

Morton Feldman: Interview by Han Reiziger, 1985

Transcribed by John Snijders

On 5 November 1985, during the New Music America festival in Los Angeles, Han Reiziger interviewed Morton Feldman for a composer portrait programme he was making for the Netherlands radio station, VPRO. Feldman's monumental String Quartet 2 had been given its West Coast premiere at the festival by the Kronos Quartet on 2 November. The transcript below was made from a recording of the programme broadcast on VPRO Radio 4 on 17 June 1987. The original interview was significantly longer, only 30 minutes of it being used in the programme. Dotted lines below indicate where cuts were made. In the radio programme the interview fragments were interspersed with recordings of short piano pieces, and the programme concluded with a complete performance of For Bunita Marcus.

MF: I feel that many, many people, if they do like my music, they like it for the wrong reasons. For example: most of the people that do like it, like it because they feel it's meditative.

HR: I think so, yes.

MF: I don't feel my music is meditative. I feel my music has to do with... Well, let's put it this way, because we were just looking at a review in a German music magazine on a book of my essays that Walter Zimmermann just put out, and on the cover is a caricature of me, or rather a painting of me by my friend Philip Guston who died a few years ago. And Philip's main theme, or if it's not a main theme it's his main concern, let's put it this way, was the impossibility of painting a picture today. That it's actually impossible to paint something because to some degree everything has already been painted. A lot of people feel that there's no problems, they just find a style and they just paint that style. But if you don't begin with style,

and you say, 'I wanna paint the picture', and your cop-out is not a look or a style, then it's pretty impossible to think about what in heaven's name am I gonna paint? And I think what my music demonstrates for me, I have no idea really you know, what other people really hear in it, but what my music really demonstrates for me is the impossibility of going ahead and just writing a purely abstract piece of music that is not, for example, metamusic, or involved with so many things that are extraneous to music. One of the most interesting things about this point of view is that I once got in an argument, when I first started to go to Europe, and people would say, "Well, this is not music". And I would say, "Well", I said, "I think that John Cage and myself are the only ones that are really writing music, because we're not doing anything else." I said, "It's not like Boulez, that has written very few purely abstract pieces, that they're all literary, and that some of the greatest music we have or we know is either based on other music, like Stravinsky, or it's based on literary things or it's based on extramusical considerations." I said, "As far as John Cage using for example the *I Ching*," I said, "You know, most people don't know why John uses the *I Ching*. John uses the *I Ching* because it's very flexible. But more than being flexible it demonstrates the yin-yang aspect of existence in terms of things equalising out. That's why he uses the *I Ching*." The fact that I don't use any known processes doesn't mean in a sense I'm not involved with process. But I am involved with my responsibility... Let's put it, again, this way: when Schoenberg said that he wanted to extend the Germanic musical tradition for another hundred years, I just want to extend music for another ten years.

HR: Not longer?

MF: Oh, I'll settle for ten years. I was recently at some big tractor company in America, and they had all the tractor parts connected with a computer, and it had to work for a ten year cycle. So I'll settle for ten years. I'm not extending any tradition, Cage is not my tradition, Ives is not my tradition, everything is my tradition. So in other words, it's like the nuclear... I don't wanna have a system that will determine no more wars. I just don't want any more wars, you see? Without a system! [laughter] I don't wanna say, "No, I wanna kill you because you don't want my system to stop wars." I remember reading a soviet poet, I thought it was quite nice, where he said, "We must kill to stop killing." But I do have a system, and my system essentially is thought. It is a system, that is, it's a system in terms of...

HR: It's thought, it's philosophy?

MF: No, not it's philosophy, but just thinking, as I'm writing. Rather than living thinking, rather than dead thinking, or prethinking. I don't wanna have the piece already written so I don't have anything to think about as I write it.

HR: So you never have in mind ahead what you are doing, you have no idea, just when you write you think?

