

Book review

The Graph Music of Morton Feldman by David Cline (CUP, 2016)

by Spencer Allman

David Cline's book in the *Music Since 1900* series edited by Arnold Whittall (Cambridge University Press) explores an area of Morton Feldman's output that is performed far more rarely than much of his other music: the pieces with indeterminate pitch that he wrote using a graph format. There are 16 published works in this category spanning a period between 1950 and 1967. Thereafter, Feldman abandoned the approach and focused on more conventionally notated compositions that allowed him to explore in greater depth his penchant for low dynamics and his quest for stasis and restrained attack, which for many listeners are the hallmarks of his style.

Nevertheless, these earlier works, all described in immense detail by Cline, represent not just an important aspect of Feldman's aesthetic but also make a seminal contribution to the experimental tradition. Cline recalls Feldman's first attempt at composing indeterminately with graph paper, whose importance for the so-called New York School John Cage later acknowledged in 1966 when he stated that this music had "opened up everything". But Cline also makes the comment that it is not at all certain that Feldman was the first in his group to write indeterminate works and that "it is possible that this accolade belongs to (Christian) Wolff".

The writer gives a chronological presentation of the graph works in two early chapters that describe them in general terms (their historical and social context, instrumental line-up, etc.) Their overriding feature is that they do not define any specific pitch, although they differ in other aspects. The series known as *Projections*, for example, is characterised by an indication to the performer of which register to apply to the free pitches indicated graphically, with time values and dynamics (soft throughout) specified, while the later *Intersections* allow for free choice of dynamics and greater flexibility with respect to durations.

The content of the book then gets more technical. There is a chapter on notation, with a generous selection of examples from scores, followed by sections on methodology and approach that go into exhaustive detail regarding the possible structure of these pieces. Again, these chapters are peppered with illustrations of musical scores - surely just as much of interest to mathematicians and numerologists as they might be to conventional readers of music, with their abundance of squiggles and their pools-coupon layout.

This is a thorough account, worthy of a place on any university/music library bookshelf, and probably indispensable for anyone wanting further insight into this part of Feldman's oeuvre. However, for other segments of the readership, including the apparently ever-growing number of listeners who have found works like *Rothko Chapel*, the two string quartets, and many other of the more traditionally notated pieces of the composer's middle and late periods sources of beauty and fascination, this central section of the book must seem as dry and uninviting as the graph works themselves.

For it is no coincidence that they are neglected. Cline early on endeavours to provide reasons for the infrequency of their performance. In what seems a moment of self-contradiction, he claims that they often call for unusual combinations of instruments and then mentions that several are for solo performers (*Projection 1* is for cello and *Intersections 2* and *3* are for piano, for example.) Cline is obviously gunning for these works, but even he has to admit that some require a degree of virtuosity that makes them an unwelcome option in any performer's repertoire.

Intersection 3, for example, requires the player to produce huge clusters of notes within a very tight framework, seemingly posing a challenge even for David Tudor, piano virtuoso and close associate of Feldman, who wrote out his own versions of the *Intersections* for solo piano and *Ixion* for two pianos. This is something that Cline covers in Chapter 9, which includes an illustration of the *Ixion* arrangement.

But does this not defeat the whole purpose? Feldman evidently wrote these pieces in order to liberate sound: each sound was to be its own entity and would be free of the rhetoric of traditional music, a principle lying close to the spirit of experimental music generally. All the same, the composer himself became disillusioned with his early efforts in this area, because he realised that he had given the performer too much freedom. At least Tudor knew what Feldman was after, but many other musicians, particularly in rehearsals of the graph works for large ensembles such as *Out of Last Pieces* from 1961, could all too easily rely on remembered musical patterns and produce groups of sounds that Feldman rejected as not being what he wanted.

