

# Morton Feldman in My Life

by Chris Villars

*A short talk given at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2006.*

*Morton Feldman in My Life* is the title of a piece which the German composer Peter Michael Hamel dedicated to Feldman shortly after his death in 1987. Feldman's death moved Hamel and many other composers to write pieces dedicated to him. At least fifty such pieces were written by the end of 1988. I maintain a list of Feldman homage pieces on my website and at last count there were 136 pieces listed. [1] Most of the early pieces were written by composers who had 'Morton Feldman in their lives' in the very real sense of a friend, colleague, or teacher, whom they had known personally. By contrast, I never had any personal contact with him. My first encounters with his music were in the late sixties and early seventies when it was performed quite regularly on BBC Radio 3. I clearly remember the delight of listening to those early Feldman pieces composed of ultra-soft, "sourceless" sounds, like disembodied tone-colours spread out, as he might say, across his 'time canvas'. Feldman was a regular visitor to the UK at this time and many concerts were supervised by him. His reception here by performers and audiences was enthusiastic and I believe he considered moving here. However, after spending a year in Berlin in 1972, he was offered a Professorship at Buffalo which he accepted and occupied for the rest of his life.

Scroll forward then twenty or so years, during which time my life and interests followed a different path and I was more or less unaware of the radical development Feldman's music was undergoing. So, in the early nineties I come across in a music store those first recordings of Feldman's long late works on the Hat Hut label: Hildegard Kleeb's *For Bunita Marcus*, and the trilogy – *Crippled Symmetry*, *For Philip Guston* and *For Christian Wolff* – written for the Feldman players (Eberhard Blum, Jan Williams and Nils Vigeland). For me those recordings were a revelation and re-inspired my interest in him. Certainly it was after progressively buying those recordings (eagerly awaiting each new release!) that my active involvement took off.

The "Morton Feldman Page" was launched on the internet in January, 1997. It will be 10 years old at the end of this year. You can still look at the early state of the site using the Wayback Machine at the Internet Archive. There you can see that the site began as just a list of works and a CD discography. That was all I intended it to be initially. Collecting the growing number of Feldman CDs, I realised there was no up-to-date discography available, so I started one up. I quickly realised the first great advantage of an online discography: You can keep it up-to-date. Even though Sebastian Claren's book on Feldman, *Neither*, published in 2000, contained a complete discography as of that date, with new recordings appearing all the time, it was almost immediately out-of-date.

The second great advantage of an online discography is that it becomes a collaborative venture. People contact me with details of recordings I would probably never have got to know about. The site today is a joint venture, with dozens of people contributing in various ways. Over the years, the site as a whole has grown mainly as a result of suggestions from others. Of course, there's a downside to this: You get these very nice messages thanking you for what's already there, but they always end with a neat suggestion for what else you might include! What about a vinyl LP discography? What about a list of what's *not* recorded, a performances listing, a text collection, photos of Feldman – these things were added over the years after suggestions from others.

Whilst the content of the website has grown, one thing has remained more or less constant, i.e. what you might euphemistically call its "low-tech" design. It's all done with a simple text editor; that's as far as my ability goes. Hopefully, someone will eventually create a more stylish, official Morton Feldman site, perhaps under the auspices of the Feldman Estate or one of his publishers.

Today the most active section of my website is the performances listing. Though the coverage is far from complete, it's a great way to see what's being performed where, and when. Of course, that knowledge can be dangerous too! Gillian (my wife) and I have become something-like "Feldman groupies" over the past decade. Our holiday destinations have largely been chosen on the basis of there being Feldman concerts on there! I'm not kidding! Amsterdam, Venice, Lisbon, Paris, Stockholm, Aachen, Utrecht, Copenhagen, Ghent ...and now, of course, Huddersfield! It's a great way to see the world!

In Aachen, Markus Berzborn, piano, and Olaf Futyma, flute, played the four-hour *For Christian Wolff*. Their performance opened my eyes to the beauty of that piece and reinforced my view that you really do have to experience Feldman's very long works in live performances to fully appreciate them. Not only is there all the subtlety of the live sound, but the visible concentration of the performers draws you in and helps to carry you along. That concentration is not accidental; it's a consequence of the complexity of the score, which for example seldom leaves the players with even the reassurance of a constant time-signature for more than a few bars at a time. In that and other ways, Feldman forces a mode of concentration in the performers similar to the concentration he describes himself as adopting whilst composing.

In my opinion, the extreme duration of many of Feldman's late works really has to be experienced at one sitting, with all the effects of varying attention, and the fluctuating orientation and disorientation in time that occurs over such long time spans. That's part of what these pieces are about.