MF: Look, it is absolutely not mysterious. We have everything even before we think. We have the automobile, we have the instrumentation, that might be the automobile, we have certain engineering to make them... All we don't have is the gas. So thought is like gas. But for composers to think that they're beginning and they're reinventing a wheel... Or as Earle Brown used to say, I remember in the fifties if you would complain about somebody

he'd say, "That guy just reinvented the fountain pen." But we have everything. I tell my students we're all Duchamp: we didn't invent major sixths, we didn't invent major and minor sevenths, we didn't invent the violin, we cannot build the forty-thousand dollar Steinway, we cannot print the money to pay the Kronos and the Aki Takahashi to play in the festival. [laughs] So there are many things that are already preinvented. All we have to do is to drive the car. However, many people feel that in art you don't have to know how to drive. I have students that defend the worst... I don't know what "Scheiss" is in Dutch...

HR: Well they'd understand!

MF: They'll understand "Scheiss"! [laughs] And they feel they don't have to know anything. So I went into my classroom the other day and I looked at them, I said, "God forbid, if any of you get very sick, and you need an operation, I have the right person for you. They never studied medicine, but they love to cut up people, and they love the sight of blood, so let me recommend this person. They're very sincere. They believe that medicine should be free expression, and they feel that they should be able to do it any way they want." I asked one student, "What do you think it is all about in the university?" He said, "I insist on my academic freedom." I said, "Don't you know that in a university academic freedom is the freedom to be academic?"

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MF: It's a discovered length. I'm not in the middle of Amsterdam where real estate is very expensive. I have all the time in the world. Again, I feel that music is not a house. It's not gonna cave in, I'm not renting space. I wanna

discover my form. I feel that every piece I write I have to rediscover its form, its scale. I'm not into form, form is... We know form already, we know the division of things into parts. Form is easy. I'm into many things, scale, what I would feel its natural proportion. I'm into new aspects of memory. One of my problems with a lot of forms is that I feel that musical forms were really memory forms, and I feel that the longer the piece is the more you remember things in the piece. In fact the memory works better, you could reflect, you could think about things you heard. Maybe they're more like novels now.

HR: Because of the length of the novels?

MF: Because where one moves out the experience, rather than just like poetry where it's the quintessence of experience. I'm a big Proust lover. A friend of mine once said... I remember once, like any other nervous young person when I was eighteen or nineteen, I picked up Proust and I put it down. And I said "I just can't read Proust." And my friend said, "You don't read Proust, you sip it, like wine." It's not beer, it's wine! I was giving my seminar a week ago. Half of it was on Beethoven's hundred and one, piano sonata. And it was edited by Hans von Bülow, and he writes something in the footnotes, in the programme notes, he says, "You don't play this sonata, you sing it," you see. Well, maybe there's something about... I always felt that the old music, or the reason that Boulez is successful, especially Boulez, is that they are hearing for you. They say, "Sit back and relax, you don't have to hear any more. I'm doing all the hearing for you. I'm doing all the thinking for you. You don't have to do anything but pay 25 dollars for a seat." Now, with that particular type of orientation you're not going to a concert to hear a piece of mine, and pay 25 dollars and have to hear it! I

mean, you're not used to it. You're paying 25 dollars, it would be, you know what it would be? As if you pay 25 dollars to go to a tennis game and they'll ask you to play the game! " [laughter] "I didn't come here to play tennis, I came here to watch tennis!" It's the same thing really.

HR: That's the way the audience reacts.

MF: That's the way the audience reacts. I don't wanna listen to you, it's too exhausting. I didn't pay to exhaust myself.

HR: And you said listening to a Beethoven sonata the audience must have the same experience as listening to your music?

MF: Late Beethoven is so crazy. One hundred and one is the work of a madman. John Cage has never written anything as crazy as 101. [sings fugue subject from last movement] And then he goes into something happy, and then he goes into something... [sings] That's not a fugue subject! [sings] It's a crazy dance! It's like you're walking the street and you see some man just dancing for no reason, without any function, without any purpose. And it moves from one mood to another like a manic depressive. If we had a relative that acted like that, we'd call the fire department! [laughter] And they're tapping their feet. [sings] They're nodding their head back and forth...

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MF: Maybe my music is for records or for in archives. I don't think my music is ever gonna have any success. I think my music might have a success like Satie. A few little pieces here and now for aficionados, if they're

not all killed off by AIDS, these aficionados that love Satie... I don't think I have a future.

HR: But that's very pessimistic, what you're saying now. When I say in the whole musical world wherever you go, well in the Western world, in Germany, Holland, Morton Feldman is a name.