Perhaps the main focus of interest in this book is David Cline's assertion that Feldman's graph pieces are based on a systematic, though loosely achieved, way of working in the creation of apparently indeterminate compositions produced in this format. The author goes to great lengths to demonstrate proportionality – the degree to which instances of register and other musical parameters are encountered within the works – and presents various schemata that are meant to persuade us that Feldman used some sort of methodology, this despite the well documented evidence that the composer was always loath to admit to adherence to any system. Certainly, the choice of scored numerical values and figurations was not arrived at using chance elements, Cline informs us, because Feldman is on record as someone who criticised the use of chance operations in composition.

This is a crucial issue in any study of Morton Feldman's music, since there are those who were once close to the man and his music who unabashedly declare that Feldman wrote purely intuitively. Just how one intuits a compositional layout based on a series of numbers is a matter for speculation, but to come down firmly on one side of the fence or the other – systematic methodology or instinct – can be dangerously misleading. Certainly, we know that Feldman used an 'allover' approach, as Cline, and indeed Feldman himself, describe it, treating the composition in the making as a sort of canvas to be daubed and worked on in a patently more random way than the conventional left-to-right practice of notating music. His great love of the American abstract painters, particularly Philip Guston, and the comment by his co-experimentalist Christian Wolff that Feldman used to put graph paper (in this instance) on the wall and treat the sheets like paintings, lend this theory weight.

Nevertheless, Cline's evidence to support his clear conviction that Feldman's graph pieces are the result of a system seems flimsy. And, crucially, nowhere in the book does he make

any attempt at an explanation as to why Feldman chooses the particular order of the core components of his graph works: the indications of register, the numerical symbols indicating numbers of notes to be played either simultaneously or sequentially, rests, durations, and so on. Admittedly, in his introduction Cline does state that some aspects of Feldman's graph pieces cannot be explained in terms of the techniques that the author identifies, a remark that, in my view, has the effect of neutralising his rather dogmatic take on the structure of these works.

The last section of this book, *Appendix 2*, is devoted to a fairly harsh critique of two other analyses of Feldman's graph works. The first object of Cline's displeasure is John Walsh's survey of *Projection 1*, which appears in *The Music of Morton Feldman* edited by Thomas Delio. This collection of essays and "analytical investigations" has become a standard, highly regarded source for scholars, such that Cline's rather scathing appraisal comes as a bit of a shock, albeit an intriguing one. Cline argues here that Walsh's portioning of the score in terms of the placing of periods of silence is unconvincing. One awaits a response from Walsh with excitement and, shamefully perhaps, glee, especially since Cline's own deep and – though it may be cruel to put it this way – rather laboured analyses of the works covered in his book somewhat compromises the notion that Feldman composed 'by ear', as the composer himself put it.

The other diatribe concerns Alistair Noble's survey of 'aggregate completions' in the range 0-11 in the score of *Intersection 3* in his book *Composing Ambiguity: The Early Music of Morton Feldman*. It has to be said here that Noble is another who seems to discover meaningful relationships in Feldman scores where another scholar might well conclude such findings as being the result of coincidence or arbitrary selection. Whatever the case, I am left with a distinct sensation of 'pot calling the kettle black'.

Despite everything, however, the *Graph Music of Morton Feldman* by David Cline is an interesting, comprehensive, diligently researched and much needed addition to the fairly slim collection of large-scale studies of this composer's music. In my view, there is a strong, if not urgent, need for an account of the late and mainly long works all contained in one volume, for it is these, surely, that have principally served to boost his popularity. Had we to rely mainly on the graph music for our diet of Feldman's music he may have well gone the way of, say, Earle Brown. Brown revolutionised musical notation and produced intriguing, and indeed attractive, aleatoric scores, but he is now virtually ignored in even the most exotic avant-garde circles. This is probably because his music is a victim of its very nature – it will always come out differently and so audiences will find themselves incapable of associating Brown and other composers like him with a typical style, something which is, for the most part, untrue about Feldman, with his meditative and often trance-like sound.