

# Morton Feldman: Interview with Françoise Esselier (1970)

Translated from the French by Ivan Ilić

## Introduction

The following interview with Morton Feldman was first published in the winter 1970–71 issue of *VH 101*, a French arts journal (on pp. 34–44). The journal was created by Austrian critic Otto Hahn and French critic Françoise Esselier and published from 1969 to 1972, and the list of interviewees is impressive, including Marcel Duchamp, Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss. It is Esselier who interviewed Feldman.

There are several unusual aspects to this interview. The first is that it was conducted in English originally, but the audio tapes appear to have been lost. Therefore until now this interview has only been available in French translation; it was republished in Jean-Yves Bosseur's excellent book about Feldman, *Écrits et Paroles* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 2000).

The second notable aspect is that, given the abrupt beginning of the interview, and other hints sprinkled throughout, it appears that this is 'take two' of an interview that, for some reason, was not recorded properly the first time. In certain passages, it appears that Feldman may be repeating or rephrasing an answer given during 'take one', perhaps making it more concise, as certain answers are uncharacteristically short and direct. At other times it seems that he is improvising and that the second version of the interview has taken a different, unexpected turn. The contrast between these two types of material is striking and revealing.

Thirdly, Esselier has a background in the visual arts rather than music, and therefore the interview remains quite conceptual. The result is that in addition to the familiar digressive quality of some of Feldman's answers, he phrases things differently than he does in other interviews, perhaps in order to bridge the gap between the different language used in the visual arts and in contemporary music.

My 're-translation' to English was facilitated by Nicole Tisserand's French translation, which captured the spirit of Feldman's cadence. Anyone familiar with Feldman's copious interviews, lectures and essays quickly recognizes the vocabulary and concerns that recur frequently throughout his career. Just as in Feldman's late music, certain motifs return again and again, but they are never exactly the same, and it is this variation that is compelling.

Today interest in Feldman's music is still quite limited in France, compared to Germany and to the English-speaking world, for example. Therefore it seems all the more relevant to provide access to this important interview to English speakers, despite the small transformations in vocabulary that will inevitably occur in any translation, let alone a 'double' translation. I hope that the richness of the interview's content will compensate for any discrepancies.

Ivan Ilić (2015)

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**MF:** How will we say all that again? Why don't you refresh my memory, why don't you start by talking about a few themes? Then we can develop them.

**FE:** All right. We talked about interesting music, about European music's interest in the object, about the wisdom of Cage and Feldman, about horizontal composition, about your disinterest in the analysis of elements. We talked about variety, about the object, about structure, about the grid . . .

**MF:** Yes, John Cage wasn't interested in information. He was interested in variety, just like he's interested in mushrooms. One of the major themes was my feeling that the importance of a work could not be determined by its influence. I have a position fairly analogous to that of American painters of the past 20 years. I differ from my European colleagues in that I don't demand of a work of art that it be interesting. I think that's one of the central themes of this interview. What is an interesting work of art? Of course, someone could respond 'So, what do you want, a boring work?' But a boring work for me is maybe an interesting work for someone else.

**FE:** We talked about information as a reiteration of something, as opposed to something that is totally new.

**MF:** Yes, that's true. It's very difficult to save all one's energy. I don't know if I need to continue in a totally different way, or if I should vary it. The Europeans have become less philosophical. I think that we're more philosophical. More philosophical and more dialectical.

**FE:** And why? How?

**MF:** Because we don't have history. You've got to make philosophy when you haven't had any history.

**FE:** Isn't the music philosophical in Europe?

**MF:** No. It could have been philosophical. Gregorian chant maybe had a philosophical side. But something happened when it became shameful to be a philosopher, because it wasn't proper enough.

**FE:** You said that Bach's compositions were neither vertical nor horizontal, but balanced, and that *that* was the formula for great art, but that there was no reason to keep bringing it up, because it's out-of-fashion, outdated.

**MF:** I said that Bach was for me a perfect example of the fantastic balance between vertical composition and horizontal composition. We can't decide between the vertical and the horizontal and it's become the formula which designates great art, genius.

**FE:** But, in a certain way, doesn't art become philosophical when it tries to change, when it tries to ask new questions?

