was about eighteen. And the basic statements I found very inspiring: "The sound is the experience". And there's something else: "Everything you use to make art is precisely what kills it". You said that as well.

MF: Yes.

HS: And it's just the idea of starting with the sound, starting with the instrumentation. You know, I used to feel that each instrument just had one sound, not three, or four. And that when you chose an instrument, you were choosing a parameter, all the other parameters as well. And it was this that I found very inspiring. This very practical involvement with material.

MF: Very practical.

HS: But also, Cage talks about a quality of tenderness, which is something else. That's very important as well. And there is an atmosphere there which is beyond your concentration, which is beyond your involvement with the medium. Are you aware of creating an atmosphere in the works, in the works like "The Swallows of Salangan"?

MF: Well, doesn't Stravinsky say that chromaticism is pathos? Well, maybe it's because of my cluster! [laughs] Well, that's it, that's the handwriting on the wall, that's the touch! I mean, I don't telephone my compositions in, you see! I sit down and write them.

HS: Actually, "atmosphere" is the wrong word.

MF: There is certainly something there. What do you think it is?

HS: Well, I used to feel that, in a sense, the 'soul' of the piece of music lay in its texture.

MF: I read a wisecrack of Stockhausen's recently where he said to me, or he says to the interviewer, that my work could be just a moment in his music... [HS laughs] ...but not vice versa! I think it's awfully clever, but I don't think it's true at all, actually. But I always wondered about that atmosphere. My girlfriend, Mary, there's some works that she feels... Did you ever hear a tape of "Cello and Orchestra"? I don't know if it was broadcasted here. It was done at the Boston Symphony.

HS: I don't think I have heard it, no.

MF: Well, I think Universal has a tape of this piece. There's also a new tape of "Oboe and Orchestra" which might be a good idea to hear.

HS: Yes, I'd love to.

MF: She prefers my work, in a sense, when they're much more abstract. Sometimes she feels it's loaded with content. In recent years I've had a little trouble with my percussion situation, where people hear percussion and they have associations with percussion. They feel that percussion is "ominous", or... you know. And I'm not upset about it, but I'm odd man out about it. I listen to the bass drum in a certain way, and I don't hear it as ominous. But of course it adds an atmosphere - not to my ears, but to a lot of people's ears - of being overly dramatic. I don't hear it. I'm trying to hear it in their ears, but I don't hear it, so far. Of course, I notice lately in my orchestral writing that instead of having one gong... Hey, there's a beautiful tape of "Orchestra" which Glasgow did recently. It's marvellous.

HS: Yes, I heard the broadcast of the performance in Glasgow.

MF: Of that piece?

HS: Yes.

MF: Well, that piece is very close to my music, and I think it's very close to my early music. A lot of people feel that my work now is just a little too swank. Well, I can't help it if I do things so beautifully! [HS laughs] I mean, there's still disturbing things. There's still a little grittiness. It's not that clean a piece.

HS: There's a lot of grittiness in "Orchestra". There's a lot of 'raw' material there.

MF: A lot of disturbing images. I hate rather being so apologetic about my recent work. I put so much emphasis on the work ethic. And I have no vested interest, to a great degree. I mean, when I begin a piece it might come out the same to others - as my other music - but for me there's enough margin of doubt to make the working of it interesting for me. In fact, I feel that my work has too much variety. I wish it didn't. I mean, I really always wanna sit down and write that same piece over and over again, but I don't seem to have the talent to write that same piece over and over again! I didn't know where the opera was gonna take me. I had no idea where I invented a certain type of imagery of a kinda mechanistic nature, which is very new for my music in that piece. But it happened.

HS: But, in a sense, the variety, this is the fabric of the piece. I mean, in the work of the Fifties, one was aware of the variety within the piece. There were a lot of new things happening from moment to moment. But, basically, the instrumentation was the ‘form’ of the piece.

MF: Yes.

HS: I mean, the form of the piece was the vertical colour. And then this was, as it were, projected in time. And there was variety within that. But this was the texture. This is what I mean by ‘atmosphere’ really.

MF: Of course, you know, there’s only the implication of content.

HS: I think the trouble is possibly that in the recent works the implication has been stronger.

