

Alex Grimley — Morton Feldman in Johannesburg, 1983

Morton Feldman spent the first two weeks of July 1983 in Johannesburg, South Africa, where he was the guest of honor for the First South African Broadcasting Corporation Contemporary Music Festival. There he gave ten masterclasses and two public lectures. While his lectures were subsequently transcribed and published,¹ the full content of the masterclasses—102 pages of conversation—became known only after the transcriptions by participant Dirk de Klerk were published online almost thirty years later, in 2012.²

1983 was a momentous year in the development of Feldman's music. Five years previously, he'd begun writing music inspired by the visual design and material composition of Anatolian and Persian rugs. This interest led to significant changes in his music; he turned away from the orchestra and toward small chamber ensembles, and he wrote pieces of increasing duration. At the end of January, he'd completed his *Second String Quartet*. At one hundred and twenty-four pages, it was the longest piece of music he'd ever written. When he arrived in Johannesburg, he was in the middle of a piece, *Clarinet and String Quartet*, the first of three soloist and string quartet pieces he'd write in the next several years.

¹ Feldman, "Johannesburg Lecture 1: Current Trends in America," and "Johannesburg Lecture 2: Feldman on Feldman," in Chris Villars, ed. *Morton Feldman Says*. London: Hyphen Press, 2006, pp. 161-72; and pp. 175-79.

² Johannesburg Masterclasses & Lectures, July 1983. *Morton Feldman Page*, 2012, <https://www.cnvill.net/mfmasterclasses.htm>. Accessed 14 October 2020.

Topics, Themes, and Concerns in Feldman's Late Thought

One question preoccupied Feldman throughout the 1980s: *Is music an art form?* This was the first question he posed to his audience in Johannesburg, just as he had posed it to an audience in Toronto the previous year, and would subsequently to audiences in Middelburg and San Francisco in years to come. *Is music an art form?* Or is it just a music form? It was a question Feldman hoped to answer, in the affirmative, alone among his contemporaries, through his music. “Why is music so entrenched in its music forms?” he wondered.³ To Feldman, the promise of experimental music at mid-century had given way to conventional forms and structures—half-hour compositions, memory structures, conceptual content. Feldman’s notion of an “art form” was based primarily in his experience of the visual arts, especially the large-scaled abstract expressionist paintings of his friends Philip Guston, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock. Central to their practice—and to music, were it to become an art form—was intuition. Working without preparatory drawings, directly on the canvas, grappling with configurations of color and markmaking, these painters developed the overall form of the picture through the process of painting itself.

In his third masterclass, Feldman introduced this notion, asking those in attendance, “[What is] the difference between *material* and *ideas*?”⁴ Ideas abounded in music. Starting out in the 1950s, Feldman worked equally against the total serialization of Pierre Boulez, and the predetermined chance procedures of his colleague John Cage; by the later 1960s, conceptual art had usurped abstraction in the visual arts as well. In contrast, Feldman explained, he preferred

³ Feldman, “Johannesburg Lecture 1,” p. 161.

⁴ Feldman, “The Johannesburg Masterclasses, July 1983 Session 4,” *Morton Feldman Page*, 2012, p. 5.

not “having ideas *a priori*” but instead to begin with material—an interval, a rhythmic figure, a motif—and “push it around. I have to do something with my material.”⁵ For example, in the opening pages of *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* (1981), the piano reiterates a two chord figure over and over, with subtle changes in its rhythmic shape. Because the variations follow no particular order, because they demonstrate no “idea,” there is no system for Feldman to exhaust; the repetitions and variations can continue ad infinitum.

These procedures were a topic of discussion in the ninth masterclass. “I’m very interested in two aspects of twentieth century music,” Feldman told those gathered. “Reiteration and variation.”⁶ He hadn’t long been interested in those aspects, however. The organizing principle of his music in the previous decade, especially the dozen or so orchestral pieces he wrote for European orchestras, had been differentiation. The sheer scale of the orchestra, and Feldman’s interest in extended techniques, unusual timbral combinations, and the far registers of each instrument lent itself to compositions in which his “material” was differentiated one moment to the next. Techniques of reiteration and variation entered his music as a subject unto themselves beginning in 1978 and ’79, following his concert tour in the Near East in 1976 and his prolonged study of hand-woven rugs that began shortly after.⁷ “Repetition is not reiteration,” he told the class. The element of variation was crucial—“Do it once, and do it another time in a different place with different notes. Essentially it’s the same idea, without even thinking of it as variation.

⁵ Feldman, “Johannesburg, Session 4,” p. 5.

⁶ Feldman, “Johannesburg, Session 9,” p. 8.

⁷ Sebastian Claren, “A Feldman Chronology,” in Chris Villars, ed. *Morton Feldman Says*. London: Hyphen Press, 2006, p. 270.

