

## Morton Feldman: For Bunita Marcus

by Sebastian Claren

*The text below was first published as sleeve notes to the recording of For Bunita Marcus, played by Lenio Liatsou, released on vinyl LP in 2014 on the God Records label (GOD 27 [2xLP]). The text is reproduced here by kind permission of the author and God Records.*

In the 1980's, Morton Feldman composed two large-sized pieces for his favourite instrument, the piano. Both pieces, *Triadic Memories* (1981) and *For Bunita Marcus* (1985), clock in at about 90 minutes. Both compositions are excellent examples of the group of works that they belong to: *Triadic Memories* demonstrates the complexity and tonal opulence of Feldman's pattern compositions from 1977 through 1983, whereas *For Bunita Marcus* shows the stripped-down, almost dismissive structures of his last works created from 1984 to 1987. Feldman himself described *For Bunita Marcus* as a piece in which he "seriously grappled with the idea of meter":

*"I was very interested in this whole problem of meter and the bar line. I was so interested that I started to write a piece in which I took meter very seriously. I saw that nobody knew how to notate. Sometimes, Stravinsky! In my notation I'm close to Stravinsky; that is, meter and rhythm actually being simultaneous and also being more grid-oriented, a balance between rhythm and meter. For Bunita Marcus is essentially made up of just three-eight, five-sixteen and two-two. Sometimes the two-two would have musical content, which was at the end of the piece. Sometimes the two-two acted as silences, either on the left side or the right side or in the middle of the three-eight and the five-sixteen, and I was using meter as a construction, not rhythm but meter and the time, the length of what is going on."*<sup>1</sup>

Feldman's definition of "silence" refers more to the score than to the acoustic reality: The sustain pedal remains depressed for the entirety of *For Bunita Marcus*, only to be lifted on two very short occasions, in order to let a three-note demisemiquaver with a slight flageolet resonance shine through. This practice is akin to Feldman's technique applied to all piano compositions of his later period which revolved around depressing the pedal a quarter, half or all the way in order to achieve a constant resonance, rich with harmonics, forming a tonal continuum on which the notes could be laid out.

When discussing *Triadic Memories*, a piece in which half pedaling is utilized, Feldman revealed the influence that painter Cy Twombly and his blurring of linear scribblings had on him, prompting him to come up with the idea of using the sustain pedal in such a fashion, to achieve "any kind of continuity" and "to some degree, a now you hear it, now you don't, obscurity":

*"But the idea came from a painter, of having the pedal half down. It came from a very good friend of mine - Cy Twombly. I saw a show, and I noticed in a sense that he used a kind of gesso, very thin gesso, where the tint changed ever so slightly you could hardly catch it from one painting to another. And it gave it this kind of - rainbow. And I got that idea from him, I got that idea of putting a little gesso, that I'm on this very precarious gesso smudge, so to speak."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Words on Music. Morton Feldman in Middelburg 1985-1987. Lectures and Conversations* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 2008) p126.

<sup>2</sup> *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964-1987* (London: Hyphen Press, 2006) p148.

As Feldman implied, the short bars at the beginning of the piece contain the tonal material, whereas the longer bars are used as sounding rests. The first page of the score consists of nothing other than the meticulous instrumentation of the notes c#, d and e<sup>b</sup>, which are distributed to both hands in varying octaves. Only in one instance, in the second measure, are two notes hit simultaneously, otherwise the single notes form a monodic line which leaves behind a chromatic gleam as the sustained notes ring out.

The following pages see Feldman gradually introducing new notes to the piece, slowly feeling out the chromatic total with the help of overlapping three-note groups. This chromatic total is fully exhausted by page 4, when a<sup>2</sup> is played as a perfect fifth over d<sup>2</sup>, causing Feldman to literally return to page 1, repeating his c#, d and e<sup>b</sup> patterns, only this time implementing new juxtapositions of measures. He explained the use of these tonal progressions (modulations, as he calls them) as a means to sustain the underlying three-note group throughout the piece:

*“I hear the whole registration differently in terms of its pitch. I take pitch and timbre very seriously, while people just take pitch seriously. If I was going to take pitch seriously the way they do, there would be no music. I'm going along and I'm just using those three notes, e flat, d, c sharp, and it's going on for a long time. Yet I don't want to get away from the cell and everything, I modulate!”*<sup>3</sup>