MF: But, you know, the intentions of the composer really doesn’t matter. And so, if Stravinsky would talk about a certain piece of his, say the second piece for the “Three Pieces for String Quartet”, and he said it was influenced by a famous clown, the kinda asymmetrical, jerky movement. Doesn’t matter! You’re still listening to it as a piece of music. Let’s take a piece, in a sense, where I reached a climax, and a crisis of content, say with “The Viola in My Life” pieces. I’ll never go back to it.

HS: They seem to stand apart. Also, “Madame Press”, and one or two other works.

MF: Yes, well, that, all that, that was it.

HS: I don’t recall whether it was a major third or a minor third in “Madame Press”.

MF: Minor third. Well, I wouldn’t say that it was a crisis of content, I let it happen! Now to me it wasn’t even a stylistic thing. To me it was just an episode in my life. I mean, because I wanted to visit the Amazon for two months, I don’t feel that I should pay for it for the rest of my life! [laughter] And I’m glad that I did it. And I think that, in certain ways, the pieces are just gorgeous. That it wasn’t conventional for me to just write a tune, that was not the idea. But I think that the tune in “Viola in My Life” it’s to make something absolutely asymmetrical, even interrupted with a little snare drum thing. I think it’s an interesting idea. But any good, tonal composer could do something classy with a melody nowadays. I think what’s interesting about the piece, for me at the time, and still when I hear it, is that I wanted the melody to come back not like a piece of music but like a ghost, like a memory. And in that piece to the melody happens, there’s no preparation for it, it’s there! And it goes away. And then it’s there! And certainly I would never have written it like that twenty-five years ago, given the opportunity, you know, the inclination, to include a melody in a piece. And I saw no difference, at the time, of putting a melody in my landscape, that it should be any different from Robert Rauschenberg putting in a photograph.

HS: In a sense, it’s still a landscape. It’s still got that landscape quality.

MF: With a photograph, of a melody. But we’re not used to that. I think that was a startling idea. If the melody was not mine then it would be acceptable. Say if it was a Tyrolean folk

tune, like in Alban Berg. Or if it was a Russian tune, like Stravinsky would use. Then it's perfectly acceptable. But if we really listen to the melody, it sounds like a folk tune. It's in a crazy A minor. I thought it was an interesting idea. I still think that. In fact, I may even do it again! [HS laughs] I think it's a very interesting idea. Why not? Put in a photograph. Which brings us to a seminar I give in Buffalo. You know, I'm now living in Buffalo. They gave me a Chair, which I named.

HS: The Varèse Chair?

MF: Yes, the Varèse Chair.

HS: Did you name that?

MF: Yes, I named it. And there were a lot of Polish people living in Buffalo. And the Vice-President at the time, I don't know if he was kidding or not, said, "How about calling it the Paderewski Chair?"³ I said that's far out, that's not bad! Now, I'm a culture watcher! I've certainly been in the midst of it these past twenty-five years. Which led me to give a seminar. It's not a long seminar. It's usually two sessions, but I spring it on them without preparation. And the seminar is called, "What's allowed and what's not allowed". And I would ask some student, or say in your work, what's allowed and what's not allowed? And we start discussing why something is allowed, and why something else is not allowed. And I finally say, "Oh, it's a question of picking your disease! You mean you don't wanna die, you don't wanna die of cancer, it's too fashionable! And it's not fashionable enough! Everybody else is dying of cancer, you wanna die of leukaemia, I understand!" [pause. HS has a question] Yes?

HS: It's just that I went to a recital of Indian music at a private house in London, and they said that the one thing that music mustn't be, for the Indian musician, is flippant. Right, so they would say that being flippant is not allowed, flippant material is not allowed. And one could say that, possibly, banal material, or trivial material, should also be excluded. I would say the marvellous thing about introducing a melody is that it worries you, and you become more involved with the piece for that reason.

MF: I don't know if you know a piece of mine called "For Frank O'Hara"? Well, "For Frank O'Hara" for no reason whatsoever - except I heard it at that moment and it served a marvellous technical function if you look at the score at that moment - for five sixteenths - one, two, three, four, five: brrrrrrrum! One, two, three, four, five: there's a snare drum that comes at yer!

HS: That's right.