But it is variation.”⁸ To take but one example from *For John Cage* (1982), on page 4, beginning the second half of the first system, the violin repeats an identical pattern for 9 measures as the accompanying piano chords shift, one measure after another. Then, a two-measure pattern in the violin repeats for 8 measures, piano chords still shifting. While keeping the same rhythmic shape, the violin pattern is varied even more minutely. The effect is not unlike seeing light refracted on a stream—flowing water following its course, but everywhere across its surface, sunlight shimmering, flickering. Feldman would subsequently reference the practice of artist Jasper Johns to describe his synthesis of reiteration and variation—

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!⁹

Patterns and Problems in Feldman Scholarship

The bulk of scholarship on Morton Feldman in recent years has focused primarily on his earliest work—his pieces of the 1950s and early 1960s written using graphic notation—to the exclusion of his orchestral work of the 1970s and his late music of the 1980s. Compared to the later work, his “grid” compositions of the early ‘50s are more obviously “experimental.”

Contemporaneous with Boulez’s *Second Piano Sonata* (written between 1947-48 but premiered in 1950) and Cage’s *Music of Changes* (1951), Feldman’s graphic scores fit comfortably into narratives of mid-century experimentalism, with their effacing of the composer and their

⁸ Feldman, “Johannesburg, Session 9,” p. 8-9.

⁹ Feldman, “Morton Feldman: Speaking of Music, 1986,” *Morton Feldman Page*, 2013, <https://www.cnvill.net/mfspeakingofmusic1986.pdf>, p. 13.

emphasis on “chance.” Moreover, these pieces became foundational texts of the so-called New York School—in both music and the visual arts. Feldman’s notion of graphic notation was subsequently taken up by Cage, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff, each in their own way, and the performance practice implied by these works mirrors the intuitive immediacy of the abstract expressionist painters. The germinative quality of Feldman’s 1950s scores for later experimentalism, and the mutually reciprocal relationship between those scores and the painting that inspired them has been the subject of much Feldman scholarship.

The dearth of scholarship on Feldman’s late music might be attributed to a few disparate reasons. First and most obviously, the extreme length and relative inaccessibility of live performances have made this work more obscure than Feldman’s earlier work. *Flute and Orchestra* (1978) and *Violin and Orchestra* (1979) had their US premieres in 2012; *Orchestra* (1976) was played in New York City for the first time in 2019. *Violin and String Quartet* (1985) has yet to be performed in the US. What’s more—Feldman’s music is performed far more frequently in Europe than the US. In the past 20 years, Germany alone has been the site of more performances than in all of the US.¹⁰ Not coincidentally, the most substantial monographic work on Feldman, Sebastian Claren’s 2000 *Neither: die Musik Morton Feldmans*, was published in German and has yet to be translated.

What’s more, Feldman’s late music, perhaps counterintuitively, marked a return to convention—conventional notation and conventional chamber ensembles. The 1970s were a decade of reaction among composers and artists of Feldman’s generation and the generation previous. To these artists, the increasing interdisciplinarity, work in multimedia, and intensified

¹⁰ “Morton Feldman Past Performances: 20 Year Summary,” *Morton Feldman Page*, 2019, <https://www.cnvill.net/mfperfsumm.htm>. Accessed 14 October 2020.

focus on social and cultural politics of new work in the '70s went too far. Even as permissive a figure as John Cage remarked in 1975, "Whenever people do the worst they can, they do it in my name."¹¹ Feldman, the arch-modernist, was more outspoken than any of his peers about his dismal view of the contemporary music scene in the 1980s. His late lectures are littered with critiques and dismissals of popular music, improvisatory music, jazz, non-Western music, unconventional instruments, and ethnomusicology, among other topics. Publisher Bálint András Varga, who interviewed Feldman earlier in 1983, before the composer's trip to Johannesburg, remarked that, "For all [Feldman's] self-assurance, I had the impression that he was fighting a duel with invisible adversaries."¹²

Feldman had always been an elliptical writer and a stream-of-consciousness lecturer. In the 1980s, his orations began to match the duration of his music. The visual arts had always been a primary point of reference for Feldman, but as he deepened his studies of the material properties of Persian and Turkish rugs—his years of work in his family's garment factory having laid the groundwork for his attention to colored dyes and weaving patterns—his metaphors for music-making became ever more esoteric. Describing his music in terms of surface, saturation, abrash (the slight differences in shade or tone of a single hue), and "crippled symmetry," Feldman may have obscured his music more than he illuminated it.

¹¹ Claren, "A Feldman Chronology," p. 270.

¹² Bálint András Varga, *Three Questions for Sixty-Five Composers*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2015, p. 151.

Conclusion

Though within the past decade his late music has been enjoying a resurgence of interest among performers and listeners, scholarship has been relatively slow to follow. The most recent books dedicated to Feldman's music, Alistair Noble's *Composing Ambiguity* (2013) and David Cline's *Graph Music of Morton Feldman* (2016), both focused exclusively on the first decade and a half of his career. The articles and essays that have taken his late music as their subject have largely been authored by performers (Louis Goldstein, Ivan Ilić, Catherine Laws, Adam Baratz) or musicologists with cross-disciplinary interests (Cristina Santarelli, also an art historian; Brian Kane, who also writes on aesthetic theory). A common thread running through all of this work is attention to phenomenology. Performers describe the physicality of playing for several hours uninterrupted, and the various states of mind and memory that emerge through performance. Frequent topics for musicologists include the sensation and scale of time, and how the music's duration is gradually constructed. In this sense, the scholarship on Feldman's late music has resembled his compositional practice—influenced by visual arts, mostly unconcerned with theory, unsystematic, speculative.