

Morton Feldman: Speaking of Music

Conversation with Charles Amirkhanian at the Exploratorium's *Speaking of Music* series, San Francisco, January 30, 1986.

Transcribed by Alex Grimley

Charles Amirkhanian: I've been looking forward to this evening for a long time because I've been reading Morton Feldman's writings and hearing his music since I was in high school and I've often wondered why it is that we don't hear his music more often in live performance in San Francisco. Maybe by having closer contact with him now that he's here at CalArts for a semester and going to be spending some time in San Francisco we can encourage some of us who are active in the music scene to bring out his music in this area. The Kronos Quartet, of course, has played his music frequently and so there have been performances of some of his recent works but the major four-hour string quartet piece¹ which he's done has only been done in excerpt here so far. Tonight we're going to hear *Violin and Orchestra*² which is a piece running over an hour in duration. We'll hear excerpts from it, and also excerpts from his *Piano and String Quartet*,³ which I greatly admired and which was played at the New Music America Festival by Aki Takahashi, the great Japanese pianist, and by the Kronos Quartet in November, I think it was. Wasn't it? November?⁴ It seems like it.... Morton, you said that the fifties gave composers like yourself not the freedom of choice, but the freedom to be yourself. And I've often wondered if maybe one of the reasons that the music that you've composed isn't played as widely as it should be is the sort of hermetic quality of it. Do you consider yourself a hermetic composer in any sense?

[A pause]

Morton Feldman: Charles Wuorinen isn't here this evening. Only reason I'm mentioning it is because recently I'm hearing that Charles says I'm one of the best serialists around. I mean, so to be called a surrealist—a *serialist*—is surrealist in relation to... [laughter]. No, I never figured that I'm hermetic. Maybe the audience is hermetic [laughter]. I see it in a more paranoid and less classy way than you're presenting it here. I just feel that for some particular reason, they don't want to give it to me. Now what that reason is, I don't know. I have a good friend, [who] owns one of the big galleries in New York, we were talking about a mutual friend, and we're talking about why there were some avenues open to him and yet there were some avenues absolutely closed. Why would London be totally open, but Paris closed? And so forth, and so on. And it was a complete mystery, you see. And he has all these museum people coming in all the time and he would try to sell them a show and either they were, "Oh, we must do it at the Tate," and they did, or, "We're not interested in him in Frankfurt," or something like that. I think my—if anything—this is not in the nature of a compliant or even an analysis—I think my reputation unfortunately was like Charles Bronson [laughter]. And there was

¹ *String Quartet No. 2* (1983)

² (1979)

³ (1985)

⁴ Amirkhanian refers to the premiere performance of *Piano and String Quartet*, given on November 2, 1985 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Bing Theatre.

just something about my music in Europe. For example, we're doing excerpts; the Stockholm radio did eight hours. Or Frankfurt radio would do four hours, and then five hours, and then two hours and three hours—and they were never really set up for that either, you see. Even the *Canadian Broadcasting Company*, and you know how chauvinistic they are up there about their art, had a show called One Hour then they extended it to Two Hours, and then they did it for Three Hours.

CA: On your music.

MF: Yeah, with the Kronos playing my big string quartet.⁵

CA: So Europe has been more open to your music than American in fact, outside of New York.

MF: Well I wouldn't even say New York. New York is not my town. I don't have any town in America, really.

[A pause]

There's usually some kind of consensus arrived at, very much like you were voting for president or something, you know. I really got to know John Adams quite well. We saw each other for breakfast, both he and Mrs. Adams, at New Music America, and he was asking me about how I feel about things on the west coast. And I said, well, as far as I could see, it's either [Pierre] Boulez or fun and games.

And I feel in a sense that Boulez, for whatever the reason, in a sense, is a consensus type of music—even in terms of the fact that it's prophetic about modernism, or the fact that it is just *wonderful* to begin with—seems to be an international consensus and I don't think just because he's a great conductor or anything. I really meant that even before he started conducting, especially with young people in Europe. On the other hand, I mean I have no complaints about my career, but I always wondered why it really doesn't take hold.

Now, for example, [Charles] Ives is someone else, for example, that they don't want to give it to. I know that seems a little silly, being that we all recognize him as a great—perhaps the greatest American composer we ever had and maybe, as Tolstoy might put it, ever will have. And at the same time, I remember having conversations with Boulez.... [He was] very disturbed that Ives was in the insurance business. I mean how that could.... My early reputation, I was in the garment center...and if anyone is vaguely anti-Semitic, that didn't help me.

So it's very difficult to talk about this subject without sounding to some degree unattractive. [laughter] And one could go either this way or that way, but I like the mood of the audience here, and I'm gonna go in the middle.

CA: I remember in Stockholm, I was talking to some students and they complained vehemently that to be an American composer who has become famous like [Conlon] Nancarrow or [John] Cage or Feldman, you have to do something so incredibly personal and hermetic that you stand out just because you're so odd. And Boulez, on the other hand, takes everything and puts it in—has a sort of worldly vision.

MF: Well I don't think he has a worldly vision. I was talking somewhat on Boulez in a seminar at CalArts and I was saying that as a kid when I saw his first,⁶ not the

⁵ The premiere performance of Feldman's *String Quartet No. 2* was broadcast live from the University of Toronto's Walter Hall by the Canadian Broadcasting Company on the evening of December 4, 1983. See Chris Villars, "Notes on the Early Performance History of Morton Feldman's Second String Quartet," (<http://www.cnvill.net/mfsq2perfs.htm>)

famous sonata, and the slow movement *for years* there was something bugging me and then I thought maybe seven years after this earlier being bugged about [it], I really caught it: that he took the same amount of attacks from a piece by Webern which was also two pages—one of his religious songs—and he used the same amount of attacks. And then the *Structures*—you teach, you know, the *Structures* with the Messiaen row, his ex-teacher.⁷ And there was something about it, you know, the way cannibals would eat their enemy.... He tried to eat America in terms of, say Earle Brown and open structure, but it didn't work out. He got indigestion on that. [laughter]

I have to watch out I'm going the other way now. [Feldman laughs, laughter] You say I'm very articulate, but I'm out here for about two months, and you caught me at a good time because I'm not as articulate [as] I might have been if I was here, say, six months ago. The weather is getting to me. In fact, I might even settle out here in San Diego. [laughter]

CA: What do you like about California?

MF: Oh, I had an uncle, an uncle Dave, that was totally unemployable in New York. Totally unemployable. And his brother—he was the millionaire in the family, and in some way we all worked for Uncle Joe—finally decided to send him out to L.A. and sell the coat business. But he was perfect for Los Angeles. He's the kind of guy that would drink a glass of water and just look and smile and he'll say, "I'm living." [laughter]

CA: This is spoken by a man who spends his summers in New York City.