**MF:** Not according to Wittgenstein. He said that philosophy could only be concerned with things that we know.

**FE:** We also talked about the necessity of determination.

**MF:** I talked about the paradox of my graphic work. I work on a grid which is measured in time and nevertheless my actions on the grid are not predetermined. Yes, we did talk about that. It's a shame that all of that should be lost, but it's a perfect example: someone thinks they're making an object, and look what happens . . .

**FE:** We talked about the indeterminacy which guides your work, and about your conversation with Stockhausen who couldn't conceive that, in your music, there is no causal relationship between one note and another.

**MF:** I told you that he came to see me. I was at the piano, I was working on a piece and he asked me how I was doing it, and I replied 'I'm just doing like this, that's all'. And he asked me if that meant that each time I wrote a note, I had to select it among the 88 other notes. I think you're going to have nothing but anecdotes in this interview. That's what I look for when I read interviews, by the way. Anecdotes interest me a great deal. One day Boulez said to John Cage on the subject of *Winter Music* (1957), 'It's very interesting, John. Now you have to do something with it'. And I

say, that for me, it's not what happens in a work of art that makes it interesting, it's the fact that you've never heard anything like it.

**FE:** Last night a young conceptual artist told me that conceptual art is ahead of today's music because it goes directly to the mind. The visual object has been eliminated. But music, according to him, hasn't resolved this problem, because it strikes the ear first. It isn't directly intercepted by the mind. It always depends on the physical, emotional and sensual aspects. The road from one mind to another is not direct. The ideation must be filtered, in a certain way, by the physical and kinetic processes of hearing.<sup>1</sup>

**MF:** Isn't that an attempt to redefine the object? Maybe he has the impression that the type of work that he described is exclusively in this direct mental process, and nothing else. Maybe. It's a very interesting problem because most people don't consider music in this way. I once had a long conversation about a similar subject with John Cage. I told him, 'How can you be interested in Duchamp? He does exactly the opposite of what you do'. Most people don't realize it, but Duchamp and Cage are complete opposites. Duchamp and Boulez are similar. Let's just say that Boulez is the epitome of the intellectual approach, with a process that is as clear as Duchamp's, for example. But what John Cage did, and what I have done, is to extract music from the conceptual domain and to place it in the purely physiological sensation of sound, separated from this conceptual cause and effect. Duchamp distanced paintings from the most sensual aspects of perception. Historically, we did exactly the same thing, but [actually they were] totally different things. Another way of saying it is that music was always conceptual. We changed that. Completely. Machaut, Boulez, Beethoven, all of that is conceptual. Music was a conceptual art. And we released it, we freed it. There are still many processes going on, naturally, but we freed it from a kind of logical serialization of possibilities. It is significant that Cage and I have influenced certain conceptual artists. And yet, our position is radically at the opposite of theirs. Historically – it's completely unbelievable – there isn't a real opposition. It's as if they hadn't realized that we were taking the glove and turning it inside out. It happened very quickly, you understand. In a certain way, John Cage has nothing in common with Duchamp, except an in-depth understanding of process.

**FE:** Do you think that philosophy is physiological?

**MF:** Yes, philosophy is physiological. Just like the conceptual artist, we also want nothing between the sound and the mind. And I think that one of the interesting aspects of Cage's music and of mine, although in different forms, is that the sound goes directly to the mind, without the mind having to coordinate what the sound has to do to get there, as it does in most other music.

**FE:** By the physiological process?

**MF:** By direct action. And direct action, in music, is anti-conceptual. The conceptual artist now tells himself that to do a direct visual action is to do a conceptual act. And maybe it's true. I forgot what I said. I'm tired . . . What was I saying? You see, the European composer doesn't see things in the same way, he thinks in terms of [the] instruments.

When the machine breaks down, he doesn't think about making another machine, he says that he's going to invent the best tools to fix it, right? They believe, they believe in art. And to believe in it, you've got to know what it is. I've never met a European composer who didn't know what art was. Let's take an example. How do you know that Pierre Boulez is a great musician? I'll tell you. Because it was proven [to be true]. All the reasons for it have been proven. You listen and you say to yourself, 'Of course, he's a great musician'. Would you say that Cage is a great musician? 'Oh, Cage is not the same, it's different. He's wonderful. He is very interesting, without a doubt, fascinating even'. But can you say of him, as you can of Boulez, that he is a great musician? Of course not. And why? Because great musicians are not supposed to innovate. That's the definition

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<sup>1</sup> Ideation = the formation of ideas or concepts. (Transl.)

of a great musician. But that's finished. I just received some articles about a concert of my music in Buenos Aires. It's fantastic. They speak about me very intelligently. And at the same time, they don't know how to place me. They appreciated the fact that my music doesn't have the same sound as the others. And at the same time, it bothered them. One of them used the past to attack me. The other one used me to attack the past. They're marvellous. When I read these articles, I understood why nothing important has ever come out of South America.

