

On counting and notation in Ives and Feldman

by **Mariano Etkin**

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“Humanity’s most perfect and terrifying work of art is its division of time.”

Elias Canetti, *The Agony of Flies*

“To interrupt a thing requires greater strength and determination than to undo a knot with a sword-blow; for the difficulty of the knot arouses one’s passion, but the passion required for breaking off must be of one’s own making.”

Søren Kierkegaard, *In Vino Veritas*

In the sinuous path from the appearance of the first sounds and ideas in the imagination of the composer to the moment when the piece is played, the technique of composition is fundamental. This includes all the materials and procedures that work constructively, when used consciously or unconsciously by the composer, to give the piece its identity. Notation is a vehicle of this technique which, like any vehicle, leaves its traces in what it conveys. Arising from the need to establish a repertoire of sound-producing actions, and perfected by the increasing complexity of music, notation gradually acquired a rational and systematic form. In its capacity as an instrument of mediation, it allowed reflection and development, sanctioning every step prior to the piece itself. The division of time into equal and exactly measurable portions – bars, beats – became established as one of the essential expressions of that rational and systematic form after the more analogue and less abstract late mediaeval period. On becoming more precise and encoding a symmetrical and divisive durational system, notation incorporated certain anomalies which, over time, led to the destabilisation of very strongly held norms. In a way similar to what happened with the so-called notes extraneous to harmony in the field of pitches, irregular – or “irrational,” as is suggestively said in French – values were the nuclei from which stability and symmetry began to be relativised. However, the instability provided by irregular values was always limited by the context: by taking the place of a beat or any binary subdivision thereof, or doing so for an entire measure, the rationalist illusion remained intact. There was always a greater time unit that encompassed the anomaly, thus allowing it to manifest itself, but within the system.

In the twentieth century, as part of the process of the fragmentation and autonomy experienced by all the parameters and variables of music, irregular values, encompassing durations that went beyond the bar line, or occupied unequal portions of two or more beats, began to be used. This shook one of the basic tools for the study of rhythm in Western music: counting.

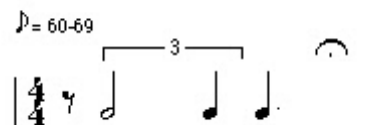
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Counting is making explicit the grid of regular beats on which the rhythms of a piece are written. This externalisation of the beat is the equality that allows all durational inequalities and asymmetries to surface; it is certainty itself, and consequently one of the cornerstones of musical interpretation in the West.

Just as Erik Satie was the first to compose non-dialectical music without either thematic or formal binary oppositions, Morton Feldman and Earle Brown – and soon after, John Cage – were those who suppressed the dialectical relationship between beat and rhythm. In some of its expressions, the so-called graphical notation introduced by these American composers around 1950 suppressed any indication referring to a metronomic or chronometric temporal grid, as in the case of Brown, or downplayed the notion of beat to establish a flexible analogy between the space occupied on the page and a non-strict metronomic unit in which all standard subdivision is cancelled, as is the case with Feldman. By eliminating the proportional relationships between durations, Feldman not only stripped the metronome of its sovereignty, but also severely weakened the underlying measurer of the temporal grid. Schoenberg emancipated dissonance from the laws of tonal functionality, and the New York School (Cage, Brown, Feldman and Wolff) emancipated rhythm from the beat, making it pure duration, thereby continuing the innovative tradition of Charles Ives and Henry Cowell.

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In the first bar of *The “St. Gaudens” in Boston Common* from *Three Places in New England* by Charles Ives, flute and piano have to play the following rhythm together:



This presents three difficulties for its execution:

- 1) The triplet begins **in the middle** of the first beat.
- 2) The triplet covers **two** beats.
- 3) The triplet contains **two unequal figures**.

To overcome these difficulties it is necessary to subdivide each beat as Ives himself implicitly suggests by indicating a metronomic quaver value. Then the rhythm has to be rewritten:



In this way, the quaver beats can be **counted**, ensuring the accuracy of durations and, above all, perfect synchronism between flute and piano. The question is, “Why did Ives not write it this way?”

The feeling of instability provided by Ives's way of writing it, arising both from the three aforementioned characteristics and from the visual appearance of the notation, is irretrievably lost in the rewrite. What is gained in accuracy as a result of the counting and consequent restoration of the temporal grid is at the expense of the subtle but decisive hesitation that the original notation offers.

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The delayed triplet – an invention introduced into traditional notation by Morton Feldman around 1977 – is a conventional triplet which, before completion, is interrupted by regular values, or another irregular value, that delays the appearance of the figure that completes it. In either case, it is a beat that is interrupted by another.