MF: But on 38th Street and Eighth Avenue, no one had any patience to hear even the *end* of that remark. [laughter] He came out here and he opened up an office in Los Angeles on South Hill Street. Everybody decided that they wanted him to represent them. In one year, he was a millionaire. [A pause] Now that I don't have to become a millionaire, I might come out here, and say, "I'm dying."

Look, I think the whole problem is very simple. I was staying in the home of a very close friend who was an anthropologist⁸ and he had his students from Cooper Union come in and he asked me to talk to them, and I did. And he has fabulous Oceanic stuff, really fabulous museum pieces and he had, and we were talking about tribal art and various things, and he had some Frank Stellas on the wall. And I finally said, "And that's New York tribal art." I never realized it at that time, to the degree that culture was so tribal—that they have their indigenous music, their indigenous names, you know? You ever go to Budapest and meet the most famous composer? What are you gonna do with his music, I mean, when you hear it?

And I think that's one of the problems, essentially. And I think it's becoming more tribal as every, you know—no city, no state, no university, no country can't say to

⁶ Boulez's first piano sonata was completed in 1946. The "famous" sonata is Boulez's second, which premiered in 1950.

⁷ Boulez studied with Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire between 1942 and 1945. The first movement of *Structures I* (1952) features pitch and duration series borrowed from Messiaen's *Mode de valeurs et d'intensité* (1949-50). See Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (University of California Press, 1975), pp. 192-194.

⁸ Francesco Pellizzi, who recalled his friendship with Feldman in the essay "Morton Feldman and the Arts: A Recollection," in *Vertical Thoughts: Morton Feldman and the Visual Arts*, ed. Sean Kissane (Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2010), pp. 114-123. The book also contains a conversation between Pellizzi and Feldman, pp. 268-293.

themselves that they have nothing. I was in Darmstadt for the first time, actually, and they're feeling badly that they haven't taken better care of me, even though I was the Charles Bronson of Europe, I wasn't Humphrey Bogart. So they're making it up to me now. And I see all these independent young kids, each one their own man or their own woman. I met this very gifted Italian composer and I said to her, "Well, what interested you here? What was the most important...?" She said, "Well, the *Italian* evening, of course." The Polish kids—there's a very nice nightclub bar there—and at night they're [*sings drunkenly*]. We're in Warsaw. The French kids were, characteristically, revolting [*laughter*] with their booing and their hissing. I got a twenty-minute standing ovation...on a very long piece.

But I said to friends when I left that I never understood—reading the newspapers, knowing people that were thrown out of Hitler Germany—I never understood the nature of wars until I went to Darmstadt.⁹

And I had a very nice lunch with some of the younger *leading* German composers—some of them you might not know, I think, the Kronos plays Rihm. Wolfgang Rihm. And he was one of them, Walter Zimmermann, there was about three others, we had a little lunch. And I just said to them, I said, "Don't let Germany take over this place." And they said, "Don't worry, we'll see to it that it doesn't happen."

That is, the whole idea of *cashing in*, like they're cashing in on Rihm, you see, that they have a *Germanic* composer. The way we try to sell that we have a classy New England WASP tradition with Elliott Carter, you know? What if his name was Elliott Ginsburg? I don't know if the English [publisher] Faber and Faber would be that interested in Elliott Carter. And that's the big problem that we have, in a sense, is that there is this nationalistic problem of countries, pushing Germans, pushing Americans. And it's a very serious cultural problem.

I still cry when I read Allen Ginsburg's *Kaddish* to his mother. I think it's one of the greatest poems written at any time. I mean it has the pathos, the language of a Heinrich Heine, I feel. These are problems, in a sense, which you'd feel are not related, say, to composition, but I do want to get back to the whole idea of what's hermetic.

CA: I just wanted to ask you first, if his name had been Allen Carter, would you have read the book? [*laughter*]

MF: Well I think that's a fair question. It's very interesting, it's very interesting that, for whatever reason I picked up *Time* magazine and it had John Updike on the cover and *Newsweek* had Norman Mailer on the cover [*Feldman laughs*]. I mean, I don't think it was an accident that John Updike was on the cover of *Time* magazine. But I think it's a very, very serious problem. It's a very serious problem. Look, it's a problem, I have a student, he was a gifted student, he got his doctorate, he was marvelous and wonderful. And I said, "Did you ever try to write with your right hand?" He was left-handed. The scores look lousy. And I think, in a sense, if he sends in, he wants to send something to Gunther Schuller, I said, "I don't know..." I kind of discouraged him from sending it because it doesn't look good—he's left-handed—doesn't look, you know, it looks very amateurish because there's no manuscript. And I feel this guy, because he's left-handed, his whole career is gonna suffer. He should get the things printed immediately. I couldn't tell him that, it was just my.... I mean you're on a committee, and you're looking through

⁹ Feldman lectured at the Darmstadt International Summer Course for New Music in July 1984.

a lot of scores, you know, you can't really look at something that looks so awkwardly done.

But this whole business of being hermetic is.... Teaching at CalArts, teaching for a long time, and talking in a lot of different places, the kids go in there and they think it's a profession. You know, "I mean, if Frank Sinatra could win them over, I mean why can't I?" they say. They got a Chinaman's chance, ten years after the gold rush. The fact that anybody could have a career in music is doubtful. But the whole thing is taught, and the whole thing is activated, as if a career is possible. And to have a career, you think about important issues, audiences, this and that. I said something that a lot of young composers in London were very upset about because the English have a terrific democratic heritage in relation to communication. That's one of the problems about [The] Albert Hall. They wanted everybody to hear the music so you can't hear anything because it's so big. I gave an interview and I said, they were talking about audiences, and I said, "Look, if you need an audience, we don't need you." And I really believe that, from the bottom of my thirty-five years of practically going blind writing music. I mean that has no hostility against an audience, but I think the thing that really phases out most *young* artists, young composers, and a lot of older ones, is that they think there's some kind of magic formula that they're gonna arrive at, in a sense, to capture them. And then do it, Superman once, twice, three, four times, forget it.

Either you have that—either you yourself *are* the audience, and triumph with a music that is absolutely, totally accessible with being very, very real. The way Sibelius is real, the way John Adams' music is very, very real—John has it. There's no formula, he's not interested in the audience. He's as elitist as anybody else, he went to Harvard, but he has it. And this is something that you cannot.... You can't manufacture it, and also you can't complain, for example, why your music is then considered hermetic. I don't consider my music hermetic.

CA: There's been a change in your music, though.

MF: Oh, they always say that [*laughter*]. They always say that.

CA: It's easier to listen to the piano and string quartet piece than *Durations I*,¹⁰ for most listeners.