MF: Yes, but like perfume, like Arpège. What is Morton Feldman? He's quiet. And now he's quiet and long! [laughter] Before he used to be quiet and short, now he's quiet and long. Like Arpège, Chanel No 4, 5, 6, 7. But Boulez is only one thing you know, but they don't feel it. Boulez is fast. It's like the motor races, very French music, they love those motor races, those films with motor races. His music is fast, there's not that much else in his music. Forget about construction, forget about putting notes together, forget about instruments, that's given. I'm talking about that special voice, that authenticity that it's Boulez that he brings. It's because he can handle speed like nobody else. He's a fast race driver, he's a top race driver, the best, that's it. I hope he writes one piece. Pierre, I now wanna say this to you personally if by accident you might hear this some day: just write ten minutes for me, I deserve it. Just ten minutes. And what I'm talking about is not the opening of *Éclat*. He was telling somebody in an interview that *Éclat* was influenced by my music, in the sense that where things would come from nowhere and go nowhere, that whole idea, which he feels my music is, that is comes from nowhere and goes nowhere. Oh I'm just too old, I'm too old for polemics.

HR: You feel that?

MF: Oh yes, yes! I'm just too old for polemics. Because then I would be doing everything they did. I'll be seeing things stylistically, that it's about old styles. That's what polemics is, it's about old styles. So I'd be on the side of culture. Everything is style. There is that marvellous remark of Charles Péguy, he's a marvellous poet, communist, at the turn of the century in France, and he said this about Christianity: "Everything begins as a mystique and ends in politics." So what's the use of me talking about the ethical or the moral or the thoughtful aspect of art divorced from culture? People would say, "Well, can't you make a good car and have it safe too?" That's the excuse one would give about society, like, "Can't you marry a rich girl instead of a poor one?" I mean, all those rationalisations, society is very smart. They're pragmatic, they've had a lot of experience, thousands of years, they know what questions to ask and they know what answers to give. And when they say, "Well, can't you make a good car that's both cheap and safe, and you can really listen to it and it's interesting, say like Luciano Berio, or it could be far out and entertain you like Mauricio Kagel? Why do you have to be different? Don't you understand we can't afford a Rolls Royce and we don't have the time. Maybe in Middelburg, but in Amsterdam? We can't sit for four hours, we have to go for dinner! We have to go for dinner, there's a new restaurant that just opened up, right around the corner from the New Amsterdam Hotel, marvellous place, but you need reservations." That's the new phenomenon now, not art, in New York, restaurants. That's the new art form: restaurants. I'm going to Berlin in a few weeks, I can't wait. There's a whole bunch of new restaurants in there that are fantastic. And New York is restaurants, that's the new art form. They don't go to concerts, they don't go to the theatre, they don't go anywhere. All the people that go to concerts will go to BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music]. They're coming in from Rochester, Cleveland,

Philadelphia, the suburbs, but the real New Yorkers don't go there. The only ones that go there are those that wanna be performed there. So there are thousands, perhaps millions, from all over the world that wanna be performed at BAM. So the audience is those that wanna be performed there. Last night with van Rossem we went out for a drink, and I said, "Let's go to the Beverly Hills Hotel." It's very expensive, very nice atmosphere, very crowded. Why is it crowded? Everybody wants to get into the movies, so they all go there, that maybe someone would see them, you see. And that's the new audience in New Music America in Los Angeles. Three quarters of the people that are in the audience coming up from provincial universities up in Oregon, coming in from the deserts, near Albuquerque, that's the audience. The audience is those that some day they might participate. I understand from Carl Stone that there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of applications for pieces to be done here. I don't like it for other reasons. I don't like what happened to art in America for other reasons. If everybody in America that did not get a bachelors degree from a university, Steve Reich and Phil Glass will have no audience. Especially now that you've come into America a lot and you see this vast country, hundreds of thousands of universities. Everybody is educated. Anthony Caro, you know, the important British minimal sculptor, was at this girls school, Bennington. I don't mean it's just a girls school, but it was Bennington, And he was coming and they went and one day they made imitation Anthony Caros to put – it's a beautiful campus – as he went up the street, up the hill around in this beautiful environment, he saw things that looked like Anthony Caros. They made them overnight. These abstract sculptures they made overnight. He got very upset.

[interview broken off by lunch]