*For Bunita Marcus* is a significant example of Feldman's departure from his previous period of almost manic pattern repetition. Page 8 of the score presents us with the only pattern structure of the entire piece, consisting of e<sup>b3</sup> - g<sup>b2</sup> changes for the right hand, and d<sup>2</sup> - c<sup>2</sup> changes for the left; both of which are suspended in different speeds on the following pages. The c<sup>2</sup> on the right hand is eventually substituted by c<sup>#2</sup> and e<sup>b2</sup> for long periods, restoring the original order of the three-note group from the beginning of the composition. Page 15 of the score, the approximate middle of the piece, sees the tonal material appear in the long 2/2 bars for the first time. This time, they contain the e<sup>b</sup> - g<sup>b</sup> changes of the repeating pattern, as well as a new accompaniment chord. On the following pages, the material from the preceding pages is repeated in free-form system and measure juxtapositions which leads up to the introduction of new material on pages 20-22. In this section, an extended short grace note with an empty note head on f<sup>4</sup> proves to be particularly interesting, because this is a form of notation which Feldman described as one of his “smaller inventions” and actually has its origins in the 1950's and 60's. The new material itself is then all juxtaposed at once until page 24 presents the first line of the entire composition transposed an octave higher, but otherwise left intact.

This reprise-like appearance makes way for a new rendition of page 1, alternately given in the original 5/16 and 3/8 time signatures and, with respective rhythmical extension, in 2/2. Feldman described this inversion of rhythm as a “metric formula” that the piece wrote for him:

*“For example, what I'm interested in, I did it in Palais de Mari, but in the piece that I dedicated to you I think I did it the best of all my pieces, where I use the metric world as an aspect of form. For example, in your piece the silences in the beginning were normally 2/2 measures, 3/4, longer measures. And the musical material were very short meters, 5/16, 1/16 [laughs], and so forth and so on. Very quixotic type of material. And then I would use the*

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<sup>3</sup> *Words on Music. Morton Feldman in Middelburg 1985-1987. Lectures and Conversations* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 2008) pp 94/96.

*longer measures to frame. And in that piece, For Bunita Marcus, it was in a very, almost formula way. I enjoyed working for one of the few times in my life in a formula that worked for me, that I just didn't rock the boat and changed it, I just used it. And so what happens there? The long measures are the silent measures, the short measures is the musical material. Towards the middle of the piece - when it started to happen, I don't know - the material were the longer measures, and the silences were the shorter measures. So it's essentially an A-B kind of form with this juxtaposition. Again, a fake mirror imagery idea of reversing roles, metric roles.”<sup>4</sup>*

In a short finale, Feldman begins to repeat single measures from the preceding pages, this time transposing them either up or down, creating entirely new constellations of pitch relation with the same basic material. The composition ends with a short reprise of the “fake mirror imagery” and a closing figure, which appeared for the first time shortly before the “mirror imagery”, where left and right hand play broken sixths, sevenths and ninths while ascending to g#<sup>3</sup>.

Feldman elaborated on the extended finale of *For Bunita Marcus* (which in his eyes probably begins with the reprise of the opening movement), stating that the material on its own does not solely determine the length of a piece:

*“I really don't know how long a piece is going to become. Little by little. A lot of times, the dictates of a piece has to do with purely personal and emotional reasons. The piece that I dedicated to Bunita Marcus, if I could make myself vulnerable, had to do with my mother's death and the whole idea of someone lingering on. I just didn't want the piece to die. So compositionally I use this to keep it alive, as a terminal patient, as long as possible”<sup>5</sup>*

This would mean that Feldman consciously utilizes the premise of the composition (e.g. the substitution of short measures containing tonal material and long rests for longer measures containing tonal material and short rests) in order to postpone the ending of *For Bunita Marcus*. The material from page 1 would have exhausted itself by the time the second reprise came along, had Feldman not switched out the metric values thus extending the composition for another ten pages in which essentially no new material is introduced, but the previously established material is repeated in a number of variations. The last three pages of the piece stretch the material out once more, this time through transposing and juxtaposing single bars, adding more than a third of the entire composition's extension to its original capacity. However, this seems to be precisely what Feldman believes to be the natural relationship of beginning and end, with *For Bunita Marcus* being the rule rather than the exception. The accompaniment of personal motives may be apparent, but does not overrule. At a lecture in 1984, prior to even starting work on *For Bunita Marcus*, Feldman explained that the longer a composition is, the less material it can accommodate, therefore showing its natural length:

*“I find that as the piece gets longer, there has to be less material. That the piece itself, strangely enough, cannot take it. It has nothing to do with my patience. I don't know, my patience, how far it goes, you know. And I don't think about what your patience would be. I don't know that. In other words, I don't have a kind of psychological situation. Let's put it this way. I don't have an anxiety that I've got to stop. But there's less going into it, so I think the piece dies a natural death. It dies of old age.”<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> *Words on Music. Morton Feldman in Middelburg 1985-1987. Lectures and Conversations* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 2008) p610.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p632.

<sup>6</sup> *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964-1987* (London: Hyphen Press, 2006) p205.