

# **Morton Feldman and Abstract Expressionism**

**Time and sound construction in his piano miniatures of  
the 1950s and 1960s**

**by Gianmario Borio**

**(English translation by Francesco Sani)**

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The circle of musicians gathering around John Cage towards the latter part of the 1940s – Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, David Tudor and Christian Wolff – expressed a strong interest in the visual arts. Cage, right from the time of his studies with Arnold Schoenberg in 1935, had taken an interest in abstract painting – Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian – and had himself begun painting. The most fruitful encounter for him was with Mark Tobey at the Cornish School of Art in Seattle; the latter's white paintings suggested to Cage the idea of non-representational and radically abstract art[1]. Perhaps it was after meeting Cage in 1941 that Tobey began studying piano and composition. His fascination with music concerned especially rhythmic and contrapuntal aspects, the subject of his paintings – stars, swarming lights, crowds and urban landscapes – executed through several interacting lines giving life to an experience characterised by an overall rhythmic pulse[2].

Tobey worked in the West Coast, an area that more than any other in the US was influenced by Asian philosophy and religion. This cultural background helps understanding the intellectual affinity felt

by Cage when confronted with Tobey's work. The core of the informal American painters was in New York: Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, to name but a few. Of all the composers in the circle around Cage – who, between 1948 and 1951, held several lectures at the *Subjects of the Artist* experimental school and at the *Club* [3] – Feldman was, without a doubt, the one who remained most faithful throughout his life to the abstract expressionist aesthetic. Some of Feldman's works bear titles that openly pay homage to some of the above artists, for example, *For Franz Kline*, *De Kooning* and, in 1971, *Rothko Chapel*, written for the octagonal space in Houston for which Rothko had been commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil to paint what were to become some of his last paintings [4].

Feldman accompanied his compositional activity with a series of essays, many of which dealt with the link between music and painting. In one of these essays, "Between Categories" [5], he defined his music as "surface" art, distancing himself from thinking about composition as linking sounds in time:

*My obsession with surface is the subject of my music. In that sense, my compositions are really not "compositions" at all. One might call them time canvasses in which I more or less prime the canvas with an overall hue of the music. I have learned that the more one composes or constructs, the more one prevents Time Undisturbed from becoming the controlling metaphor of the music.*

*Both these terms - Space, Time - have come to be used in music and the visual arts as well as in mathematics, literature, philosophy and science. [...] I prefer to think of my work as: between categories. Between Time and Space. Between painting and music. Between the music's construction, and its surface [6].*

Composing between categories also means allowing the emergence of an emotion which cannot be grasped by means of philosophical categories. Such emotion is born of the "abstract experience", a term with which Feldman defined his work, but which also defined the quintessence of Abstract Expressionism, the late 1940s artistic

movement based in New York. The abstract in “abstract experience” does not mean the opposite of real or concrete, but rather it means belonging to a sphere that cannot be represented in a painting, albeit having an effect on us at a sensory level. Like the New York artists, Feldman believed that, to obtain visibility (which however can be captured only as the ‘atmosphere’ of the painting), one needs above all to provide experiences of transition and dissolution. The dominant categories of art music, such as beginning and end, lose any meaning in this atmospheric conception of the work. Compositions begin with a leap that “is more like going to another place where the time changes” [7] and end simply by being abandoned, without a speech-like gesture of closure.

In his piano miniatures of the 1950s, Feldman pursued an asymmetric and decentralised logic, far removed from the structuralism developed around the same time by Milton Babbitt, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luigi Nono. The time configuration is not previously determined but issues forth with immediacy from the sound object; also, figurativeness is excluded or neutralised by a compositional effort that is chiefly concerned with harmonic fields and their sonorities. In a conference held in 1956 at the *Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* in Darmstadt, Stefan Wolpe – the only composer other than Cage whom Feldman considered as something of a teacher to him – brought Wolff’s and Feldman’s short piano pieces into the arena of an art of the “extreme” spearheaded by Edgard Varèse:

*The motion, which in Varèse is already slowed down and held back, comes to a standstill in Christian Wolff - at least apparently to a standstill. Probably the tendency is so to isolate every event that it appears suspended in space and isolated in its own motion. [...] [Feldman] is interested in surfaces that are as spare as possible and in the remnants of shapes that can barely be heard at a distance [8]*

## INTERMISSION 5

SLOW. HOLD SUSTAINING AND UNA CORDA PEDALS THROUGHOUT.