[*A pause*]

MF: Well, Djuna Barnes once had some marvelous insight about an elderly decadent character, and she said, "Well, you know, as types like him become older and older, what was deplorable now seems charming." [*Feldman laughs, laughter*] And I think that what happened to my music, in a sense, is that if someone never heard my *Durations*, they would feel the same thing about my new music, too.

[*A pause*]

What I'm worried about is not the question of the audience and the composer, and those big issues and all those. That's not what bothers me. What bothers me is the fact of that kind of consensus about what music could be or should be. And there isn't that consensus about literature or the visual arts. And in my Darmstadt lecture¹¹ which you mentioned that you like, I just asked all the young composers in the audience, "Why

¹⁰ (1960)

¹¹ Given on 26 July 1984. Originally published in *Morton Feldman: Essays*, ed. Walter Zimmerman (Beginner Press, 1985), pp. 181-213. Republished in *Morton Feldman Says*, ed. Chris Villars (Hyphen Press, 2006), pp. 191-209.

don't painters get together in a congress like this? What is there about music, in a sense, as if you're in some kind of scientific congress?" And you know what it is about music? That it's nearly impossible to have an idea that's your own. That's why they get together, in large classrooms—that perhaps by analysis, in a sense, they're gonna learn the secret. But did you ever take a recipe and try to [repeat it]—you know? The water's not the same, you know. Something is there that's not the same, no matter how you do the recipe.

Let's take a fugue. Only God could make a tree? Why is it only Bach could make a fugue? In the *Bach* sense of a fugue, I'm not talking about a late Beethoven fugue, which was something else. Why is it after millions and millions—you know how many fugues? Now with the computer, I think, [laughter] we can find out how many fugues were written in those times. Either they're too fuguey. The material—it's just not flexible. Or they always come in at the wrong place. Only Bach could make a fugue; and what a recipe!

[A pause]

My concern these days is whether music is an art form to begin with. I think those are more scary questions that I'm asking—that both John and myself might have been kidding ourselves all these years. That is, music...it's a music form, not an art form *per se*, that one could explore and be flexible in. And we lost that sense of the music form, so for a composer to feel, in a sense, that they're gonna capture something from the past.... Well, this comparison might seem unattractive, but like a Buffalo militant black learning Swahili, out of nostalgia, out of identification, but can't, can't get back to Africa in 1850 or 1830.

CA: So you're saying that because we had the enormous revolution in music, where anything seemed possible for a while, that we've come to this point?

MF: I think we've come to this corner. I mean, I'm only concerned with one thing. I see every student practically that I teach is dying of cancer—some kind of terminal patient, that I'm trying to at least get through, get them out of college. One basket case, I was just *nuts* about this guy. He couldn't put a sentence together in any language, and he loved music, and he wasn't a dope, but very, very primitive. And I wanted to—in my university at that time, all I had to do was sign a paper and he got his M.F.A. There was no committees, nothing. I just sign my name, he got his M.F.A. But I had to have some conscience about it. But there was no piece in a kind of number five pencil, if there is such a [thing], he used it [*Feldman laughs, laughter*]. You know, notes like this, you know [*laughter*].

CA: Really big.

MF: I didn't know what to do with the guy, I said, "Look, go down to the library," I said, "Messiaen wrote a good cook book. Bring up the Messiaen book and we'll see what we could do with it." Well, he brought it up and we discussed it. We discussed it about two weeks, and I just wanted him to use all the recipes that Messiaen gives in this book. Even that didn't help. He just couldn't cook. The recipe didn't even mean anything.

Ah, but there's a bright side! There's a bright side [*laughter*]. Keeps you out of trouble... I didn't want it to go like this, you see I'm going on that other side.

CA: Let's play some music. Let's talk about the piece—

MF: Alright, but... I would like to ask you why you feel, for example, that *Piano and String Quartet* is easier listening than *Durations*?

CA: For me, it brings back the kind of consonance that was in your music only once in the earlier pieces, that I know, which was in the *Piece for Four Pianos*.¹² It has a kind of prettiness to it—and I didn't know the pieces just preceding this composition—I haven't heard the long string quartet so I didn't know it was in that vein.

MF: I think that was, I think that coexisted at all times. There were some pieces that were more gritty. What you call “consonance,” I would say more elegant; they're not consonant. But I think it always—there was always a gritty side to me, and there was always that other side. And I think what I'm really gonna do with the few excerpts, I think they really demonstrate those two sides. The violin and orchestra piece—I just want to say something very quickly before we go into the music.

I think a lot of that perception that you have has a lot to do with who's playing the music now. I don't write a piece, unless it's a large orchestra piece—I just did a piece for the New York Philharmonic and I just forgot about myself and said, “It's a great orchestra,” and I wrote a piece for them.¹³ I didn't even think about myself. But, in a sense, I don't think about myself when I write for Paul Zukofsky, or Aki, or the Kronos either. So what I do now more than I ever did as a young composer—I mean we all write these pieces, you know. We don't realize that all these other people had the Esterhazy Orchestra. They all heard everything they did, you know, always on Sunday as I use to say. I used to just write one piece after another, just like everybody else. But I wasn't thinking of any groups, they were just pieces. Now I can't write a piece unless I'm thinking of Aki, or Roger Woodward. Aki plays my music like Satie; Roger plays it like Beethoven. I'm trying to find one that goes right down the middle. And then there's [Herbert] Henck who's fabulous, but he plays my music too slow, and too soft. But the fact that I'm writing casted pieces now is very, very important. I write for Aki's *unbelievable* devotion. She plays my music as if she's praying, and I love and thank her for it. And then Paul, he's craggy, crotchety, and it went into the violin concerto. The orchestra is anonymous; it's just an orchestra. But Paul, I felt, he was doing things that only he could do, like *spelling*.

By spelling, I mean, that you would have a pitch in a violin, say like an E-flat and I could spell it—E-flat is not a good pitch for that, I would say a D. You could spell it as a D. You could spell it as a C-double sharp. You could spell it as an E-double flat. Sharp is more directional, flat is less. And this piece, he is not playing out of tune, but he is trying to keep the focus going so it doesn't become a quartertone. And you don't lose too much of it. And that's throughout the piece. Occasionally, it might go into the orchestra, just for a moment. And he does that beautifully. In fact, anyone who's interested in some of his ideas—I didn't finish the article—but he wrote an article years ago for *Perspectives of New Music* on tuning.¹⁴

But it's been six or seven years I've been working with Paul on a lot of important violin music. And I still haven't found a way, how to give the directions in the [score]—because E-double flat or something, or C-double sharp, especially in Europe, are *leading* tones. They think of them as leading tones, or *expressive* tones, you know, to get something. So I really haven't found a way of notating it, actually. But this is pretty good,

¹² (1957)

¹³ *Coptic Light* (1985)

¹⁴ Paul Zukofsky, “On Violin Harmonics,” *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 6, no. 2, Spring-Summer 1968, pp. 174-181.

the way it's going. But no one but Paul could just pick notes like that out of the...you know, just fabulous. So he's responsible for this piece. I probably wouldn't even have written a piece for violin and orchestra if there wasn't Paul.

