

# Three Articles on Morton Feldman by Eberhard Blum

## English translations by Ken Edelson

### Report on *For Philip Guston* (1996)

*This report was first published in the program for a performance of Feldman's For Philip Guston. The performance took place on January 21, 1996 in the Berlinische Galerie of the Martin-Gropius-Bau, with Eberhard Blum on flute, Nils Vigeland on piano, and Jan Williams playing percussion.*

Right after the premier of *Crippled Symmetry* on February 5, 1984 at the Academy of the Arts in Berlin, Morton Feldman told me that he was planning to compose a new trio, and that it would surpass everything that we (Nils Vigeland, Jan Williams, and I) had performed up to that point. In mid-November of the same year, a thick package arrived in the mail. It contained the 102 pages of the score of *For Philip Guston*. I had Feldman's third trio for flute, piano, and percussion in my hands. After I had studied the work in depth, I saw that Feldman was right. It was really totally different from everything we had done up to that point. The first thing that impressed me was the sheer length of the work, and I asked myself: "How am I going to last physically through a performance at all?" With further study, this question quickly became insignificant, and I gave my full attention to the details of the score. The premier of the work was planned for April 21, 1985 in the Albright Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo. Since Nils Vigeland wasn't available, Ivar Mikhashoff took the piano part. I traveled to Buffalo a week before the performance and we worked every day on parts of the piece. What we didn't have was the experience of a complete performance of a work like this. The atmosphere before the concert was accordingly tense. The performance lasted about four and a half hours (Feldman had predicted three hours), and I had a completely new experience of musical time and the events which happen within it. Feldman was in high spirits after the performance, and spoke for hours about the time during which he was with Philip Guston and the other painters in New York almost every day. Probably no other work of Feldman's bears such clearly autobiographical features. You could make it the starting point of a yet-to-be-written biography.

The next performance took place on July 2, 1985. Ad van't Veer had invited us to Middleburg in Holland. Pieces of Feldman's were the focal point of the yearly festival for new music that happens there. There were also works by Bunita Marcus and Nils Vigeland on the program – both students of Feldman's. The performance of *For Philip Guston* was the undisputed high point of the festival. On the afternoon of the concert Feldman gave a four-hour lecture to about six interested listeners. The transcription of the lecture was printed in the volume "Musik Konzepte," which was devoted to Feldman, and became the key to understanding his late

works. Just before the start of the concert Feldman gave a short introduction, which emphasized the autobiographical character of the piece.

In the years after that we regularly performed the trios *Why Patterns?* and *Crippled Symmetry* in Europe and in the US. *For Philip Guston* was only on the program once. There was a performance on November 24, 1985 under terrible conditions in the Museum of Musical Instruments in Berlin. After the performance we agreed with Feldman not to perform the work under inadequate conditions anymore. Most promoters didn't understand this sort of new music, and were as a result not in the position to create appropriate conditions for performances. In the meanwhile, Feldman had composed *For Christian Wolff* for flute and piano, the premiere of which Nils Vigeland and I played in 1986 at the International Summer Course in Darmstadt. On January 15, 1987, we performed it again in the big exhibition hall of the Kunstsammlung North Rhein-Westphalia in Düsseldorf. Late in the evening on September 3, 1987, Nils Vigeland called me from New York and said: "Morton Feldman is dead." Of course it wasn't totally surprising, since we knew he was seriously ill.

On the morning of September 4, I talked to Ernstalbrecht Stiebler in Frankfurt and we agreed to put on a memorial concert. *For Philip Guston* would be on the program. The concert took place on December 1, 1987 in the Städel Museum in Frankfurt. John Cage spoke before the performance, talked about his last telephone conversation with the ailing Feldman, and was, as always, optimistic, since after all, we still had Feldman's music.

Did an era end with Feldman's death?

Would the changes in the music world be similarly apparent, like in the art world after the death of Jackson Pollock? What influence would Feldman's music have? I performed Feldman's music wherever I could, and observed how the interest in it grew and how young composers made it the point of departure for their own work.

Through the Swiss pianist Marianne Schröder we began a fruitful collaboration with Werner X. Uehlinger and his label HATHUT. In quick succession, Nils Vigeland, Jan Williams, and I recorded the three trios and the duo. These CDs are documents of our more than decade long close collaboration with Feldman. The circle has been completed!