Morton Feldman

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Intermission 5' by Morton Feldman. It consists of two systems of piano music. The first system contains measures 1 through 6, and the second system contains measures 7 through 12. The music is written for piano with a 3/8 time signature. The score features a mix of dynamics, including fortissimo (fff) and pianissimo (ppp). There are several chords marked with '15' above them, indicating a specific fingering or voicing. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The overall texture is sparse and vertical, characteristic of Feldman's style.

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Musical excerpt 1: *Intermission 5* (bb. 1-12)

We begin our examination of Feldman's solo piano pieces with *Intermission 5* and *Extensions 3*, both from 1952. These compositions are characterised by the predominantly vertical arrangement of sounds, the sudden juxtapositions of pianissimo and fortissimo dynamics, and the use of repetitive patterns. In *Intermission 5*, navigating through the piece is aided by four *fff* chords (one of which is at the start of the piece) functioning as goalposts in a sound universe that, as Wolpe noted, unfolds and defines itself mainly through a spatial dimension. Since the pianist holds down both pedals for the entire duration of the piece, these chords break into the music like explosions, absorbing into their resonance the succeeding *ppp* sounds. Entrance points for the *fff* chords are structured according to simple proportions, namely multiples of 6. The piece is 72 bars long; since the meter is 3/8, it makes 216 quavers – which is equal to  $6^3$ . And the time interval between the *fff* chords, which can be considered as markers of the musical time, is always a multiple of 6.

Table 1: *Intermission 5*, Time intervals between major events

Bar	1	9	23	33	55	72	
Events	<i>fff</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>fff</i>	<i>fff</i>	pattern		
Time intervals in quavers							

As Table 1 shows, the last *fff* chord gives way to a 119-quaver long section – over half the total length of the piece – which is itself made of multiples of 6. Thus, for example, the second-but-one section is a D#-Gb pattern which, including the silent b. 43, totals (6 x 4 =) 24 quavers. This is followed by a (6 x 2 =) 12-quaver long silent passage, which in turn leads into the final section (b. 56 ff.), namely a coda-like two-bar pattern lasting (6 x 9 =) 54 quavers. Furthermore, the entire number of notes in the piece is 138, which is the result of the multiplication 23 x 6. It remains to be seen whether or not this bears witness to a compositional intent or is mere coincidence.

SOFT AS POSSIBLE. *8va* ..... **EXTENSIONS 3** ..... *Morton Feldman*

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Musical excerpt 2: *Extensions 3* (bb. 1-16)

Table 2: Segments within *Extensions 3*

Segm.	Bars	Segm.	Bars	Segm.	Bars	Segm.	Bars
1	1-7	7	33-37	13	66-69	19	108-113
2	8-11	8	38-44	14	70-74	20	114-122
3	12-14	9	45-50	15	75-78	21	123-126
4	15-20	10	51-52	16	79-89	22	127-130
5	20-28	11	53-60	17	90-101	23	131-133
6	28-32	12	61-65	18	102-107	24	134-137

The repeated pattern in the last section of *Intermission 5* heralds a shift in the temporal dimension that seems to contradict, rather than bringing to a conclusion, what has gone before. It is precisely this shift in the sound “surface”, to paraphrase Feldman, that typifies another of his works, *Extensions 3*. From the very beginning the listener is made aware of a sound world articulated by small segments; rather than developing, the music seems to just expand through space. Thus, for instance, the opening two superimposed major sevenths do not imply any harmonic tension; they rather delineate the gamut within which the pitches will slot in and the type of chromatic intervals to which chords will be linked. Thus the opening chords, containing the pitches F / E / D# / Ab / G / C / B, suggest the sort of chromatic filling-in that Pousseur called “organic chromaticism” [9]. However by the end of b. 4 a repetition already occurs (where Ab returns enharmonically as G#) and by the end of b.7 or Segment 1 as many as three repetitions have occurred among the fourteen pitches used; moreover, the chromatic sequence misses the F#, which is saved for particular moments (as in Segment 11).