So that's the way things are going now—casted pieces. No longer that kind of marvelous anonymity that any great cellist could play [*hums*] but in the casting of Vienna, [*Feldman laughs*] you see. And that's, to some degree, something that we don't have that.... I knew somebody [who] got disappeared between New Orleans and Chicago tracing some minor development in Dixieland, you know. Just got *lost* someplace, I don't know where. And we don't have that. We don't really have that. And I think again, getting back to Boulez. I think what reassures us about Boulez is that it's *style personified*.

And it's very difficult for us to listen to something, or to look at something, outside of its *style*. We don't know what went *into* it. We don't know the *skills* that went into it. We're looking at—we don't know how [Mark] Rothko bled his edges, you understand, as good as Rembrandt. We don't know the *skills* that gets into it. But we know the style of it. And that's the disaster area. That's the disaster area. That until we're reeducated not to think of art in terms of aesthetics or style, we really don't know what it is—very difficult to know what it is.

Naturally, the iconography of a Renaissance painting helps. But someone like Bellini, for example, in *St. Francis*, that fabulous painting at the Frick,¹⁵ paints a blade of grass with the same type of religiosity as he's painting *St. Francis* looking up at the Heaven in that little, what is it? A little goat? Or a little sheep standing there, also looking like a saint, you know. But even the blade of grass was trembling with religious fervor. And that has nothing to do with...that has nothing to do with communication, in that sense. You know Malraux said something fabulous about Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, he said, when they would talk about Rome being like Hollywood, dictating how to do things, he said, "Tell me," he said, "what pope taught or told Michelangelo how to paint the Sistine chapel, and what to put in it?"

I think we lost that religiosity about music, and the *sound itself*. I mean we're not—we don't want to live in a convent. We don't wanna get involved. Nevermind aspects of hermetic contemporary music, such as myself, but London is the only community in the world that I know that continually, where you can go and hear just *fabulous*—the Elizabethan, the Renaissance, that kind of music. Nevermind playing me, how about William Byrd in San Francisco? De Lassus and all these fantastic people? I once wrote someplace that on a modern concert, if you really would put on a mass of Machaut, people would start to boo. Because it goes *on* and *on* and *on* and they don't want to know some isorhythmic aspects in the piece, you know. I mean it's not a very exciting, it's not a very exciting, he's not a very exciting composer.

CA: When they opened the music center in Los Angeles, that was the first piece that was played.¹⁶ And Harry Partch was sitting next to me, and then the Boulez piece came on, and he left in the middle of that piece—got up and walked through the hall.

¹⁵ Bellini, *St. Francis in the Desert*, c. 1475-78.

¹⁶ Karl Kohn writes, "On March 26 [1965], Monday Evening Concerts celebrated the first concert in its splendid new home, the Leo S. Bing Center of the recently completed Los Angeles County Museum of Art, with a special program that also marked, albeit late by one day, Pierre Boulez's fortieth birthday. Boulez conducted the Machaut Mass, Jean-Claude Eloy's *Equivalences*, and the first

MF: Oh, they were making a historical connection between Machaut and Boulez.

CA: We're going to hear your music now.

MF: Yes.

CA: Do you object?

MF: Not at all.

CA: Good.

MF: Let me just tell you how it, how it ends. We're only going to hear the beginning. What happens in this piece is that—we'll hear about fifteen or twenty minutes of it—what happens, unknown to me, I just don't know how a piece is gonna develop, actually. I'm following it through. I don't start with any plans whatsoever. I agree, and I hope he would agree with me, Debussy, that you develop rules as it happens rather than beginning with them. And what fascinated me in this piece was when you see a broken chord, say in an early piece of Webern's, say that cello and piano piece, and you'll notice that broken chords in that particular period in history, that a symmetrical chord like six is—you roll it and it sounds fantastic. What I was interested in here was after a while going from six to five to four to three, seven, two—just two broken notes—then I found what a broken one-note is. Just a repeat.

CA: A gracenote.

MF: Just a gracenote. And what happened, in a sense, that's what was happening in this piece—that I was just going with these various amounts. And they're changing in every register. I mean, we're not going to hear much low because it took a long, it took about forty minutes actually to get into the lower register because it just disturbs the surface too much. And that became the exploratorium of this particular piece and I followed it through. It gets faster, in the part we're not going to hear, and it gets out of sync, and then it comes back again—not like an A-B-A—but it just comes back to in sync again.

By the way, I give six hour seminars, so you'll have to forgive me—[laughter]
[An excerpt of Piano and String Quartet is played.]

MF: Actually I've had a lot of pieces of mine played and I think that was one of the most memorable performances I've ever had anywhere, with this performance.

CA: It was exciting also to have been there at the concert, and then to hear it on the radio as I was driving to CalArts afterwards. It was being broadcast on the satellite and to hear it in an automobile in pitch-blackness driving down the freeway was an unbelievable experience. I think I told you afterwards, I feel that this is the kind of music that can be very effective over the radio—these long pieces that really draw you in.

MF: Just another technical detail is that again, and it really is not that subtle, what I—the other technical aspect of the piece that interested me was the rate of changing of speed that would you hear this material. And these broken chords finally come back for about twenty minutes, very slow, and then I utilize the bottom of the piano, just going all the way up the.... So that was a very important aspect of the piece, the rate of speed. What was also very interesting was that I never thought I could make a piece out of this. When I opened up the piece, I said, "Alright," and I just—I had no idea that I was gonna be involved with the same format seen through different light and—

CA: Because of the length of the piece, you didn't think it was sustainable—?

performance of his own *Eclat* in a program that included both books of *Structures* for two pianos." *The Musical Quarterly* vol. 51, no. 4 (Oct. 1965), p. 702.

MF: No, I had no idea. I had no idea. One of the questions—I don't ask many questions—but one of the questions that I do ask myself as a composer is not how to do it or things like that. I always had a knack [for] doing the appropriate thing, you know. Doing the appropriate thing means that you can't choose everything. But now, in a sense, I don't have those particular type of problems—I don't think "How should it go?" or "What should it do?" What I do ask myself when I begin a piece is: What is material?

CA: So you limit yourself at the outset.

MF: Well I'm very curious in understanding it as phenomena, in a sense. Every composer, in a sense, does it as well on every level, it's just a question of what metaphor you would settle for, in a sense, is what materials is it. There's a very charming story about Stravinsky sitting at his piano, and Mrs. Stravinsky comes in, you know, the great man, "What's the matter, you're not working?" He says, "I'm waiting for the right note." And that, to him, was where the material began. Unless you write music, it's very hard to understand that—what a note might do, how it could trigger off a rhythm, an instrument, something.

