

NOTES ON PLAYING FELDMAN (2016)

by John Tilbury

The following notes were written by John Tilbury to accompany Volume 3 of his series of recordings with the Smith Quartet of "MUSIC for PIANO AND STRINGS by MORTON FELDMAN" issued on the MATCHLESS RECORDINGS label (MRDVD-03, 2016). The notes are reproduced here with his kind permission.

ON SOFTNESS

Softness draws the audience into the music - it encourages attentiveness and alertness. It also demands a 'transcendental' listening in its search for a revelatory experience. Perhaps that is what Feldman was referring to when on one occasion, just before a concert, waiting in the wings as I recall, he urged me, like a New York pugilist, to 'knock 'em flat.'

Softness heightens consciousness; it enhances the consciousness, for example, of the idiosyncrasies of the instrument at which one sits. As Cornelius Cardew observed, listening to Feldman we have to accustom ourselves to new dimensions, rather like Alice had to in Wonderland. When we have passed through the narrow door and got accustomed to the dim light, we realise the range of his imagination and the significant differences that distinguish one piece from another. The performer, and the listener, become aware that the dynamic quality within softness creates an extraordinary variety. (I am thinking now of the ineffable beauty of the Smiths' string sound in *piano and string quartet*) In other words, it is not just a question of a routine, conservatory-trained pianissimo, however skillfully controlled.

ON THE UNINTENDED

Respect for the unintended ('accidental') embodies for the interpreter the notion of nowness, of uniqueness.

Moreover, the 'accidental' is a corollary of the extreme softness which Feldman demands and which necessarily involves risk. The player is playing on the edge, on the frontier between sound and no sound. Accidentalness is an *active* component, which is to be contextualized, preferably with conviction. The music responds to the contingencies of venue, of temperature, etc. etc.

Keeping ears 'fantastically adrift' (Philip Clark), while alert to the surroundings and open to the possibility of change, is second nature to improvising musicians (AMM) as it must be for Feldman interpreters. There is no controlling blue-print.

In a radio discussion Feldman once referred to what he recognized, in many cases, as the professional musician's apparent fear of his instrument, a fear that creates, as he put it, a distance between performer and instrument. He talked of the need, in his own music, for a closeness of player to instrument - what I would describe as an at-oneness, embodied in a

radical commitment to the muscular, physical and essentially sensual qualities of performance of Feldman's music.

The dialectic of extreme fingertip sensitivity and control - embodying the notion of intention - and the recognition, through an awareness of the contingent, of the impossibility, indeed the undesirability, of control. Intimately, at close quarters, the performer experiences the vulnerability of intention and the inevitability, and acceptance, of failure. This gives the music its unique quality.

ON INTERPRETATION

It is a foolhardy and naive interpreter who attempts to predetermine and structure his interpretation of this music, for it unfolds organically, responding to the idiosyncrasies of the instrument, the shape and acoustic of the room, the general ambience. All are active components in the music-making. The music takes on a quasi-autonomous nature, as if the musician is 'tracking' rather than consciously, i.e. 'professionally', producing the sounds; he/she steers a hazardous course in which phrasing, dynamics and rhythmic profile are 'situational'. For example, in *piano and string quartet* the piano part comprises mainly arpeggios. I decided to instil a quality of 'spontaneity', of 'improvisation' into these arpeggios, individually characterizing them in some way or another: through discreet rubato, through dynamic inflection, subtle rhythmic distortion, etc.

In Feldman's earlier works, from the fifties and sixties, there are many examples of single notes or phrases which are repeated exactly; this is simply to 'freeze' the music in order to give weight and focus to a single chord or phrase and, in those days, I would aim for an almost inhuman exactitude. I recall an occasion of my performance of *intermission 5* which provoked the composer Klaus Huber to make a piquant observation. At the very end of the piece there is a short phrase which is repeated nine times. I tried to make each repetition the same as the preceding one. Huber observed that they were not only the same, but they were even more the same than the preceding one! I suppose he was saying that they exceeded the listener's expectations of what 'sameness' means. In trying to exceed those expectations, one is acknowledging that everything is different.

In much of Feldman's later music he prescribes a pulse, not infrequently between 63 and 66. And when Feldman begins *for bunita marcus* with the alternation of 3/8 and 5/16 measures I approach this with rigour, to the extent, paradoxically, of slightly elongating the 3/4 measures. Similarly with the ending of *palais de mari* which alternates 7/8 and 2/2.