If the filling of the chromatic space can be considered a dynamic feature of this composition (a composition of sound and time), unvaried repetition can be only understood as a phenomenon of stasis. Thus, for example, the three repetitions of a major ninth (Eb – F) at the beginning of Segment 2 (b.8) herald a temporal shift from dynamism to stasis, from process to pattern – two sides of the same coin in Feldman’s aesthetic. Consequently one could argue that *Extensions 3* articulates a dialectic between these two opposites, were it not for the fact that on the one hand the reiterative passages seem to continually transform the very idea of stasis, and on the other the non-

reiterative ones seem to increasingly take on static qualities (especially by Segments 21 – 23).

Here the term “extension” acquires two meanings: 1) widening of the sound palette within the chosen space; 2) process character of the succession of repetitive events. Examining the latter more closely, one finds that all the repetitive segments show at least one of the following distinctive features; pattern duration, number of notes, density of attacks, and number of reiterations [10]. Thus, for example, Segment 4 differs from Segment 2 not only in its beginning (on the ‘extraneous’ F# and a C# doubled at the fifteenth) but also in both number of notes and reiterations. One notices besides that, maybe in order to accentuate the asymmetrical structure, the transition to Segment 5 takes place with the use of two common pitch-classes. The process character of Segment 5 is underlined by the linear disposition of the first pitches. The next segment with process character (9) takes up the rhythmical feature of two dotted quavers which characterized the previous patterns. The linear process of repetition can be clearly seen also in the section that goes from the start of Segment 11 (b.53) to the end of Segment 20 (b.122). What is interesting is that the segments always have a different structure, so for instance where an interval of a fifteenth periodically repeated is a feature of Segment 11 and alternating chords/dyads that of Segment 13, in Segment 15 we see repeated dyads with an extra note, followed by a grace-notes pattern in Segment 17 and an irregularly repeated single pitch in Segment 19.

The analysis of the configuration of time and sound in *Extensions 3* puts into question the hypothesis that the roots of minimalism should lie in pieces like this one. The repetitive patterns are short, the overlapping of rhythms and meters is missing, the slow de-phasing of a regular movement and the occasional tonal chords are absent. Rather than the continual unfolding seen in the gradual processes of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, what we see here is a fragmented and discontinuous time. A vague relationship (rather aesthetical than technical) may be seen in what Ivanka Stoianova identified as the main characteristic of the “énoncé répétitif” (repetitive statement): the negation of the narrative and teleological process which, in the European tradition, outlined the path of a composition between a

definite starting point and a definite end, shaping the entire thematic, harmonic, and formal structure [11]. However it is worth noting that integral serialism had already broken away from this teleology, with its idea of constellation, and so had those composers who acted within an informal aesthetic beyond the serial techniques. Feldman's music exemplifies the opening of new dimensions of listening, in a way linked to the idea of "abstract experience" which he recognized to be fundamental for the New York School of painting; thus, it is a part of the multifarious complex of the avant-garde. In his piano miniatures he traced a development that took him beyond the "repetitive statement": to juxtaposition and overlapping of shifting surfaces.

*Piano Piece 1955* opened up a new horizon in Feldman's compositional technique. What would happen if one struck four piano keys simultaneously and then, lifting the lower ones, kept the highest sounding key depressed, allowing their echoes to be heard? Or if one, while holding down the keys of a group, added tones of a duration no longer than that of the original sound group resonances?



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Musical excerpt 3: *Piano Piece 1955* (bb. 14-15 and 22-23)

In *Piano Pieces 1956* Feldman continued adding new strategies to his microscopic exploration of mutual, oscillating interactions between pitches, and of the effects of friction and resonance between two or more sounds. For example, in the first three measures of *Piano Piece B* (1956), F2 and D3 are depressed silently while D4 and D5 are sounded, thus generating a sonic expansion within the harmonic series and hints of D minor. Then, as C2, Eb3 and C#4 are added, the harmonic series thickens to a complex and unstable spectrum. Thus, the listener is drawn to the faintest vibrations that the piano resonance can produce. Here, listening to sound's internal life seems to become

the objective – a gigantic amplification of one of the principles of the expressionist aesthetics. However, where the unconditional subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism, partially rooted in Kandinsky, took reflection on the inner life of colour as the primary goal, there is more than this in Feldman's aesthetic, which goes beyond his connection with the New York School art by investigating the very techniques by which sound is born. In one of his last essays on music, Theodor W. Adorno identified the convergence of music and painting as the core issue of 1950s/60s art [12]. For the philosopher, this convergence did not create a new species of syncretism but a loose exchange of concepts and techniques between artistic strands, with movement through time coming into painting (especially in Pollock's "action" painting), and spatial awareness coming into music. Had Adorno had a chance to know Feldman's work better he could well have identified him as one of the main instigators of such process.