CA: Questions for Morton Feldman?

[An audience member comments for two minutes and forty-four seconds]

MF: I was speaking to some musicians in the break, and... [A pause] And why it's so difficult to do something in music. An old friend of mine once defined tragedy as when two people are right [laughter]. He was another very articulate New Yorker, his name is Lionel Abel. In art, everybody is right. Systems are right. Tonality is right. Functional harmony is right. It's *all right*. How can you say that it's wrong? Unless again you're just gonna attack it aesthetically and then you're up the creek, you see. If I was to say that I too hear the circle of fifths, that I too chords or harmony, in a sense, the way Charles would talk about this consonance in my piece. But Charles, if I would use the word "consonance" as I'm writing something, I would go quietly down into the basement and hang myself [laughter and applause].

I stopped giving things a name. And I stopped giving things a name a long time ago. A student would come and they'll say, "Well, I got involved with this imitation," and I said, "Don't call it imitation because look at the way you got out of it—that it didn't become formula." And I would take a—I showed them some scores, I remember that you admired Bunita Marcus when she was at CalArts, and I showed a new score of hers where she's really *ghosting* these voices, that it wasn't done conventionally, as imitation. Or Jo Kondo, for that matter.

So, I really don't know if music could become an art form because all these things work. I mean if you, I notice that if I'm giving up—and we don't alternatives, or that is, we don't wanna say to ourselves, "Well every thing works, then what do we do?" If everything works, what do we do? But that's when that's the fun, you see. That's the fun, when you know that everybody's right.

You certainly feel that when you go into history, and you go in again, into the Frick and you see those fabulous little Pieros and this one and that one and each one and everyone and they're all right, you see. That's where the fun begins. But music? Those circle of fifths? How *pleasant* tonality is? How *seductive* Stravinsky referred to variation? How interesting repetition is? And so forth and so on.

So you have to fight against it essentially, as if, say, the overtones didn't work or this didn't work. You really have to fight against it and I find when I'm working, in a

sense, I just more or less pray for the moments when I'm free not to be seduced by the successes of history. Listen, I mean, after all we don't go to school to study the failures of history; so it all has to do with success.

I don't know if music is that flexible to make a metamorphosis into something that does not have formula, like improvisation which is a big con job—it's formula. Anything that's successful is formula. John Cage is not formula. And I learned a lot from Cage where he taught me the distinction between conceptualization and formula. But the minute you don't get in formula, you're considered a third-world artist, like Ives is, you see. We understand things—we have to add another thing to that curse of aesthetics: formulas.

Stuck in a snowstorm in Pittsburgh, I picked up a paper—and I think he still has a studio there—[Mark] di Suvero, he's having problems in Pittsburgh because he can't give them the exact dimensions of the sculpture. And they never had, you know, they never had anybody come in, gonna build a sculpture without giving this mockup, you see, and he can't give them this mockup. He wants to go and take a look at it and the whole city planning, even the most generous people can't understand it, you see, can't understand how he can't give the mockup. Everybody else has. The fact that he works by his eye? He's a kook. You're not supposed to work by your eye, you're supposed to have it on the drafting board. So I'm very interested if music is an art form rather than a music form, because of this terrific problem of not being seduced by systems because they work and formulas because they appear to work.

However, getting back to the *American* way of life, I once hung out with a bunch of characters in the Russian Tea Room in New York and there was this fabulous stage designer, Boris Aronson, and there was always a very terrific left-wing contingent sitting at the table. And he got fed up one day, and he got up and he says, "*The reason I love America is because it doesn't work.*" [laughs, audience laughter] Maybe music could become an art when it doesn't work. But you need a lot of skills, and the kids don't have those skills. And you can't define what those skills are.

CA: What led us to the point where students don't find those skills anymore? I mean there were a lot of people who said you didn't have those skills too, when they heard your music for the first time.

MF: Not the three or four people that were worried about me [Feldman laughs]. They know you just can't do anything without skills, and I don't know what the skills are, I don't...

CA: But why is it that the students that you see now when you're teaching don't have those skills. What's brought us to this point?

MF: Well, even as a *music form* it's remote to them. They don't know the jack-in-the-box forms of late Webern, that seems to make it work, this kind of Rube Goldberg fabulous machinery that's going on there. And who knows why these people in the Viennese school were so fabulous at these things, maybe because they were giving up something and they had to become overcompensated. And, you know, a very charming example of this is in Vienna when you see the Secession building, the [Adolf] Loos building there, and you take a look at the Hapsburg palaces and they have the cupola, and then you see this Secessionist building—how they got real estate facing the Hapsburgs is a story in itself—and then you see in this square building, this new modernist, formalist building, a little... [Feldman laughs] on top, you know.

CA: An arch?

MF: Yeah, a little cupola on top just like all the other conventional buildings [*Feldman laughs*]. They had to put it on, this arch thing, they had to do that, you see. [*A pause*] Yes?

Audience: I'm a sculptor, and it seems there's a lot of club-footed art, visual art, out there as well. That a lot of artists who make paintings are steeped in the formulas of the past... Do you think it's just that, I'm not quite sure what my question is, but I think it's also attached to your statement about—

MF: Well let me just modify it. Maybe I'm not against formulas, but maybe I feel that one has to invent one's own. In other words, after all, who are those guys out there for the past three hundred years? I think it's the most glamorous workshop imaginable and they certainly didn't want to waste any time. And it was the best talent around, and that's why it's so fabulous, in any discipline. Los Alamos, instead of building the bomb, they all got together and they built art: the best minds, the best talents. So there's nothing wrong with it, that's the tragedy—it works.

The only way you could take to think about it is [to] kind of live in a kind of dream-like hallucination. Every time as a kid, when I visited Varese, he would always tell me, he had this term about, "This *necrophiliac* came to see me today." He continually, everybody was a necrophiliac, and that's the way he dismissed all this talk, you know, [*Feldman laughs, laughter*] that he was just *surrounded* by necrophilia. I mean what are you gonna do? Heine has a gorgeous poem where he admonishes the public, and telling them that what they're doing to art is that they're smothering it with their love. So of course they love it and of course they don't want to lose it. Why should they?

I'm very interested in the whole problem. My students are very upset with my long pieces. I hope they don't take that up as an influence, they're never gonna get performed [*laughter*]. But actually, you know the world, you know, this whole idea of a better mousetrap? Actually maybe a bigger mousetrap, which is my music. The longer they're becoming, the more they want to play them. Not as a kind of upmanship, or "We could sit through it too." [*laughter*] The joke about this is I always felt it was an eternal punishment when I went with the Kronos and I had to hear my five-hour string quartet three places. I was on tour with them and I said, "Oh my god." [*Feldman laughs, laughter*] All within two weeks, you know! And I said, "This is my revenge."