MF: And disappears. It was very disturbing. [MF claps his hands together once loudly] People thought, "What, is that when Frank O'Hara died?" Of course not! That's silly. We wouldn't even discuss that kind of thinking. And I said to myself, why not? You know, Stockhausen in a recent book would talk about a certain piece, and he wanted something to happen which ordinarily one would think could, would, should not happen. And what he

³ Presumably to honour Ignacy Jan Paderewski, Polish composer and politician (1860-1941).

came up with was somebody coming on the stage with a drum. He came up with theatre. The only thing he could think of at that particular time that would be extraneous to the sound world was a theatrical one. There's nothing wrong with this. This is not a criticism for this. But it's very difficult to come up - once you're bogged in and you're role playing - it's very difficult to come up with situations that work, regardless who you are, unless the whole conception is one of non sequiturs, you see, in a kind of collage situation. It's very difficult in a piece, in a kinda monolithic piece, to come up to something which seems out of context to the piece. Those were one of the few moments in my career that something happened where I said it doesn't belong and I'm going leave it. Now this is something painters would do.

HS: Yes. Well, you used it in your early works. You had sudden loud sounds. For example, in "Extensions 3".

MF: Yes. Out of context. This is the question of what is taste? For example, take a very tasteful painter like Robert Motherwell. You see a new picture of his, everything is exquisite; the imagery, the proportion, the scale. Everything is absolutely fabulous. And on the bottom, you'll have some kind of purple. He'll take a rag, and he'll just "swish", you see. Kills it! No use trying to kill a piece! I mean, really. I'm trying to disturb its surface. I'm trying to make it worry. I think a piece of music should worry. And I'm against role playing. And many composers teach in terms of role playing. They say, "Well, the piece... and you start off with this, and why are you doing this?" My teaching, in a sense, is anti-role playing. And I've noticed that culture accepts anything, so long as it's consistent.

HS: This is why...

MF: I'm sorry to interrupt you. I'm getting very excited about "The Viola in My Life"! And I'm telling you, I think it's terrific!

HS: Yes, in fact, we must go on about that, because I was going to say...

MF: I mean, I never really thought about it [except] in a little kinda, defensive to somewhat way. I remember when I did the big version, with orchestra, in Venice, Franco Donatoni came up to me, and he said in his broken English, "Why? Why!?" And I looked at him and I said, "*Amore!*"⁴. [laughter] Terribly upset!

HS: Extraordinary!

[Bill Colleran enters the room]

Bill Colleran: Is the interview still going on?

MF: Sure, why not?

BC: Tape still working?

MF: Why not?

⁴ Italian: Love!

BC: Can I say something?

MF: Of course! [laughter]

BC: Your contract's cancelled! [much laughter] I've done the washing up! [more laughter and friendly banter]

HS: Yes, we're talking about "The Viola in My Life".

MF: Yes, I was being defensive. I said, actually I think it's a fantastic moment. Why in my natural landscape can't a melody happen in the way a photograph happens in a Bob Rauschenberg world? I said, why if the melody does happen it has to be a folk melody, like in the Berg Tyrolean folk song, or it has to be something which you don't like. I mean, it's an interesting point. Why can't it happen? And it can only happen, in a sense, if it's anonymous.

HS: In the early works, you had a recurring sound at times, and you formed a plane through repeating the sound.

MF: It's second nature. I had to do it.

HS: But, instead of that, you've got a recurring group of notes, which is a melody. So, in a sense, it's a similar situation in "The Viola in My Life".

MF: It's a photograph.

HS: It's a photograph rather than an isolated colour.

MF: I never even thought it was a melody. It's not prepared. Only once is it prepared. Only once, with an accompaniment figure, and then it starts. But most of the time you're just hit with it, like in a dream sequence. Now, when I hear the piece live it reminds me of a dream. I don't know why it's there. And it disappears. I don't know if it's gonna come back or not, because I don't remember my musics. A lot of times I think it's gonna come back, and it doesn't come back! [laughs] I'll never do it again. I really mean it. That was a period of my life. The possibilities of other experiences!

HS: Yes.

MF: Why not? The whole problem, you see, the whole problem with a reputation is... There's a marvellous remark of Nietzsche's: "If you make me change my mind about you, I'll make you pay for it"⁵. And I think that's what it's all about. John Cage was telling me recently that one particular friend, there was some difficulty because he would write a new piece and she would get very upset because it wasn't like his last piece! Because she thought like the last piece. And it's a big, big problem. It's a big, big problem, in a sense, that, er... I can't find words for it! I haven't thought about it at length. I just can't find words for it. A lot of my reputation was, you know, if my music is changing people say, "Well it's impossible!" It's amazing, you know, we're so prejudicial. We all are. And I think a lot of composers are

⁵ Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil", section 125: "When we have to change our mind about a person, we hold the inconvenience he causes us very much against him" (Walter Kaufmann translation).

having similar problems, of people wanting them to be just where they was. You're not allowed a television change in your mind! You're not allowed to really work freely.