Towards the end of the 1950s Feldman abandoned the familiar 3/8 meter or, better, the dotted crotchet as time unit and began giving as much time as his sound constructs require to truly resonate, regardless of whether these be single pitches or vertical groups straddling several octaves. For example, in *Last Pieces* (1959) the time flow is freely drawn, with occasional attempts at regulating it via fermatas, acciaccaturas, slurs, and vague markings such as "slow" or "very fast". However this freedom, hinted at by the text "Durations are free" preceding each of the pieces, is not so much the espousing of a chance aesthetic but rather a message to point the performer towards making choices about the appropriate durations for each sound group. Within this choice there cannot be a unilateral interpretation where, for example, one would invariably allocate to each dyad a duration triple that of all other sounds; this would inevitably destroy that balance which, in spite of the durational freedom, is perceptible by looking at the score [13]. Therefore, said "freedom" actually means that durations are not dependent upon an expressive premise or a constructive law; the material characteristics of each event in the sequence - density, ambitus, register placement, and spectrum complexity - should provide sufficient information in respect of timing. Therefore, the utopia of an informal aesthetic, where sounds unfold without constrictions, manifests itself indirectly in this liberation of time [14].

Slow. Soft. Durations are free

PIANO

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Musical excerpt 4: *Last Pieces #1* (Opening two systems)

It was a short step from the above combinations to sound clusters. Feldman's *Vertical Thoughts* show his awareness of the cluster theories of John Cage's former teacher Henry Cowell (1919) [15], and of the potential for these major/minor 2<sup>nd</sup> aggregates to go beyond functional harmony. However, the compositional consequences of using clusters were not limited to escaping the principles of the dissonance degree of the chords and their "need" to be resolved. A cluster can be seen as a single, static unit of extended proportion [16]. Its use implied adopting new criteria, such as amplitude (the number of pitches), ambitus (the distance between the outer notes) and density (the degree of filling of the ambitus), as well as the reinterpretation of existing criteria, such as duration and timbre, which acquire a completely new meaning in a cluster composition.

In spite of aesthetic and surface similarities between Feldman's *Vertical Thoughts* and, say, György Ligeti's nearly contemporary work (for example *Apparitions*, *Atmosphères*, *Volumina* and *Cello Concerto*, spanning the period 1958 – 1966), in Feldman there is neither progressive and chromatic filling-in nor evolving ramifications of the cluster, whereas in Ligeti the cluster textures are the result of structuring, colouring, and transformation [17].

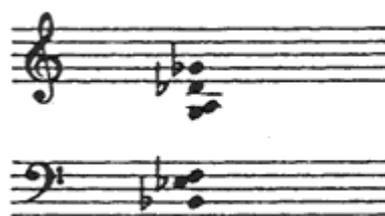
Feldman's sound groupings follow one another unevenly, separated by silences of varying duration, and without a sense of direction; these features seem to suggest an overall irregularity and heterogeneity, where the isolated and unrelated events deny any connection or cohesion.

Understanding whether or not this is truly a process of radical negation may be easier if we looked at two of Feldman's works from 1963, namely *Piano Piece (for Philip Guston)* and *Vertical Thoughts 4*, both of which consist of a sequence of aggregates with variable tempo (• = 66-88) [18]. The only time/rhythmic variants are the acciaccaturas, slurs, fermatas, and *lascia vibrare*, with the number of notes per aggregate varying from one (usually in an extreme register and often followed by a fermata) to nine.