**FE:** Why don't you work in different media, like John Cage works in dance, in art, etc?

**MF:** That's always the question: making a virtue out of a necessity. John is a very different person than me. I think it's a question of temperament rather than aesthetic. John has always led [his] life within a community. He always has people around him. It's a public stage. And from the beginning, since his youth, he's had a house full of people. John and I lived in the same building near the East River for seven years. There were people all the time. What I'm saying is that when there are people, there is theatre. Then he worked with Merce Cunningham's troupe, he took care of the dance, that is to say lots of people, he took care of the musicians and that means even more people. It's the audience. [As for] me, in my entire life, I've tried to maintain my private life; my work is private. I'm like Jasper Johns and John Cage is like Robert Rauschenberg. The work of Jasper Johns is also his secret, if I may say so. Jasper is secretive. What he does is secret too. I like what both of them do, and they like my music. I lost Bob Rauschenberg's friendship because I didn't attend the dance concerts that he gave a few years ago. And I didn't really seem like I was interested in his way of using different media, and he was mad at me. Isn't that right Bob?

**FE:** You said earlier that your problem was starting something from nothing.

**MF:** My problem is not to be interesting. I am too interesting to just be interesting. My problem is doing something out of nothing. Like Kierkegaard said, 'In the beginning was the void'. We need to understand that God created from nothing. Every time I do a new composition, I have the feeling of doing something from nothing. Isn't the fact that God created from nothing more interesting than what he created? But what we want to know is not that someone created something from nothing, but rather how are we going to be able to talk about what was made. Pascal is more interesting than God. God is boring already. Pascal is much more interesting.

**FE:** The last time, you talked about modesty, this time you talk about wisdom. Aren't they directly related? You were talking about Cage.

**MF:** I don't know exactly what I said about Cage anymore, but since we're coming back to it, I would say that I always thought that Cage was a modest composer because he never went further than he could go. I frequently discuss certain aspects of music with students, and then one week later they're theoretically already in the twenty-second century. When it comes to my colleagues in Europe, they're doing nothing but continuing the music of the nineteenth century in the twentieth century. It's a very curious situation. What interests them is not what art history was concerned with in the past 80 years. The composer's research has always been concerned with what Nietzsche called the lie of the great form. And the influential music today, the successful music, perpetuates this lie of the great form. That's the pursuit, the research of today's music.

**FE:** Did Schoenberg also perpetuate this lie of the great form?

**MF:** Oh yes! Yes. He used a language that perpetuated the possibility of making large-scale music. Remember that one of the things he wrote about after he had developed his 12-tone principle was that he supported German culture. He was totally conscious of it . . . Differentiation was the key word in the fifties and sixties, now we talk about information. The complex nature of information is the only thing that permits the prolongation and the creation of possibilities of large-scale music. Do you remember the interview that I played for you: I told John Cage that Stockhausen always wanted me to write music on a large scale, orchestra pieces, do you remember? And I told him that I was

trying to write a piece for piano, to be played with one finger. If I only had one goal in life, it would be to scare Stockhausen. To show Karlheinz that history is now going in another direction. And that some day, there will be another great philosopher like Nietzsche who will talk about my music, and about the lie of the small scale.

**FE:** Do you think you are succeeding in scaring [Stockhausen]?

**MF:** I've succeeded. I already made him scared, two years ago in Venice. How? Because I made the same music last for 40 minutes.