Further performances are already planned!

## On The Life of Sounds (1997)

*This article was written for the program brochure that appeared in connection with festival “Gütersloh ’97: For Morton Feldman.”*

If we look at the second half of our closing century, and ask ourselves who the great composers of the era were, we inevitably have to include Morton Feldman.

Who is this Morton Feldman, and what is it about his extraordinary artistic achievement that gives us occasion to devote a series of events to him this year?

He was born on January 12, 1926 in New York. His parents came as children at the beginning of the century from Russia to America. His father first worked at a garment company and later started his own business. Feldman grew up in a Jewish family typical of the time.

But even the beginning of his musical education was remarkable. At twelve, he took piano lessons with Vera Maurina Press, a Russian emigrant, who, among other things, had studied with Ferruccio Busoni in Berlin. She introduced the young Feldman to the secrets of sound, and taught him to understand the great European tradition of the nineteenth century.

Feldman later remarked about these lessons: “It was only because of her – only, I think, because she was not a disciplinarian – that I was instilled with a sort of vibrant musicality rather than musicianship.”<sup>1</sup> When Feldman was supposed to start his studies in 1944, he visited New York University and realized it wasn't for him. He preferred to work in his father's small business, and decided to earn his living that way. It was during this time that he met the Berlin emigrant Stefan Wolpe, whose vitality impressed him, and with whom he took private lessons.

He called Wolpe his most important teacher, since he “didn't question my ideas or extol any systems for me to use.”<sup>2</sup> Through Wolpe, he met many New York musicians and visual artists, among others, the composer Edgard Varèse. Varèse showed him “how you become a professional composer in America without leading a professional life.” He advised him emphatically never to study at an academic institution and to go his own way. Feldman followed his advice and developed his musical ideas independently.

Around 1950, Feldman met the composer John Cage, 14 years his elder, who became his life-long friend. They played each other their new compositions, organized group concerts, and discussed the visual arts, literature, and music through the night. Cage's loft in a former factory building in Manhattan was the meeting point of the New York art scene. Here Feldman met visual artists and began to cultivate a passionate exchange of ideas with them. Among them were Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns, and Robert

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<sup>1</sup> From “Liner Notes” in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: The Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, p3.

<sup>2</sup> From “Crippled Symmetry” in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: The Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, p146.

Rauschenberg. These painters' work hung in his office, and he dedicated compositions to them.

It was artists, writers, theater people, and dancers who attended concerts of Feldman and Cage's work, which also included the music of their friends and comrades Earle Brown and Christian Wolff. The concerts mostly took place in art galleries, small theaters, or factory spaces. All of the musicians were isolated from the traditional music business in America. Their musical approaches were disruptive and weren't accepted, since they didn't try to compose any new sort of music, but rather to create a fundamentally new form of musical art.

What were the ideas which Feldman so independently developed? He found graphic forms of notation for many of his works – mostly chamber music, which required joint responsibility on the part of the performer in choosing many of the piece's details. He thought that all sounds should lead their own life – meaning that they should be, to the greatest extent possible, unmanipulated by the composer. The will of a generation of expressionists, of artists who used music as a medium to convey some sort of message, was foreign and disagreeable to him. Feldman accepted the innate life of sounds – the process of creating them, their fading out, their dynamics and their limits. It was from this perspective that he wrote music for his entire life.

To his influential contemporaries in Europe – Stockhausen, Boulez, and Nono – he was a dilettante, since he didn't have anything to do with their dominance in the musical world and their all-encompassing will to control sounds. Feldman was interested in the question: to what degree can you give up control, but still preserve that last bit, which allows you to speak of a piece as your own? This question played a decisive role in the visual arts as well as in the music of the time. Concepts like “informal art,” “aleatoric music,” and “abstract expressionism” were the catch words of the time. Feldman talked about “abstract experience,” which played a decisive role in his work.

Of course the same question occupied most European composers a few years later, and people started to perform Feldman's works, study his thinking and his approach, and even to some degree to imitate them. In 1970 Feldman stepped on to the European stage and lived for a year and a half as a guest of the Künstlerprogramm of the DAAD in Berlin. During this period of intense activity he got commissions to write large works for orchestra, introduced his work at countless concerts, and talked about his music. Suddenly the dilettante became a respected artist.