HS: This is where Cage is such a marvellous example. He said recently - in talking about Mondrian - he said that it was marvellous the way he [Cage] had changed, that he'd moved away from what he was doing, he was now performing a new music. And what was so exciting about this was the fact that he was changing. You know, that he was prepared to do something quite new, although of course it was there to begin with. His early music arose from a love of Indian music anyway.

MF: We have a history of it in terms of painting. I mean, even Mondrian changed drastically through the years. The whole early Mondrian is still nature-oriented. The early abstractions were still abstractions of facades of buildings. It took him many years before he really became absolutely abstract. Then, in the Forties, especially, you know when he was in England. And then he came to America, and the whole "Boogie Woogie" series. He got involved with the stroke, less of the brush stroke. Then he starts using the coloured things.

HS: Little cubes.

MF: And he got away from the touch aspect. And within what seemed to others as a limited world, there was vast, dramatic changes in my opinion.

[interview interrupted by the phone ringing again]

MF: [resuming] Why don't we go on to the opera?

HS: Yes, we haven't got much time actually. We should really talk about that. I had it on my mind that we might talk about this. I'm writing some material which will be appearing about the same time [as the opera premiere].

MF: About when is this?

HS: This is May.

MF: Great. This is for a May issue?

HS: This is for May "Music and Musicians". But really, you know, I was quite interested to know how you worked on this. I mean, you were given the text. Beckett gave you the text...

MF: Yes.

HS: ...and said you're free to do what you like.

MF: Yes.

HS: And you then worked on it in the way you've described. You had the pages on the wall...

MF: Yes.

HS: ...gradually filling them in. And you mentioned the grid, which is important.

MF: Yes.

HS: What about the pitch material? You mentioned that as well. You started talking about that. You said there were three intervals.

BC: Can I just cut in?

HS: Of course.

BC: Morty, on the flights to Cologne... There's a 9:45 or a 14:45.

MF: 2:45.

BC: Right.

MF: Thanks, Bill.

[BC leaves the room]

HS: Would you like to say something about the instrumentation? Was that fixed in advance?

MF: Well, they pleaded with me to use just a set orchestra. There was only one thing I couldn't comply with. It was the bassoons. In other words, I could use two oboes and an English horn, rather than three oboes, which I usually use now, and an English horn. I usually use three [bassoons]. Because of those three notes. In fact the opening page, you could see the... [searches in the score] A, A flat, G.

HS: That's right, yes. So you have to use a bassoon.

MF: D, C, D flat. The timpani is the only one where I use - you know, on the top - I use a tritone, G and C sharp, and I use G flat and C sharp. I would've liked to have used three oboes and an English horn, three clarinets. But there was something about the bassoon, where the third doubles to double bassoon. There you see, three horns, three trumpets.

HS: That's right.

MF: The classic opera has two harps. Which I was very happy about because it became very important at a pivotal point in the piece. And I do some beautiful work with the harps, especially later on, against the voice. I usually feel that orchestras should have four percussion players, but I didn't ask. And regular strings. I didn't ask how many cellos. I was worried about how many violas and how many cellos they had, but I didn't ask. And I put in ten violas, and a big divisi section. I just figured they just have to have ten! If they only have eight, then I shall have eight too.

HS: So, in a sense, you had fixed instrumentation. You had the text.

MF: I didn't have the text. That's why the piece begins voiceless. I was waiting for the text.

HS: Oh, I see, you were waiting for the text when you wrote the overture?

MF: Yes, that's why I discovered what an overture is: Waiting for the text! [laughter]

HS: And then you reacted to the text, you worked on the piece, you took bits of the text as they came really?

MF: No, he sent it all together.

HS: But I mean, you selected bits to work on at a time.