The reason I like a long piece, though no one asked me it. It's become very, very important is—

CA: No one's asked you anything so far [*laughter*].

MF: Well maybe I'm asking the questions, leading, leading... the area, in a sense, the referential aspect. I haven't been here in twenty years, so... I like the long pieces for the same reason you like Proust—is that you don't drink it, you sip it. And you get into it—just *saturated*, more and more and more....

I'm a closet rug collector. San Francisco, very famous, one of the very few places in America that has the kind of rugs I like unfortunately. And the only way you can get sensational colors like a blue, a deep blue, is that you have to do it, dip it many times. Just like a more prosaic example: the difference between the surface color of a Pontiac in relation to a Rolls Royce. No cheap car can get that fabulous putty color that I love, you know, on the expensive Jaguars years ago. And it's the same thing with the whole experience of *listening* to it. You're just *saturated*.

Remember, I'm the listener as I'm writing it. I don't feel that I'm a composer; I do feel that I'm a listener. And my music makes some kind of compromise between performance and making something. That's part of my tradition. I'm a great Mozart lover, and I feel that's what he did, where you don't know where the composition began, and where the performance was.

After all, you are involved with thought. You *are* pulling things, you *are* getting ideas. But you don't have to be an American pragmatist to voice these opinions. Someone, strangely enough, like Goethe dreamt of action and thought as a simultaneity, and I always loved that image—of action and thought as a simultaneity. And I really feel, you know, we all hear, we all have our own definition of history and tradition. My tradition and my history, say with Beethoven, was the concentration of his thought. That taught me more than anything he did because anything he did, in a sense, cannot help what I do, you see. But the thought of him thinking and you see his mind going here, there, is very, very important, which perhaps I don't find that, for example, in Brahms. I find a more systematic construction, very noble and wonderful. I understood Brahms for the first time, I was in Hamburg recently, and it's a very classy, stately, open city, and you really—very Brahmsian in its look. But let's get on to the violin concerto, ok?

CA: Sure.

MF: Let me tell you another composer who has influenced me tremendously, and of course, he's not a composer, Samuel Beckett. And in recent years, in certain pieces, the way he works, I borrowed, and that's another reason the pieces are long. Now, in some things that he does—I'm not talking about the short things, I'm just talking about his method, not how long or short his work is—is that he, living in Paris, being so involved with French for the past fifty years, he'd write something in English then translate it into French, and then he'd translate it back into English, and of course it's not the same. Then he'd translate that English back into French, and he's just continually retranslating. In music perhaps we might call it variation, but I don't think of it that way.

Jasper Johns also had a very similar explanation for the way he works, he says, "I do it one way, and then I do it another." As simple as that. Jasper has helped me also, of doing it one way and doing it another, do it with four notes, do it with three notes, do it slower, put it here, put it there, this can go on for a long time.

CA: It's kind of a modular approach, isn't it?

MF: *Very modular*. And then when you're really saturated, and then I can take Z and I put it against A and it sounds like a million dollars. But you can't do it in ten minutes! You can't put Z against A in ten minutes. It takes the saturation, and time is the liberator. Time creates that saturation of the *experience*. Of course I'm no different than anybody else. I'm only interested in communication. That's the only thing I'm interested in.

CA: Now your approach in this concerto is not the same kind of piece exactly as the *Piano and String Quartet* at all.

MF: Well, first of all we don't have Aki praying, we have Paul kvetching—we have another kind of personality, also with great patience. That's why I would have long interludes. That's a very interesting thing, how long a performer could stand there before he comes in and out. I always marvel at the opening of the Beethoven violin concerto, what the violinist must be going through before they come in.

Let me tell you just a tiny bit about the spelling. So we're involved with the spelling and then I take the metaphor on every level. If I'm involved with the spelling of a pitch, I'm involved with the spelling of a rhythm, so I would notate the same imagery maybe six or seven different ways. Remember I don't think of it as variation, I'm just doing it another way. Then I'd do the same thing with *time worlds*.

Most music is like, in inches. You're going along in inches. I go along with millimeters and centimeters and inches simultaneously and I could shift from one time world to another, in a sense. That all came from the spelling, so as the kids would say, I carried it into the parameters, you see, every aspect that I could think of. And it created this monster of which you'll only hear about twenty minutes. It's quite different.

[*An excerpt from Violin and Orchestra is played.*]

CA: That's an excerpt from a piece that lasts about an hour and ten minutes.

MF: Actually, this was just the introduction.

CA: Are there any questions for Morton Feldman?

Audience: Charles was saying earlier that it seems so different but my first acquaintance with your music was in Columbia's modern American music with a lot of David Tudor on it and stuff like that, and this has that same quality of—what's gonna happen next? And I really like that, little things coming down the pipe after one another.

MF: Yeah, that's referred to in the trade as *ad hoc* [*Feldman laughs, laughter*].

CA: Any other questions?

Man in audience: Where can you buy the music?

CA: Buy the printed scores?

Man in audience: No, the recording.

CA: The recording.

MF: You can't, they're not.... They're not commercially recorded.

Woman in audience: Why not?

Man in audience: People don't want to.

MF: Why not?

Second man in audience: To have to buy four records of Philip Glass or would they buy four records of that?

MF: You said it, not me [*laughter*].

Woman in audience: Columbia records does want it? I can't believe it.

MF: Well he knows that I'm very.... My wife left me, and the reason she said was I was always on the side of the landlord. [*Feldman laughs*] She'd yell, "There's no heat!" And I'd say, "Take it easy, I mean..." [*laughter*] I said, "The whole thing collapsed. You can't get heat now no matter what they want to do." And so when I'm with, say, David Frost from Columbia and he's telling me the problems of modern music, I kind of agree with him.

I don't really pursue it, actually, I suppose maybe. John Cage really outlined the function of the composer beautifully. He said you write the music, and then there are these *other things* that happen to it. You can't be responsible for—we all can't live our life like Steve Reich. We can't. Even he's tired.

CA: Larry, do you have a question?

Audience: Yeah, I guess there are a couple of things but you said you kind of think of yourself as composing as a listener. Do you kind of, as you're composing, move

from millimeter to millimeter and then see how you think it sounds and then add the next thing, or is there more of a—

MF: There is no secret to music. Either you put something against something else, and you say, how does it work? And you might feel like it works like [the way] Messiaen feels it works, but you don't feel that it works, [*Feldman laughs*] because he's putting one thing against another in a kind of mosaic-like way—or you feel that it has a certain type of *organic* continuity, and...your approach is more monolithic. There are no other approaches. Either it's organic, [and] you keep it going without making too many waves, or you're putting one crazy thing against another crazy thing.