And then, quite recently, I read Feldman's cautionary strictures regarding the observance of pulse. A conversation with the composer Xenakis turned to a recent performance of Feldman's *trio*:

Feldman: I felt it was just a little stiff.

Xenakis: You wanted more agitation?

Feldman: No, I wanted them to breathe with each other more naturally. Breathe rather than count.

Xenakis: But they counted correctly.

Feldman: Yes, they counted correctly. Maybe that was it, that it was a little too mechanical in the counting."

Because in Feldman's later music there are hours and hours of pulse. I guess what Feldman meant was that they were counting like metronomes, instead of like human beings. A slavish adherence to the pulse, tempting though it may seem, is to be avoided. So I got to thinking about pulse. Pulse helps us with our rhythmic orientation, especially in ensemble playing. The pulse should be just within reach, or just beyond reach of the music. The music floats above and beyond the pulse, but we do feel it. We dare not go out on a limb.

ON NOTATION

In Feldman that which is given in the notation is essential; no rhetoric, nothing superfluous, and, one of Feldman's great strengths, the unity of pitch and register is flawless.

Of course, much needs to be said through notation, but in my view, even more needs to be left unsaid. Too often, at least in my experience, notations 'say' too much. The balance between the said and the unsaid is the essence of the composer's responsibility.

I am usually reluctant to question a composer about his score, though after a composer's death, as in the case of Cardew and Feldman, I do regret not having asked them more. Yet to have to ask seems to me to demonstrate an inadequacy, either of the composer through failing to produce a notation which is self-sufficient, or of myself through an inability to understand what for others is crystal clear.

ON THE INEXPLICABLE

Remarkable is the very occasional, sudden brief loudness, for example, the *fff* single chord in the piano part in the *trio*. We wait through nearly 6 hours of music (the first two DVDs) for this. There are also *sforzandi* in the violin part, but with less impact. To the listener, taken by surprise, the loudness is more akin to noise, an invasion from an alien source. I often wonder what Feldman meant by this. The prescription is psychological rather than musical, perhaps? There are other less dramatic interventions, like the jaunty little repetitive dance which appears out of nowhere in *for john cage*. And I scratch my head at the wilful appearances of empty measures prescribed $1/8$ or $3/16$. What is their function? Where is the difference?

GENERAL

At its best Feldman's music can take our breath away, providing a revelatory experience, a transparency, which has no need of argument. Thinking back to *piano and string quartet* there are moments of extraordinary beauty when, through a sudden change of register, darkness enshrouds the music; elsewhere the string sound enshrouds the piano arpeggios

Feldman seems to occupy a metaphysical space and encroaches on the domain of spirituality normally associated with religion. Thus art wrests spirituality from religion; spirituality is not

the private property of religion. Perhaps with Feldman one can make a case for a kind of musical utopianism. One cannot play this music in a merely professional capacity

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is - Infinite." Blake - *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. 'Hygiene', the Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter retorted when asked his opinion of the music of Bach. I assume he means something which cleanses. Feldman's Art has the same quality. The opening chorus of the *St. John Passion* springs to mind, along with the opening of *piano and string quartet*. Feldman also syringes the ears.

I recall an occasion in Graz, Austria, performing Feldman's *triadic memories* (1981), a work lasting around an hour and a half, beginning in a natural light but which was beginning to fade, and the concert, accompanied, enhanced by the changing light, (the only artificial light was a lamp) ended in near darkness. Towards the end of the performance bells from a distant church provided a miraculous counterpoint – a merging of Art with everyday reality; and at a stroke what Anita Brookner calls the monstrous egotism of the artist – in this case composer and performer – is punctured, undermined; and the music could no longer say simply 'listen to me'; nor could the performer demand of his audience 'look at me'. Cardew used to talk about the 'musical composition of the world'.

Listening to *triadic memories* on that day two women, one young, one elderly, were weeping. I mention it, not least because I think it is a rare occurrence at concerts and I can only speculate on the reasons. But I believe they have something to do with meanings in Feldman's art I have already touched upon: human vulnerability and fragility. In the late works the enveloping hugeness of Feldman's canvas reminds one of the great Rothko black paintings. There, too, in the Rothko Chapel in Houston people sit and quietly weep.

The primacy of the experience of art in relation to the experience of nature has often been called into question. Perhaps then it is the kinship of Feldman's music with nature, rather than with art, its aspiration to nature, like the Rothko works, which is able to generate this response in people. Significantly, Feldman wouldn't talk about compositional reality; in fact, he said there was no such thing; he preferred to talk about acoustical reality.