MF: Well, no one believes this, but it's true. I pinned up the text on my wall. And the text is written where he has one line, and then there are like a little line in between, you see. And they are just like single lines that do connect. But he has that particular type of visual punctuation. And no one believes this, but I only read - with my bad eyes it's pretty easy - I only read one line at a time. And wrote it down in big letters on the top of a music sheet: "to and fro from shadow to - whatever it is - inner to outer shadow". "to and fro from inner and outer shadow", I wrote down. Now, I must tell you something about my meeting with Beckett, and the conversation, because it's both humorous and very interesting in relation to my treatment of the thing. Because I wanted to slavishly adhere to his feelings as well as mine. And there was no compromise because [we were] in complete agreement about many, many things in conversation. For example, he was very embarrassed. He said to me after a while, he said, "Mr Feldman, I don't like opera". And I said to him, "I don't blame you!" [laughter] Then he said to me, "I don't like my words being set to music". And I said, "I'm in complete agreement. In fact", I said, "it's very seldom that I've used words". I said, "I've written a lot of pieces with voice, and they're wordless". And then he looked at me again, and he said, "Then what do you want!" [more laughter] And I said, "I have no idea!" He also asked me why I didn't use existing material. We had a mutual friend he wrote to, and who told him that I wanted to, you know, work with Beckett text. And he wrote back to this friend suggesting various things, and he said why didn't I take these suggestions. I said, "Well, I read them all, but they were like a flashlight that you just had to follow". I said, "They were impregnable. They didn't need music". I said, "What I'm looking for is the kinda quintessence". I said, "I'm also looking for something that...". I don't know if I used the word "directional", but it was close to it. That just hovered, so to speak. And, I don't know if he remembered or not, or whatever. It was very interesting when I finally got the material that there was this line between sentences. So what I did, I looked at the whole thing very briefly. Why I didn't read it through I have no idea. I have no idea. I can't fathom that one out. But something told me not to.

HS: Before we go on, this is really very useful for the article. Shall I start again? This is the only tape I've got, which I thought ninety minutes would probably be enough, you see. [laughter]

MF: You wanna erase the beginning?

HS: Can we erase the beginning?

MF: Of course!

[end of tape side]

MF: [resuming] I got the text. And the moment that I got the text I stuck the continuity over here on page 11. I got the text on page 10, and I knew we began on page 11. It wasn't a structural idea, or theatrical idea, why I began the text there. I began the text because I received the text in the morning's mail. [laughter] Again, a very practical reason.

HS: That's marvellous. So this brings us right back to the sort of work you were doing in the Fifties, where each measure was fresh. And you would take what was fresh and probably stop.

MF: Right. Exactly.

HS: Or if you wrote something that wasn't fresh you'd work on it, and extract material from it until it was fresh. But, basically, you're working on each measure, each system, as it comes.

MF: Now, the grid really suggested itself. First of all, like a conventional composer, I started to scan the first sentence. And I said, "to... and... fro... in... sha... dow: to and fro in shadow" [turns page] "from... inner... to... outer... sha... dow". And, you know, Beckett is very into timing, he did the timings. And those timings are usually quickly. And I said, "Well, I'm gonna cut it in the middle. I'm not gonna say 'to and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow'. I'm gonna cut it in half: 'to... and... fro... in... sha... dow'". At the same time I felt what was quick was that pulsating figure that's continuing in the cello. So that's more or less as if it's quick, you see. So I had the feeling of quickness, and I set this within this quickness. So it will sound much quicker. And I saw, "to... and... fro... in... sha... dow... from... inner... to... outer... sha... dow". And it seemed to me - and this was where my experience in the kinda free durational period entered - it seemed to me as one long period, to try and envision it as one long period of time. So I had the whole period of time as one thought. And I noticed that it fell into a grid. And then I found that particular rhythm. Now, I wanna have the feeling that she's just coming out of, coming out of it. I don't want the feeling that she's coming on it, in terms of the word. So I found a kind of durational value, rather than a rhythmic entity. And that's the reason, in a sense, I have this quarter-half [sings from soprano part, p11, wordlessly]. And I saw that it worked for each word [sings same, with words] "To... and... fro... in... sha... dow". It worked. Now, what did I want? I wanted it neither stretched thin. I didn't want parlando. I wanted it sung. I wanted a beautiful tone on that. And I wrote to Beckett, and described this. You know, he is an amateur musician.

HS: His cousin is a very well known musician here, John Beckett.