I think if you really listen to music, it's crazier than you think. I was giving a seminar on Beethoven's hundred and one.¹⁷ I think it's the nuttiest thing I ever heard. This is a fabulous piece of his, with a crazy fugue in it. The thing is to understand, for example, why he would put a fugue in there in the first place. If you're going to think that it spells out some kind of fantastic architecture to help with the piece, you're mistaken. He put it in there as an element of expression—that there was just something about a fugue at that particular point, which just helped the expression of the music. And the piece is very eclectic in terms of using all different kinds of devices, all for expression. He was so hung up with expression in the last period in his life that he put it [in the score] both in *German* and *Italian*, just to make sure that everybody got the idea. And that's all it is, in a sense, either you feel that it's organic, again Boulez, where the fluidity of the music, and the fluidity of the form goes hand in hand, or you don't think of that particular type of architectural or constructive or stylistic, however you want to think of it.

Audience: Why not both?

MF: Eh?

Audience: At the same time?

MF: You can do anything you want. That's also the tragedy: no one's stopping you [*Feldman laughs, laughter*]. Go ahead! Go east, young man.

CA: Yes, over here?

Audience: You spoke about starting a piece and not knowing how it's going to progress, and the simultaneity of thought and action, and other things that might lead one to suspect that composing for you is starting from the beginning and going in a sort of straight, linear shot to the end. And I'm wondering to what extent do you draft, sketch, revise your works?

MF: Everybody develops their own method of working. A lot of students, in a sense, just don't understand. They usually think that things got together in a much more formal way. For example, let's take something like [Schoenberg's] *Pierrot Lunaire*.¹⁸ They were just a whole bunch of songs, more or less, and he got the order later, like you would make a movie: you'd put this against this, and this against this. Young composers can't make a movie. They can't make a composition because evidently somebody told them, when they were somewhere, in that little school on the prairie, that things have to follow logically, otherwise they're not going to have a good piece. You know how many good pieces have been written? There have been more good pieces than fugues [*Feldman laughs*]. The whole idea is not to write a good piece. [*A pause*]

¹⁷ Piano Sonata No. 28 in A major, Op. 101.

¹⁸ (1912)

The whole idea is to get lost, and then come out, you know, come out of it alive. Though a lot of times, I'm totally lost. It's very upsetting. But what's the use of telling you to get lost? You have to get lost with Rome opera on the phone wanting a piece. Remember Fellini's *8½*, you know? I really feel that there's an element of *big budget* involved. A student of mine who's writing her Ph.D. dissertation, and she's very, very gifted, uptight, young professional composer from McGill University, I called her up and said, "How's your thesis going?" and she said, "I finally decided that I'm going to work your way." I says, "What's 'my way?'" And she said, "Executive decisions." Her father's a big stockbroker, you see, so she thought of this whole thing as a kind of macho, man in the world, you see, making these executive decisions, deciding I'm going to put this here, I'm going to put that here.

I do put things together. Let's put it this way. I once was stuck again—that's why I'm never going back east—again in a snowstorm, and I pick up a book by Bernard Baruch, how to become a millionaire. So I start reading the book, I should have read it—I don't like these people looking at, reading books you know, all the time, and they don't buy them. I should have read the first page because right off, he tells you, look, the way I became a millionaire, if you were to try it, you'll go to jail. He said, I made my first million when I was 25 on the London stock market in relation to the New York stock market, and the time differential. He said, that was my first million, but then the government found out about it and you could read about it, it's a very important new law. And there are about four new laws put in by the federal trades commission which I'm responsible for. And then he goes ahead and actually tells you about what a clever crook he was.

And I think that art has, to some degree, there is an aspect—let's forget about talent, we're not supposed to talk about that, but there is an element of *authority*, that someone could sell something to you, you know, maybe because just out of context. I think my music is very normal. You know when I have trouble? When I go to Europe, when I see that *Cellini*, that head, and all the Americans are walking by, licking their frozen yogurt, and you see this Cellini black *head*, with the *blood*.¹⁹ I mean that's crazy, [*laughter*] you understand? Or if you're walking on a rainy night in Paris, maybe to you it's romantic, not when I see Rodin's statue of Balzac there. I think it's the creepiest thing imaginable. That's crazy. We're just moving a few little things around. I wish I could write something as *delirious* as that Cellini, where you'll all be out of here in one minute.

Woman in audience: What kind of rug are you looking for?

MF: Rug? I dropped a lot of money here a few weeks ago. I'm finished with San Francisco.

Woman in audience: No sales pitch this time, so...

Second woman in audience: Did you find it?

MF: Oh, yes. I wouldn't even go to the other places, I would recommend Bakhtiari. He has some wonderful stuff, especially early Turkish pieces, just sensational pieces. Most of the old rugs here are not in good condition, and his is in excellent condition.

Audience: He has good pieces, but does he have fugues?

MF: Does he have fugues? A great rug is better than any fugue [*Feldman laughs*].

CA: Back here, yeah?

¹⁹ Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, 1545, in the Piazza della Signoria, Florence.

Audience: You spoke of departing from the traditional point, trying to break with it when you're working, and yet you also spoke of your appreciation for craft and—

MF: But I also didn't define it. I don't know what tradition is, but I've been asking that question a lot, especially with young people. There's a marvelous Chinese poem about where is the beginning? What do you begin with? What is the beginning? And the whole thing is just talking about what is the beginning. Someone asked me recently what I thought musical civilization is, and I thought for a minute, and I said, a forty-thousand dollar Steinway, and that's where I've really arrived at, that we've got these fantastic instruments, and you realize that when you're teaching. A kid comes in with a bunch of pipes and he starts blowing into them, and you say, "You know we've got an instrument, it's called a trombone [*Feldman laughs, laughter*]. You're like a new sound source! Well good luck to you, young fellow." And I love perfected instruments. I really love perfected instruments. And I continually tell marvelously talented performers that there's a wonderful violinist, she's married to a first cellist of a big orchestra in Europe, she went to Julliard, American girl, and we worked together, and there was a concert in Venice and she did a solo thing, she did the Schoenberg *Fantasy*,²⁰ which, you know, it's a big number. And I said, "Look you're very, very good," I said, "but you can't go around playing public recitals with a cheap bow." She said, "Well, we've talked about it." I said, "You're just wasting your time."

I bumped into her two years later, and she gave me a big hug, and she said, "I can't thank you enough, Morty, I don't even have to practice anymore." [*laughter*] I think that's what the twentieth century is really ending up with. We're not going to get out—I mean we could go *slumming* into Haiti, we can get involved in voodoo music, and we can get involved with any kind of *fusion* music but I don't think that's where it's at. I think there are some things that are perfected, and there are some things that are not. There are some things that are *flexible*, and there are some things that are not, and I think it's just a question of selection, actually. I didn't mean choice or free will, I meant selection.