At the end of the seventies (in the meanwhile he had become a professor at the University of Buffalo), Feldman started to write a series of chamber pieces, whose particularity consists primarily in the fact that they're unusually long. Duos, trios, and quartets came about whose length is between one and five hours. Until the end of his life – Feldman died in 1987 – he composed fourteen of these works, a tremendous accomplishment. What, apart from the length, is particular to these works?

Theorists, musicologists, and journalists are trying to find out. They want to find out his secret. I think – and I'm glad – that that hasn't happened yet. Feldman's music is and remains mysterious. When we listen to his music, the enigma is solved, without our being able to articulate the solution, to put it into words. You almost

want to say: just listen! Don't ask questions!

But there are things to say about them:

The works evoke massive paintings, like the ones Jackson Pollock, Cy Twombly, and Mark Rothko made, paintings which today take up entire rooms in museums, or for which, in Rothko's case, entire buildings are created in order to do justice to the scale of the work. In Feldman's works it's the amount of time, and the relationship as well as the proportions of the events to each other, which makes their performance such a particular experience.

In 1997, ten years after Feldman's death, the city of Gütersloh is dedicating a series of events and a documentary exhibition to Feldman under the title "Gütersloh '97: For Morton Feldman." Eleven chamber works and three orchestral works of Feldman's are on the program. The orchestral works belong to those of his that are rarely performed. There's a rare opportunity to hear the work *Oboe and Orchestra*. The graphically notated orchestral work *Atlantis* has never been played in Germany. The chamber works give an overview from the fifties through the eighties. Of the late works, we chose the ninety-minute *Crippled Symmetry*.

Feldman was a passionate collector of old, hand-woven rugs. He started to pay attention to the offset patterns in the rugs, and transferred these patterns, which develop through delicate manual work, to his compositional process, to the connection of musical patterns and symmetries. The result was fascinating music of great beauty.

Feldman himself always listened to other composers' music in a totally engaged way. Some composers, like Boulez, he admired and despised in the same measure, others, like Webern, Stravinsky, and Wolpe, were models for him. To determine Feldman's "place" in the music of the twentieth century, there are other works to listen to, with which Feldman felt connected, or which were influenced by him. They fill out the picture we'd like to give you of his music in Gütersloh. So: LISTEN!

## Report (1997)

*The following text was written for the program of the Feldman concert on March 9, 1997 at the Musik Biennale Berlin. The concert was a repeat of the program given on October 21, 1978 for the "Metamusik Festival Berlin":*

Program:

*Why Patterns? (World Premiere)*

*Instruments III*

*Why Patterns? (Repetition)*

The Soloists Were:

*Eberhard Blum (Flute)*

*Han de Vries (Oboe)*

*Jan Williams (Percussion)*

*Morton Feldman (Piano)*

*In the March 1997 concert, Steffen Schleiermacher played piano.*

The Metamusikfestival took place four times in the seventies under the direction of Walter Bachauer in the Berlin National Gallery. Music from various cultures of the world was performed at a high level in this exceptionally successful series.

In 1978, Morton Feldman, Jan Williams, Han de Vries and I were invited to the third Metamusikfestival. Feldman decided to present his new pieces *Why Patterns?* and *Instruments III* in Berlin. The concert took place on October 21, 1978. Feldman had finished the first version of *Why Patterns?*, which he had worked on intensely for months, in April, and talked about it constantly. He wanted to play the piano part himself. Approaching the first rehearsals in Buffalo we were accordingly tense. There wasn't and isn't any master score for this piece. The three parts are precisely notated, but there is no vertical coordination during the performance. Each person plays his part independently, and as exactly as possible. Every performance turns out differently of course.

“Rehearsing” meant for us playing the piece again and again. We wanted to experience the degrees of variation and the musical results. During the rehearsals Feldman constantly changed his part and a few times details in ours. He just tried things out. Experiencing his touch on the piano during rehearsals and later in many performances was a special experience for us. In Buffalo we previewed a lot of the works for Feldman's composition students, who would get to know the work before the premiere. In Berlin, and later at other concerts, he put *Why Patterns?* on the program twice so that the audience could experience the particularities of the work.