**FE:** Was there a time before the lie of the great form?

**MF:** I think that music, in a certain way, is always commercial. I think that important music was commercial and that it had something to do with the lie of the great form. I don't find great music very serious, I think the serious aspect has to do with what it's manipulating. Besides that, it's not serious. What I mean is that for Bach, writing an augmented fourth, a diminished fourth and saying, 'Oh! God!' does not signify that it's serious . . . Like, for example, Bach would never do that . . . (*musical example*)

Did you know [in advance] what good it would do to come and talk to me? What good it would do except to find the truth? I think it's something like that, or maybe my mind is a bit confused. I'm tired and I'm hungry. In a certain way, I think that serious music, very serious music, which isn't about God, nor about Christ, nor about the Borgia family, nor about philosophy, nor about anything at all, but only about what it is, I think that serious music started with John Cage and myself. I find that music took a long time to come into being. Music made what we call in America a . . . what do they call it? A 'late start'. Music, I mean John Cage's and mine, is very serious. There is no educational aspect, no edifying aspect, it's not looking to please. It's something else, that's all. Our music is not related to anything except music. A simple look at music history allows us to ascertain the influence of extra-musical elements on the majority of innovations. I'm talking about pure music, about abstract music. It never was like this. It always served propaganda. Propaganda for a mind, in the sense that the music was there to showcase the composer's culture, or the propaganda of a particular taste. Cage and I have no other goal than to present a musical situation using only musical material. I think that we're the first ones to use this material for what it is, without looking to assign to it another function.

**FE:** For the first time music has become its own language.

**MF:** Yes, instead of being an aspect of numerous other phenomena. Dance music . . . (*musical example*) .... and devo[tional] music . . . (*another example*).

**FE:** The problem of propaganda exists in painting as well. We can immediately tell that a painting was made at the request of the Borgias or to celebrate them. Or that another, painted in the seventeenth century in Holland, was subsidized by a rich merchant. At the same time, these Impressionist paintings, which preferably represent daily life, illustrate well the values of the dominant class of the nineteenth century.

**MF:** Today we're trying not to lead a bourgeois life. For my avantgarde colleagues (Stockhausen) it's very fashionable to be antibourgeois. Honestly. They're Marxists.

**FE:** Not Stockhausen.

**MF:** I wonder . . . I think that if it would be of use to him in any way . . .

**FE:** Not Stockhausen. He attacks anyone who tries to assign political intentions to his music. He would like to be completely apolitical; he says that he's not concerned. This is false, because it is rather difficult to say about someone, or for someone to say about himself, that he is apolitical. At any rate, he never accepts it when one assigns the slightest political content to what he does.

**MF:** What was I saying . . . I always thought that . . . I've lost my train of thought. Let's try to retrace my thought.

**FE:** You were saying that they're Marxists.

**MF:** Many composers today are, in a certain way, engaged with the political content of their music. They are anti-bourgeois. At the same time, the only public that concerns them is the bourgeois public. Do you know the story about Berio, Luciano Berio? At the time that he had written the piece for La Scala, I was with him one evening, we were taking a walk, and then we went up to his place, he showed us the piece and he told me, 'Actually, this piece was commissioned from me by La Scala. I decided that, during the concert, I'd hire a claque, you know, some people in the hall.<sup>2</sup> The chorus members would be spread throughout the audience, they would be sitting among the spectators and they would look like members of the bourgeois public. They'll wear the same kind of clothes and, on the score, I had written, 'Attack against what's happening on stage'. So the evening of the performance, everything is in place. The chorus members are in the audience and they start heckling and commenting on what's happening on stage. And the bourgeois, the real bourgeois who are sitting next to them, start screaming next to them, "Shut up"!'

**FE:** Certain artists are very preoccupied by the idea that they should never repeat themselves. They start with two or three important ideas, and if they can't come up with new ones, they stop. Earlier we spoke about what John Cage and you have done with respect to this exact problem.

**MF:** My problem is that I don't want to change. My problem is that I would like to repeat myself, and I can't. I have no desire to change. But my music changes continuously. It's getting older. I like natural changes, you know. It would be extraordinary to compose a work which works well, and one day an oboe dies of old age on stage . . . It would be good for people to perceive this reality, this sort of commentary on the work itself.

There's a wonderful poem by Pushkin in which he tells off his muse. He tells her, 'You limp'. The trouble with music is that it always has something to say, which it reinforces with the mythology that wants something important to be happening all the time. I love art, but I hate all these poses, all this false moralizing and this fake pomp that surrounds it in general. I never had an anti-art attitude. John Cage [never did] either. John Cage has nothing to do with Dada, of any kind. Stockhausen is Dada. That's what Dada is. Stockhausen is like a little boy who's trying to scare you. John Cage has another way of scaring people. He's kind of like a little boy who goes away in the woods and comes back with a kind of grass snake which he holds out to his mother, who starts screaming, you see? John Cage takes the audience for his mother, you understand? He doesn't understand why they scream, but he has a totally different attitude. On the other hand, Stockhausen is the little boy who hides behind the doors and who jumps out saying 'Boo!' or who climbs in by the window, like Till Eulenspiegel. You know what happened to Till Eulenspiegel, right? In the end he was hanged. I think we should put Stockhausen in a correctional facility. You know what that is?