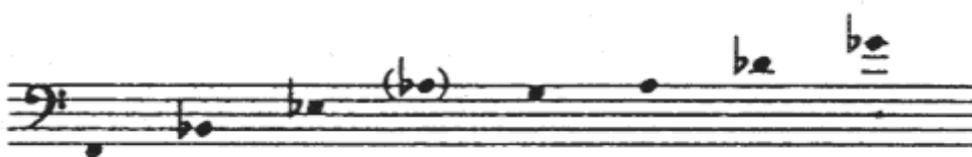
At a first glance, aggregates of more than one note seem to fall into two categories, depending on whether their lower interval is a 4<sup>th</sup> or a 2<sup>nd</sup> [19]; from the first type we may write the following pitch series:



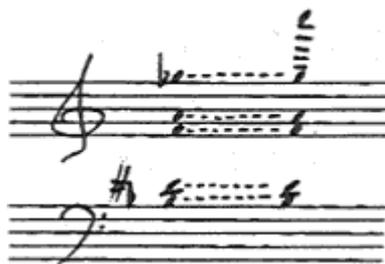
Immediately, we could link the above series to the following aggregate, first of the *Vertical Thoughts 4* sequence:



or rather:



This aggregate then reappears in octave transposition as the fourth aggregate in the score (without G and Db but with an added C):

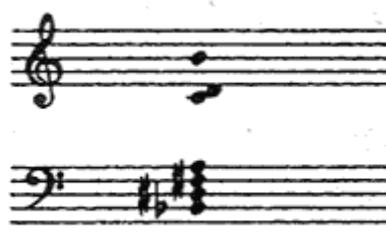


The quartal harmonies are again visible, though not necessarily audible, in the sixth and ninth aggregates within *Piano Piece (to Philip Guston)*, as shown here:

Sixth aggregate:



Ninth aggregate:



The registral compression largely undermines the acoustic effect of a quartal chord. This poses a specific problem for analysis: Is the term “quartal chord”, which came into use with Schoenberg’s *Kammersymphonie* (1906), appropriate for such aggregates? Indeed the main characteristic of the quartal chords is the way in which their constituent pitches are arranged along unchanged quartal patterns. However, if one accepts that Feldman could have extracted these aggregates from the cycle of fourths, one can recognize different degrees of transparency of such a gamut. For example, the above aggregates belong to the same family, as they both feature the Bb-Eb(D#) sound in the lower part and show further quartal relations in their inner structure.

Let’s consider the first system of *Vertical Thoughts 4* in more detail. The fermatas articulate it in four segments. In the first segment, we hear the above mentioned chord with quartal content. The second segment articulates the opposition between chords with prevalence of

fourths and chords characterised by seconds and thirds (the first and last chord have again the lowest pitches in common: G# and A). The second chord of this segment has a tritone as upper dyad, a sonority which is taken over in the next chord with the later addition of the high C on the lying Gb. In the following segments, one can observe similar processes of transformation of the aggregates. Feldman's guiding principle here seems to be that no aggregate or sound event should appear twice in the same form but always undergo some alteration, reduction, compression, etc., as though his work were an energy field where sounds produced concentration, dilution, and rarefaction.

EXTREMELY SOFT. #=66-88.

Martin Feldman

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Musical excerpt 5: *Vertical Thoughts 4* (Opening two systems)

In spite of a structural affinity between *Vertical Thoughts 4* and *Piano Piece (to Philip Guston)* we can detect two different formal conceptions. In the first two systems of *Vertical Thoughts 4*, a sort of formal balance is achieved: A single note isolated through the insertion of two fermatas serves as dividing line between two segments; the larger employment of pitches in the second system is compensated through a faster flow of the grace notes. In the third system, the concentration of material is increased; complex events

follow each other; the initial instability caused by the grace notes is counterbalanced in the second half through the higher density of the chords. Finally, the sound flow gets thinner reaching a single pitch. The close is prepared through the only octave of this composition, G4-G6, followed by G5 (the same pitch which appeared as a dividing line in the first system).

In *Piano Piece (to Philip Guston)*, on the other hand, Feldman puts more weight in the first two systems; the opening event apart, the grace notes appear always as isolated sounds in the extreme registers. Then, the attention of the listener is captured by the resonances of complex aggregates; some of the chords overlap with new sonorities; in other cases, the pianist plays a group of pitches as acciaccatura prolonging the value of some components. Without a comparison between compositions for other instruments or for ensemble, we cannot fully answer the questions concerning Feldman's harmonic language upon which we touched in this brief analysis, even though it was restricted to his 1960s output. However, what has emerged is a series of clues highlighting the relationship between the durational and intervallic structuring of aggregates. Even by itself, this relationship would justify the need for a more in-depth inquiry into the concept of musical space which is at the basis of Feldman's oeuvre. Hopefully the results of such inquiry would offer new ideas to help us further understand, within the context of abstract aesthetics, the complex relationships between music and painting.