MF: And he's an amateur musician. I showed him some ideas I had in the overture, even before I ever expected to get any text. I had the opening page of "Neither" with me. And I wrote him, and I told him of the opening pages. And I said, "I want to create the feeling that she's singing and you have the feeling that there is a melody and yet there is no melody. But if there was a melody, a kind of, as if you're hearing a melody and there was no melody, you see". And I said, "That idea of the colour changes that's going around her".

HS: Yes. You're changing the context and she's a fixed point within the context.

MF: Yes. You see, here it's going along, with this crippled symmetry of these passages. And she's still singing and you hear all these things, you see. Now, [Harrison] Birtwistle I thought caught something in my music recently in Glasgow, where at a seminar we gave together - or whatever it was - he mentioned how in my music there is no background and foreground. Which is absolutely true.

HS: Absolutely.

MF: And here, just because that orchestra's going doesn't mean it's background. It's not. She is on that same plane with them. So you get the feeling when the orchestra's coming that she's singing something. And she's all intermingled with these other things, you see. So, do you get the feeling I have?

HS: Except that, when you talk about.. I mean, she's a fixed point in this case and the orchestra is the changing context.

MF: Yes. But that G [that the soprano sings] is merging all the time in this changing context. The G is part of the chordal structures in the clarinet and the bass clarinet. At the end of "fro" we hear that high solo F sharp with a kinda... The colour of the basses, the colour of the tam-tam, and the cymbals with their sprays, in words and out of words, give the feeling that there is a change of light, so to speak, every time she sings a G. So, superficially, it looks like a parlando, but it's gonna be very lyrical, and yet there is no melody. That's the way I hear it, and I don't think I'm wrong in that. And, let's see... [searches in score] ...perfect example of the grid on page 13: "from... impenetrable... self... to... impenetrable... unself". Look at how perfect it is. The only thing I see that's different is that the last two measures in time doesn't really equal the first two measures. But that's not important. But you can see the way it's laid in there. For example, "from... impenetrable", and "self" is virtually, except for a hair's breadth, very close to the triplet figure, you see. Why I didn't put a triplet figure in there was only because the tam-tam acts like a kind of anticipation. Where she ordinarily would come in that beat is on the tam-tam, and then she kinda... she's off the tam-tam colour. Just a hair's breadth away from, say, the opening line. But she does repeat with the triplet figure, to the three-eight, exactly the same, you see. And so forth and so on. A very important thing, which I think I'm gonna miss [out] now, is that if you look at what I referred to as - which I think was not a bad term - the 'crippled symmetry' of those figures in the cello. Let's save that for a little while and notice what happens in the middle of the piece when that crippled symmetry becomes actually machine-like, and stays while we get later on. So... [searches score] I've found that many times it's only in a few places that I really got involved with wordplay with the score. And I've found that many times accidental things happen that either unconsciously I wasn't aware of, or it just happened. We come to a very important place where that would happen. For example, we have: "as between two lit refuges". Two lit refuges - and I found that she's singing it between the divisi cellos. And even where she is, even sonically... Here we only have two, you see. Here: [p15] "between two lit refuges". And here she is, this G. And this B flat is high.

HS: That's right.

MF: And in effect she is between two! I wasn't aware of that at the time.

HS: Gosh!

MF: That was creepy! That was creepy! Then she begins on page 17 again. And he has this sentence: "doors once neared gently close". And then he went on to the end of the sentence: "away from gently part again". And I broke that in half, in time. I split that sentence in half, that was enough: "doors once neared gently close". I told you that earlier. And I finally got off the note, the G. [sings from soprano part, p17, wordlessly] And I found the breathing, the right timing. [sings again p17, with words] "doors... once... neared... gently... gently... close". And what I would do is take the most difficult one, like [sings again repeating the last syllable] "gently-ly". You wanna hold on to it. In other words that tying feeling of the - usually, naturally - the last syllable. And that determined the whole overall rhythmic structure, you see. Because of that one thing, "ly", you know. "doors" - that you could hold on to; "once" - you could hold on to; "neared" - you could hold on. "ly" [sings] "ly". Not too much. [sings] "close" - that you can hold on to. So here it was "gently". The difficult words, to timing the overall pattern. And I noticed that everything fit in gorgeously if I found the equivalent of that particular figure. The sentence, or the half a sentence, fit in very nicely. [sings] "doors... close...".

HS: So this is another way the text, as it were, took part. The difficult word dictated the...

MF: The difficult word.

HS: Like "gently" would be...