**FE:** Yes, yes, it's for the little boys . . .

**MF:** Yes. I think we should put Karlheinz in one. Not for very long.

**FE:** What would you do without Stockhausen?

**MF:** We'd invent another one! Of course, if we didn't have one, we'd make one up! I think he's our Lucifer. I think he's the Devil, because he gives the most convincing argument: how to sin in music. With your Christian civilization . . . God wasn't interesting anymore, so you invented the Devil.

**FE:** . . . who is much more interesting . . .

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<sup>2</sup> A claque is an organized body of professional applauders in French theatres and opera houses. (Transl.)

**MF:** Like Pascal . . . You already needed something more interesting than God. God bores you. Victor Hugo, do you know Victor Hugo? He's a French writer . . . He said that God ended up getting sick of Napoleon.

**FE:** I heard a beautiful sentence [spoken by] John Cage at the rehearsal of *Song Books* in Paris. All the performers were on stage and were accentuating their roles by different actions. Cage was delighted, it was chaos, and there were lots of things going on all over the place. And then Cage stepped aside and said to a friend, 'I wonder what all of this has to do with music'.

**MF:** It's interesting. You see, that's exactly it, that's what I wanted to say about his modesty: John Cage worries whether it's music or not. It worries him.

**FE:** Stockhausen, on the other hand, knows that his music is music.

**MF:** Stockhausen isn't worried. Stockhausen doesn't care if it's music or not; he uses it for the impact it produces. Stockhausen has created a very interesting polarity. Because he articulates the 'either this/or that' aspect of our lives. And I think that he clarifies things for most people.

In my youth, for example, it was either Schoenberg or Stravinsky. One or the other. And yet, there were hundreds of other composers during that period as well. I think that's what's happening now. Even though I don't think that the choice is between Karlheinz and John Cage. It's either Karlheinz or myself. I think that's the polarity. I have the impression that he swallowed the influence of Cage and that he used it. In other words, if we had a magnifying glass that allowed us to see into the stomach of Karlheinz, we'd see Cage walking around. Karlheinz can't swallow me. I think he wanted to do it. I remember one time, it was New Year's Eve in Long Island, [Stockhausen] was there for a few months staying with someone who had a very big house. He invited Lukas Foss and me and our wives, to this house for New Year's. It was an unbelievable evening. The owner of the house had also invited his own friends, [who were] well-off and more conventional people, from around Long Island. Everybody was there, and Stockhausen exclaimed, 'And now, we're going to listen to some music'. And all the young women who were there thought they were going to dance, you see. But for two hours, he played Stockhausen. And all the people started to leave. The owner of the house didn't have two hours but one hour of my music on a record so he played that. At the end, Karlheinz jumped up dramatically, and he said, 'I've just decided, I've just decided, that . . .'

'What have you decided?' I asked him. 'I've just decided to use you in my music'.<sup>3</sup> That's what Europe is. That's Europe. Do you know the story of Picasso who goes to see Braque at his house and Madame Braque starts yelling, 'The veil!' and Braque immediately hides everything he's done . . . And the first meeting between Picasso and Matisse? They decide to exchange paintings and Matisse chooses a magnificent Picasso, and Picasso chooses a very ambivalent Matisse, and puts it on the wall, at his house. Friends of his come to see and say, 'Who did that?' and Picasso responds, 'That? Oh! Matisse . . .'

**FE:** We've just about reproduced the first interview.

**MF:** Yes, just about. Do you have any questions to ask me about music? . . .

**FE:** May I speak about Stockhausen at the end? It's very beautiful.

**MF:** Who's Stockhausen?

**FE:** You told me earlier: he's like Till Eulenspiegel, and you know what happened to Till Eulenspiegel . . .

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<sup>3</sup> When Jonathan Cott read Stockhausen the passages of this interview that mention him, he retorted, 'I told Feldman one day that one of his works could pass for a fragment of one of mine. But the reverse? Never'. Jonathan Cott, *Stockhausen: Conversations with the Composer* (London: Robson Books, 1974), p. 136.