Morton Feldman’s “Glass Sequence”

by Daniel Stern

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The text below was first published by Helen A. Harrison in her book, Such Desperate Joy: Imagining Jackson Pollock (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2000) pp 305-308. It is reproduced here with her kind permission.

Morton Feldman and I had been close friends from Music and Art High School on. We both played in the Senior orchestra. I was a cellist and he played the bass – a big man playing a big instrument. He also played the piano, and with great delicacy. Our first encounter was during a rehearsal, when he put down his bass and took up the baton to conduct a piece he had written entitled “Dirge for Thomas Wolfe,” a conventional piece not without its own beauty. And the title tells you how young we both were.

We both studied composition with Dante Fiorello, a relatively unknown composer; but later Morty went on to study with acknowledged major figures such as Wallingford Reiger and Stefan Wolpe. He never studied institutionally, but he learned what he needed from these teachers.

Morty became quite close with the Abstract-Expressionist painters. When Hans Namuth was to do a film on Jackson Pollock, Namuth and Paul Falkenberg asked him to write the score. He scored it for two cellos and asked me to play both parts.

It’s a special piece, unlike the rest of his work. It was, as I interpreted it, intentional fragments that come together as a coherent whole, similar to the way Pollock’s work is made. By this time Morty was definitely not interested in linear music; the very fragmentary nature of such a project was anti-linear. In most of his music, the motifs are quite hard to discern, but here the main motifs are quite prominent and are repeated as a sort of leitmotif. There are two of them. The one that opens the film is a series of high harmonics on the A-string, and the other is the pizzicato, or plucked, series. There’s also a long, drawn-out tone – not a motif, exactly – that comes in several times. Interestingly, some of it is quite loud, whereas Morty’s music became famous for its extraordinary softness, almost to the point of inaudibility.
In other words, Morty did not set out to write a piece that would stand on its own. The music was written very much in the spirit and the letter of the film. He really adapted the sounds to what was happening on the screen. It’s an upside down, avant-garde version of the Hollywood composer working off the given visual material. There’s no direct correlation, so it’s not “movie music” in that sense, but it’s very much a series of aesthetic moments, just as the film is a series of aesthetic gestures.

What Morty was looking for, and found, was an objective correlative for Pollock’s act of painting. The main difference is that the disciplined nature of the repeated harmonic and pizzicato themes is a little more formal than you might imagine in terms of Pollock’s work. But then again, I remember Pollock saying in the film’s narration that he didn’t just throw paint. He controlled it; he knew what he was doing.

I’m sure that Morty saw a rough cut of the film as he was writing the music, and at least once during the editing process we watched Pollock at work. He was staying in New York City at the town house of his friend, Alfonso Ossorio, in MacDougal Alley. We both went to see him there, and he was painting away. I don’t recall if Morty took me along to familiarize me with the subject matter of the film, or if we were just hanging out together that day, as we did most days.

To tell the truth, I was no big fan of Abstract Expressionism. I was quite naive and I thought it was all needlessly obscure. I remember sounding off about it at the Cedar Bar, and Morty saying, “What gives you the right to judge?” I had no right, just the chutzpah of youth. He’d known me since we were fifteen or so, and knew I was not very sophisticated about painting. But in spite of these differences we stayed very close. Once I went with him to the Museum of Modern Art, and he pointed out a painting by Balthus. “You want to talk about obscure,” he said. “Why is that girl looking at the cat in that odd way? And why is the other girl lying on the floor with her skirt raised? That’s much more obscure than Abstract Expressionism.”

Morty was involved in the origin of “chance” or “aleatoric” music – picking notes at random, with a looser control than composers had traditionally exercised up until that time. But the so-called glass sequence (which actually accompanies Pollock as he paints on both glass and canvas) is definitely not aleatoric. It was composed, written down, and I played it exactly as it was written. Still, it’s hard to put it into any specific category. It’s certainly not tonal, not written in any key. It’s in ¾ time, but there’s no specified tempo. It could be played fast or slow; that was Morty’s decision as we made the recording.
The actual recording was done at the studio of Peter Bartók, Béla Bartók’s son. There were two separate scores, one for each cello part. I recorded one, then put on giant earphones and listened to it as I recorded the second part. We did it in one session, and it took the better part of an afternoon. From a technical point of view, it was very hard to mix the harmonics with the pizzicatos and make them come out just right. Actually, I’ll never know how much mixing was done on the console, and how much changing in the mix later on. But I think the final result captured the feeling of Pollock at work. When my grandson, who was eleven or twelve at the time, saw the film at the Museum of Modern Art, he said, perspicaciously, “the music kind of goes with the painting.” And it does.

Everybody involved in the film was paid with a Pollock drawing. Morty got one, Namuth and Falkenberg each got one. But I never got mine. My life was then so chaotic – I was running here, playing there, working as a musician and already beginning to be a writer. I just never showed up to claim it.

All in all, it was an extraordinary moment for me in music, friendship, and my artistic education.