MF: Yes. Now here [p18/19] there's no problem: "once... turned... away... from..." Here we have it now ["gently" again]. And now we have an interplay. Before notice we just had the three eighths, right?

HS: That's right, yes.

MF: Three eighths and then the half triplet, right? Now we have an interplay between the triplet quarters and the eighths: [sings p19] "away... from... gently part... again". A little, slightest variation. It's quite lovely the way it's done. What made me determine the length of the intermezzo interlude between her singing, that I can't answer really in any kinda way. A world from "gently part again". It's almost as if I'm just like reflecting on it. Evidently I'm just reflecting on it. And the fact that I didn't know what was gonna come next, in terms of the next sentence, was very important. I didn't want a cause and effect continuity, a kinda glue that would take me from one door to another. I wanted to treat each sentence as a world. And there was much to think about, because I noticed that as the work went on it became much more tragic. It became unbearable. While here it's just, it's tolerable now. And "gently part again". OK, so evidently I was affected to it very personally. And I then go in on a very gorgeous and very lengthy trip between solo cello and divisi violas [pp21-26]. And the viola is changing all the time, the chord is changing all the time, in the inner voices. But the solo

cello is not. And cello, in a sense, has its own duration. You see now, that a certain Beckett word had a life in terms of its duration. The instrumental work then developed its own duration. And that was the dialectic between me and Beckett, you see. In other words, the durations that I picked for the words were not necessarily the durations that I would pick for a sound, you see. Now I give the duration. I give its equivalent.

HS: This is the Feldman equivalent!

MF: The Feldman equivalent. And so the solo cello also starts off but, instead of ending, say after the three-eight, continues for another two beats until it's decayed, you see [p21]. It needed that for decay. And the Feldman equivalent of course goes on for a long, [turning score pages] long time. Now we get into another situation. Notice the way these sounds are on a grid, every other measure. You see?

HS: That's very beautiful, yes.

MF: Huh? Looks gorgeous, doesn't it? It's gonna be lost in printing. Maybe we should keep it in printing. It's a beautiful, visual thing [pp24/25].

HS: Yes.

MF: And the grid was very important, because the grid is part of the Beckett breathing, you see. So there's like another dimension here, the Beckett breathing, and little by little - remember, this is new for me - I'm getting used to dealing with words and durations, in a way that I haven't for years. And I'm turned on.

HS: But you are relating the words and durations to the page.

MF: Yes, even though it's wordless. This page here is wordless. But if it wasn't for Beckett I doubt that I would have made this duration. Now I'm giving the instrumental time, and certain durations I will have given the voice. You know, I mean I'm come closer. Closer. To what I would give the sum duration. And we continue this to some degree, with another sound world. Remember the solo cello is still there. These are that page. These are the next page. And it continues... I love the imagery in the harps, one and two [p26]. Only because they gave me two harps. See against the solo cello, that chord, it's lovely! And now she's back again. Notice where she takes up the dotted eighth. All those previous pages, those isolated, every other measure pages, on page 26 in the bottom she reminds you of those other durations. But she's still on a grid. Notice the way it's working out. Except the grid is much more complicated. It's not helter-skelter, but it's made up of the dotted half and now the dotted quarter. It's that characteristic triplet figure and the eighth, without a tie. [sings p26] "between[sic]... back... and... forth... and... turned... a-way". Lovely! Much more complicated. Almost as if it's off the grid. Huh? Yet on! A little more lopsided in the time, on the grid. It's amazing how people think that I don't think about these things! [laughs]

HS: Well, is this new? You said that this is probably something quite new?