A year earlier, on July 31, 1977, we premiered *Instruments III* in a memorable concert at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. Feldman worked for a long time on the program. He wanted it to be ideal.

He combined two dramatic works – *Dmaathen* for oboe and percussion by Xenakis, and the *Ursonate* by Kurt Schwitters – with Eric Satie's *Socrate* and his work *Instruments III*. The London concert was one of the last that the oboist Nora Post played, who had to give up her concert activities because of illness. After that we always played *Instruments III* with Han de Vries, for whom Feldman had already composed his 1976 work *Oboe and Orchestra*. In Berlin, *Instruments III* was between the two performances of *Why Patterns?* on the program.

After Jörn Merkert became the director of the Berlinische Galerie in 1987, he asked me to put on a series of concerts in the rooms of the Martin-Gropius-Bau in February 1988. These concerts were supposed to be an indication that he wanted new music to be played in the rooms of the museum next to new art. I devoted this first series of concerts in the Berlinische Galerie to Feldman, who had died in September of 1987, and put *Why Patterns?* on the program next to the work *Piano* and the percussion piece *The King of Denmark*. Nils Vigeland, who had studied composition with Feldman and had played in the premiere of *Crippled Symmetry* in 1984 at the Academy of the Arts in Berlin, was the pianist. In a second series of concerts, “Stations of Musical Modernity,” which likewise took place in the Berlinische Galerie, two early piano pieces (*Intermission 6*, *Projection 3*) as well as both of the cello pieces *Projection 1* and *Intersection 4* were on the program

In 1995 I was awarded the “Friedlieb Ferdinand Runge Prize for Unconventional Dissemination of Art” from the Foundation for Prussian Maritime Trade. With the prize money, Jörn Merkert and I organized an event in January 1996 for Feldman's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday: the performance of a the four hour work *For Philip Guston* with Jan Williams, Nils Vigeland, and I under ideal conditions at the Martin-Gropius-Bau. Among these conditions was the presentation of the huge Feldman portrait “Friend – to M.F.” by Guston (on loan from the Des Moines Art Center) in the same room. We had already played *For Philip Guston* in 1985 with Feldman present in Berlin, but it was the first time that the painting was shown here.

So over the years the Berlinische Galerie in the Martin-Gropius-Bau became one of the most important places for the performance of Feldman's chamber music. During his life, Feldman was, like few other composers of the twentieth century, closely connected to the visual arts and to visual artists. Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns belonged to his circle of friends. In his essays, Feldman described the influence these artists had on him.

When I went to Buffalo in the early seventies at Feldman's invitation, the first thing he did was bring me to the Albright Knox Art Gallery, in order to show me this incredible collection of American art. We spent hours in front of every picture, and I started to understand the roots of Feldman's art. Not to mention that I learned through this education in perception a lot for my own work as a visual artist.

Of course Feldman's works have been performed in places other than the Berlinische Gallery. At the end of January, 1990, Steffen Schleiermacher and I played the three-hour *For Christian Wolff* in the auditorium of the

East German Academy of the Arts. Schleiermacher, whom I had met shortly before, has definitely become one of Feldman's most active interpreters through his experience playing his work. In connection with the exhibition "American Art in the Twentieth Century" I planned for June 1993 under the title of "The New York School" multiple concerts in the Hebbel-Theater. Jan Williams, Nils Vigeland, and I played *Crippled Symmetry* and there was an impressive performance of the rarely played *Pianos and Voices I* for five pianists. This work had caused a scandal at its premiere in Berlin in 1972, and led John Cage, one of the five pianists, to call Feldman a poetic extremist.

In July of 1996, the gallery owner Michael Wewerka asked me, for the occasion of a retrospective of exhibitions held at the gallery, to put on a number of concerts. His express wish was to have works of Feldman's, Cage's and Schwitters' on the program. The pianist Daniel N. Seel played Feldman's *Palais de Mari*, *Last Pieces*, and *Intermission 6*. I played *Ursonate* by Kurt Schwitters, which Feldman also always liked to have on the program.

Repeating a concert from 1978 almost 20 years later for this Musik-Biennale doesn't make Feldman a historical figure. We want to remember how important performances in Berlin were for him, under what circumstances they took place, and to ask ourselves:

Do we hear and play differently now?

Have we changed?

Has Feldman's music changed us?

What is the future of Feldman's music?