I think the whole problem is this whole business of self-expression. [*A pause*] I think we misunderstand also the artistry through the ages. I was recently in Japan and had a lovely visit with Takemitsu, and they took me to see those, beautiful stone garden, and I looked at the damn thing and I said to Toru, I said, "Well, I mean what's the name of this guy?" And he gives me the name. It's not anonymous, you see. And I said, "Well, when did he live?" It was the same time as Michelangelo. I said, "Was there a text book, how to make a Zen garden?" He said, "No." I said, "Oh, he *invented* this?" He said, "Yes." And this whole fantasy we have about the art of the East being sublimation and ours being more of the individual, I think is a lot of nonsense. For Bach to write that fugue, for Stravinsky to write the Huxley Variations,²¹ he just had to, you just have to forget about yourself. And I think that all that music and stuff that we feel is like ego-centered and ego-oriented was really works of *astounding* sublimation. Actually, I'm beginning to see history differently, in a way.

I never had an argument with history, I just wanted to become part of it. I think it's terrific. Absolutely nothing went wrong, everything went right, again, remember that's the tragedy, it all went right. Well, I mean it's, it's terrific, and you feel, well where's my voice? The only thing is, is that you don't see, especially with young people,

²⁰ *Fantasy for Violin and Piano*, Op. 47 (1949)

²¹ *Variations: Aldous Huxley in memoriam* (1963-1964), Stravinsky's last orchestral composition.

they really don't see the uniqueness. They had bad teachers that talked about tradition, and yet, the only one I know that Beethoven really influenced is some obscure string quartet by Saint-Saens. I don't think that anybody really influences anybody, except in the most superficial way.

I feel there's a lot of—and there's no flexibility to change with young people, absolutely. They're like, I remember when I was in public school, where there were God knows how many people were dying of famine in India and it's a social science class, and she was telling us that there *was* a lot of food, that there *was* a lot of rice, but they weren't eating it. It wasn't of their region. She said that's why these people, and in Biafra, in recent years, this would happen, too. And I think it's the same thing, speaking to a marvelous cellist at CalArts and I noticed that the students, they already come, you know, whatever their background is, and they're looking at me slanty-eyed. I'm showing them new ways of notation, new ways of flexibility. I'm giving them a little, I'm giving them a little, you know, an extra five months in this terminal life and they don't want even the five months. They were taught a certain way; they don't want to change. They're no different than the people who don't want to eat the rice of another region, and I asked this marvelous cellist, I said—there's the same thing in performance—I said, “Did you go to any high level master classes in cello?” And she said, yes, she was at a very unfortunate one with [Pierre] Fournier who's fabulous, and the kid didn't buy the, the tradition of the way he would use the bow. [She] was taught one way, and actually just wondered why he was... that she was so finished, you see, that she didn't want to be confused by this Frenchman showing how you could really play fantastically, you know, in this tradition.

I'm very concerned about teaching in recent years, and I'm very, very upset about it. In Toronto, in March, I'm speaking to all the composers from French-Canada, and Ontario, all throughout Canada and America on the teaching of composition in America, and I feel that it's so important that I'm actually taking time out to write about it, very upset about it...very, very upset.

CA: It seems now that a lot of the direction that teaching is going to take will be involved with computer music. That will only make the situation worse, from your point of view?

MF: Oh, it adds to the tragedy, it also works [*laughter*]. Everything works.

CA: If everything works, what's the tragedy?

MF: That everything works.

CA: But regarding younger students?

MF: Well, it's just a question, it's just a question of... they find the processes and the methods, in a sense, which come easiest for them, which means, for example, let's say if twelve-tone music is considered an *intellectual* pursuit, well there are people, in a sense, who are very good with moving notes around. I was telling some students the other day that I used to play cards with Milton Babbitt when I was a teenager, and Milton would come over every week, we'd play poker, all different kinds of people, Milton, and there was a science-fiction writer.

CA: Cage?

MF: Towards the end. I didn't know Cage when we started the poker game. Cage was another time with another set of poker, only with science-fiction people [*Feldman laughs*]. We had about two years which was a fabulous thing. Anyway, I said, and I noticed at that particular time—this is actually during the period, I just finished studying

with Stefan Wolpe—and he [Babbitt] was just finishing up on that magnificent early piece of his, *Composition for Four Instruments*²²—and I noticed that this man was a bridge player, was a pinochle player. He knew the cards that were out. He was good with knowing the cards that were out, and that’s the way he was with notes. There’s no difference, it’s a card game, it’s easier—there are only twelve of them, not fifty-two. And you know, they think he’s Einstein. Milton was good at remembering the notes that are out, and he handles them with great élan and great flexibility like no one else. While Charles, Charles isn’t here is he? Charles Wuorinen has to work hard at it. Charles has to sweat at it! Milton never has to sweat. So you can’t deduce anything about the intellectuality of Milton Babbitt, though he likes intellectual....

Or, even myself, talking about the kind of music, I can’t make a virtue of my necessities. I find it *easier* to write this kind of music. There’s a very, I was at one of Franz Kline’s early shows in black and white and his mother comes in from the coal mines of New Jersey and she started to yell at him because it was in black and white, and she said, “Franz, you always took the easy way out!” [*Feldman laughs, laughter*] It’s a marvelous story. Well, maybe he did!

I always feel, in a sense, that everybody who has some degree of uniqueness is unique only because of—to cover up something or something. Fred Astaire, for example, said that he found his whole dancing technique, the way he moves his hands so you can’t focus on them, because they’re very *big*, you see. [*A pause*] Imagine Beethoven coming here and saying, “Well the reason I wrote the C-sharp minor string quartet is because I’m deaf,” [*Feldman laughs, laughter*] and it’s probably *true!* I’m convinced, in a sense, he got away from the clichés and the pressures, and started to get involved with his inner hearing. I feel we do have various levels of how we hear. I always cultivated, if possible, inner hearing. I don’t know exactly what it is. I don’t have perfect pitch; I have relative pitch. But I have perfect pitch if I’m not thinking of *anything*. In other words, I could think a note, or I could think a chord without hearing anything, and I don’t think it’s too much of a phenomena, it’s like, it’s like a green thumb, so to speak.

But this whole idea, in a sense, that it comes down to you in a tablet, and you begin, what’s that crap that I, to this day I shake that maybe I’m not doing the wrong thing, that begins like a cell and starts to grow, you know that kind of business? Yeah, it grows into cancer. That’s what it grows into.

CA: On that cheerful note, I’d like to thank [*Feldman laughs, laughter*] Morton Feldman for visiting with us tonight.

²² (1948)