MF: No. I mean I work this way. Given another context, I mean. And now begins another section, or what seems to appear to be another section. [turns score pages] And I didn't realise it was so long! [turns more pages] And now begins what I call the 'Beckett material'. This is new for me only because I never worked with this type of material before, this type of imagery before. And this I derived from other Beckett writings. His tempo, the way the words are spoken, and the way they... the continuity of it in time, you see. In other words [sings from p29]. Could be almost like, could be from a player piece. A certain type of tempo. And I just continued this thing. And it breaks off, and we're back again to that F sharp G A flat [sings from soprano part, p30, wordlessly] "dee-da-da". And I'm nuts about this one! I love the figure of the three-eight into the two-two held over into the three-eight figure. It's one of my favourite, and it comes back over and over again. I like it. [sings same with words] "heed... less... of". Perfect duration. [continues singing] "the... way... in.. tent on...". Now we still have that kind of asymmetrical feeling now, the beginning of a nightmare, if I may use that term. And this is now where I started to get an actual symbolic content in terms of material. It wasn't until page 30 that I had a glimpse of the juxtaposition of what "to and fro" is, in his text. Now when he says, "to and fro", in plain words what he's talking about is the impossibility, in a sense, of either fathoming the self or the unself, and you're in unlit areas. You're back and forth, back and forth, in this trip. And I said to myself, "Well, the self, I certainly know more than anybody of my generation what the self is, in terms of personal music". And I had to invent the unself. And I saw the unself as a very detached, very impersonal, perfect type of machinery. That's how, you see. Now, I couldn't introduce this perfect machinery just like that! And so what I did was superimpose it in a kind of polyrhythmic situation with what's happening on top. So it's still the opening pages, but there is a new element here, a periodic element, in the sense that eventually does emerge and we're hearing it in the body of it. And so we hear this [clicks fingers to illustrate the rhythm] against these crazy... OK. Now we have this figure of the ostinato now, but it's in double time [p32], so that [sings phrase in original timing, p29] it's now [sings same in double time, p32] against very periodic... like we know the piccolo couldn't attempt it even! The way it's: [sings] "Bm... Bm... Bm... Bm...". And now we start making that trip. Now, another thing which I don't like about operatic writing is that the words take over, and the action, the narrative takes over. And there's not enough time for the musical situation to really express itself. And this is something, in a sense, that Berlioz had, Berlioz. And one of the reasons he's not successful is that she'll start to sing and the unaccompanied cello... Like in "Faust" there's one section with an unaccompanied cello and he just makes that trip, and it goes on and on and on and on! It's because I think he's thinking it much more musically! Than dramatically! And he's trying for them to meet some place. But he lived in a Delacroix era. Couldn't do it! Just couldn't do it! But this is something which I realised in writing a dramatic work. I decided I'm not gonna let the narrative take over. And if the music had a place to go, let's see where it went. And that's what happened here. That's why it's just going on and on [turning pages] and on! And we're back again, 36 [p36]. And we're back to the beginning on the high G. But it sounds different now because we've heard so much. And now, in the beginning [p11], she's against a kind of rhythmic pattern, now she's just against these chords that come in [p36].

HS: That's right, yes, with the empty bars.

MF: She comes against... the chord happens after every word.

HS: That's right.

MF: That's a grid idea, where the chord happens every, you see: [sings p36] "the..." chord "one..." chord "gleam..." chord "or..." chord "the..." chord "other...". That's it. A complete picture in itself. And I remember I showed you this other grid where she's wordless [p37]. Because I don't want to set Beckett to words. He doesn't like it and I don't like it. And I want her to trip. And this is the big moment for her. It's one of the moments of her long... this continuity. Very important part. I like the idea. Do you realise how long, in a big opera house, the length of time those tam-tams are speaking [pp37/8].

HS: I think this is what I meant by 'atmosphere'. When you think of an opera you think of the whole situation, the dramatic situation, the stage and the size of the place. But it's not drama in a narrative sense, It's the idea of a performer on a stage projecting something, which is obviously attractive. I mean, this is something you've seized on. But you're opposed... I mean, people have expressed surprise when I mention the opera. They can't believe it. But I think it's the narrative, they think it's narrative when they think of opera. They think of rhetoric, and they think of...

MF: Well, I don't feel this is narrative.

HS: No, not at all. But this is when they think of opera in general.

MF: When we finish I'd like to ask you a few key questions. Let's go through it very quickly. How's the tape running?

HS: Actually we're quite near the end of this side.

MF: Well, why don't you ask me some questions? I think the whole idea is, as the text continues, and is getting this whole business of losing itself, the "to and fro", and that there's no getting together. Only occasionally there is musical imagery that the words suggest. For example, why don't we turn to page 45? Now, I don't think I put the actual kosher total amount of time values. But notice that that particular sound gets far-er and far-er and far-er away in time. Very important moment in the opera. I would say that this is the most literal and dramatic moment, to hear this whole business of "Bm..." That it's all losing a beat, you see. Just losing an eighth-note: [demonstrates] one - two[clipped] "Bm... Bm... [getting softer] Bm... [softer still] Bm... Bm".

[the last 10 minutes of the second tape side are missing]