## Notes:

1. On the relationship between Cage and painting, see *Conversing with Cage*, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz, New York, Limelight Editions 1994, pp. 173-198. Since the first publication of the present article, several studies on the relationship between the New York composers and the Abstract Expressionists have been published; the most comprehensive is *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts. John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. by Steven Johnson, Routledge, New York/London 2002.
2. Cf. Eliza RATHBONE, *The Role of Music in the Development of Mark Tobey's Abstract Style*, "Arts Magazine", December 1983, pp. 94-100, and *Mark Tobey: City Paintings*, National Gallery of Art, Washington 1984 (with an essay by E. Rathbone).
3. Cf. Irving SANDLER, "The Club", in *Abstract Expressionism. A Critical Record*, ed. by David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press 1990, p. 54. One of the texts, *Lecture on Nothing*, was published in John Cage, *Silence*, Hanover New Hampshire, Wesleyan University Press 1973, pp. 109-128
4. Cf. Steven JOHNSON, *Rothko Chapel and Rothko's Chapel*, "Perspectives of New Music", XXXII/2 1994, pp. 6-53.
5. Morton FELDMAN, "Between Categories", in *Give My Regard to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman* edited by B. H. Friedman, Cambridge MA, Exact Change, 2000, pp. 83-89.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
7. M. FELDMAN, "After Modernism", in *ibid.*, pp. 67-79: 78.
8. Stefan WOLPE, *On New (and Not-So-New) Music in America*, translated by Austin Clarkson, "Journal of Music Theory", XXVIII/1 1984, pp. 1-45: 25.
9. Cf. Henri POUSSSEUR, *Anton Weberns organische Chromatik*, "die Reihe", II 1955, pp. 56-65. Translated into English by Leo Black as, "Anton Webern's Organic Chromaticism", "die Reihe" (English Edition), Vol 2 Part 2 1958, pp. 51-60.
10. A further two aspects of the pattern, which I shall not discuss at present, are their direction and their register placement. I wish to thank Angela Ida De Benedictis, who kindly drew my attention to their significance.
11. Cf. Ivanka STOIANOVA, *Musique répétitive*, "Musique en jeu", XXVI 1977, pp. 64-74.
12. Cf. Theodor W. ADORNO, "Über einige Relationen zwischen Musik und Malerei", in T. W. ADORNO, *Gesammelte Schriften* 16, hrsg. von Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp 1978, pp. 628-642. Translated into English by Susan H. Gillespie as, "On Some Relationships between Music and Painting", *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol 79, No 1, Spring 1995.
13. An inappropriate freedom of tempo can be seen in the Sender Freies Berlin archive recording of the 1972 premiere of Feldman's *Piano and Voices* at the *Woche der avantgardistischen Musik* in Berlin, featuring John Cage, David Tudor, Cornelius Cardew, Fredric Rzewski and the composer. Towards the end of the piece, where each performer sustained the piano sounds with their voice, one can hear a long solo by John Cage, who interpreted the freedom of tempo too literally.
14. Cf. T. W. ADORNO, "Vers une musique informelle", in *Gesammelte Schriften* 16, cit., pp. 493-540. Translated into English under the original French title in T. W. ADORNO, "Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music", Verso Classics, 1998, p.269 ff.
15. Cf. Michael HICKS, "Cowell's Clusters", *Musical Quarterly* 77 (Fall 1993), pp. 428-58.

16. Cf. Mauricio KAGEL, *Ton-Cluster, Anschläge, Übergänge*, “die Reihe”, V 1959, pp. 23-37. Translated into English as, “Tone Clusters, Attacks, Transitions”, “die Reihe” (English Edition), Vol 5 1961, pp. 40-55.
17. Cf. Rudolf STEPHAN, “György Ligeti: Konzert für Violoncello und Orchester. Anmerkungen zur Cluster-Komposition”, in *Die Musik der sechziger Jahre*, hrsg. von R. Stephan, Mainz, Schott 1972, pp. 117-127.
18. An interpretation of such flexible tempo poses inevitable problems. For example, one may play the entire piece either at a tempo which is the average of the values or at a tempo which varies between the values. In spite of the indeterminate tempo, some interpretations are more valid than others. A blanket approach, for example, would not take into account the individual acoustic properties of each aggregate’s structure and type of resonance.
19. In some cases, however, the lowest interval is actually a third.