In a letter to the author of this article, Feldman explains what the delayed triplet is:

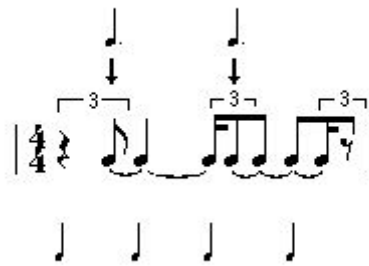
like a normal triplet as regards counting

[The emphasis is by Feldman]

The example and its explanation clearly demonstrate Feldman's intention as regards destabilising counting, which he reaffirms with the words "*as regards counting*" and the corresponding underlining. Feldman suggests that there is another, non-measurable, quality or attribute to which the notation refers without doing so visibly, that is, without changing the quantity or quality of the figures included in the measure, which are those corresponding to the written metric. The delayed triplet turns out to be the opposite case of the Ives example discussed above: for Ives, a regular beat is interrupted while for Feldman this happens with a beat of an irregular value.

If we assume a metronomic value of crotchet around 63 – as happens in *Piano*, a piece that includes Feldman's example – the unstable bar could be rewritten, just as we did with Ives, discarding the irregular values and restoring a regular beat that permits counting. First, the quadruplet that interrupts the delayed triplet and adds an additional difficulty can be rewritten as follows:

Once the irregular value acting as the interruption has been converted to regular, the delayed triplet can be disposed of using conventional triplets entering on a full beat or the middle of a beat:

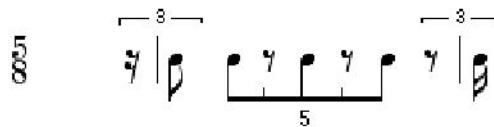


This rewrite, with durations exactly the same as the original, permits counting, that is, destroys the composer's intent.

The Feldman notation is more a representation of the sound result than an encoded guide for execution, making it closer to the composer than the interpreter. In this sense, the extreme practical difficulties in executing much of the music of Ives are a clear precedent. For both composers, although stylistically distant from each other, there is the same free handling of everything connected with predictability, including predictability in ways of approaching the study and preparation of the work for its execution.

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The most radical conflict between notation and execution occurs in the violin part in bar 5 of *Spring of Chosroes* for violin and piano, composed by Feldman in the same period as *Piano*:



The existence of an extra semiquaver triplet made the publisher – perhaps with the composer's agreement – include a footnote in the score: "*This bar is slightly longer than 5/8 but stands as the composer intended.*"

The illegality – which the publisher takes responsibility for reporting, assuming defence of the laws of the notational system, and absolving themselves from any charge of error in printing or copying – is more than evident. The delayed triplet not only operates as a destabiliser of the continuity of beat and counting but also, being imperfectly written, destabilises – makes irrational – the context in which it occurs: the 5/8 metric is "slightly" enlarged. There is no doubt about the use of the notation as part of a systematic process of "disorientation of memory," as Feldman defines it.¹ In bar 5 of *Spring of Chosroes*, the disorientation of memory reaches the memory of one of the most stable laws

¹ Referring to a passage in his work *Triadic Memories*, Feldman says: "*This way of working was a conscious attempt at 'formalising' a disorientation of memory.*" In "Crippled Symmetry" (1981), reprinted in "Morton Feldman: Essays" edited by Walter Zimmermann (Kerpen, Germany: Beginner Press, 1985).

of the traditional system of notation; the correspondence between metric and the quantity and quality of figures per bar.

From the graphical notation of the 50s through the return to conventional notation, Feldman's path speaks of the encounter with a music freed from some of its deepest mensural bonds. To achieve this, the notation becomes a true material, often used to turn against itself. Hence the well-known assertion that for Feldman notation is a parameter.

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The conventional triplet that interrupts the flow of regular beats and the delayed triplet which is interrupted by another beat are a small-scale expressions of the phenomenon of disruption which is an essential procedure in the production techniques of twentieth century music.²

The interruption or discontinuity – on any temporal scale that occurs – can give rise, under certain conditions, to a distancing of both performer and listener. It involves a denial of the promises and expectations contained in the interrupted fragment. This is succeeded by another, similar or different, which requires a different listening disposition. The cut causes a dislocation of hearing focus that makes us aware of the act of listening itself; a wake-up call to the impossibility of bringing together subject and work.

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² The procedure of disruption was used on a large-scale through the techniques of collage or assembly by Satie and Stravinsky. Referring to the last scene of his Ballet *Orpheus*, Stravinsky says: "*Here, you see, I cut the fugue with a pair of scissors... I introduced this brief harp phrase, as if they were two bars of accompaniment. Then the horns continue their fugue as if nothing had happened. This is repeated at regular intervals, here and there. You can suppress these interruptions of the harp alone, unite the pieces of the fugue and have a complete work*". Quoted in "1949: Christmas with Stravinsky" by Nicholas Nabokoff, included in "Igor Stravinsky" edited by Edwin Corle (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949).