As well as upcoming performances, the website retains an archive list of past performances. This can be used to get a view of where Feldman is most performed and which works are performed most often. I compiled those stats a couple of years ago for the previous 5 year period, and I've now brought them up-to-date for the past 7 years. It turns out that Feldman is most often performed in Germany (160 concerts listed in the 7 years). Second and third are the USA (97 concerts) and the UK (70 concerts). So there's quite a significant preference for playing Feldman in Germany, though the trend for concerts in the USA has been increasing in the last 2 years.

Feldman's most performed work is *Rothko Chapel* (33 performances), closely followed by *Why Patterns?* (30), *The Viola in My Life 2* (29) and *Triadic Memories* (27). I guess Feldman would be pleased (if not amazed!) to know that his five-hour *String Quartet 2* has been performed at least 22 times in the past 7 years!

At the other end of the scale, there is not a single performance of *String Quartet 1* listed, and just 2 performances of *For Christian Wolff*, as compared with 17 performances of *Crippled Symmetry* and 15 of *For Philip Guston*. [2]

In 2004, with the help of my friend Paul Flapper in the Netherlands, I produced the Feldman jazz tributes CD. This brought together on one disc all the jazz tribute pieces that I had identified at that time. They are a great set of pieces and illustrate very well just how diverse and pervasive Feldman's influence has become. Feldman's own interest in jazz was highlighted recently when Universal Edition published his arrangement (for ensemble and voice) of Kurt Weill's *Alabama Song*. In his introduction to the score, the American painter and jazz musician Howard Kanovitz wrote: "I went to all of Morty's early concerts ... At the same time, I would bring him to hear jazz at the Five Spot and Jazz Gallery. We heard John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Charlie Mingus and Thelonius Monk whom Morty especially admired. Around 1984 ... I asked Morty if he would write a piece for us. Some weeks passed, then I received a copy of the score of *Alabama Song*. ... I was thrilled with it and hoped we would record it. But it was not to be, sadly we never even performed it". Well, Feldman's arrangement of *Alabama Song* is published now, but I believe it's still awaiting its first performance. [3]

[Incidentally, I've brought along some copies of the jazz tributes CD. If you'd like one, please come and take one. They're free! I'm sure everyone will find something on there to enjoy!]

In July 2003, Joseph Kohlmaier and Stefan Kraus of the London-based design company, Polimekanos, approached me about producing a book from some of the material collected on the Feldman website. This seemed a good idea for two reasons: First, when you publish things electronically online you wonder how long they're going to be available, what's going to happen to them. It still seems advisable to have important material available in a hard-copy format. The second reason to like the book idea is that most people still prefer to read from printed text. Of course you can print the online copies but the result is not ideal in terms of handling or reading. The project also gave Joseph and Stefan the opportunity to design something that, as well as presenting important texts, was a beautiful object in its own right.

We decided to publish the interviews I'd collected over the years as they make a good complementary volume to the collection of essays published by Exact Change a few years ago. After a false start when we misguidedly attempted to go ahead without a publisher on board, the project finally took off when Robin Kinross of Hyphen Press, London, enthusiastically agreed to take it on. The resulting book, *Morton Feldman Says* (another title I pinched – this time from Robert Ashley!), was published in March this year.

Robin and I sponsored a concert to launch the book on March 24<sup>th</sup> at Conway Hall in London. John Tilbury and Darragh Morgan, who, amongst many others of course, are featured here this week, were amongst those who played in that event. Dr David Reid recorded the event and I hope to be able to issue his recording on CD at some time in the future. [4]

I get a fair number of queries from people about all kinds of things to do with Feldman. One question that keeps popping up is: How can I get hold of the score of Feldman's piece for electric guitar called *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar*? The answer, of course, is that you can't, because it was lost when Christian Wolff's guitar case, which held the only copy of the score, was stolen from his car.

When Italian guitarist Marco Cappelli asked me that question in 2004, I suggested that he re-compose the piece as a sort of homage, and he produced a lovely piece based on Feldman's *Piano Piece 1964*. This was premiered in November 2004. I've since realised that the same idea occurred much earlier to Larry Polansky, who composed a piece for electric guitar based on the chord sequence in Feldman's *Christian Wolff in Cambridge*. So now there are two *Possibilities*!! I also think it is not impossible that the original might one day come to light. Not the score, but a recording. Christian Wolff says that he once played the piece in the studios of radio WKFA in San Francisco. It's not impossible that buried somewhere in the archives of that radio station a recording may still exist. [5]

OK, that's some of the ways in which Morton Feldman has been in my life in the past decade. Feldman once said: "We can do very well without art; what we can't live without is the *myth* of art". It's perfectly true that my own involvement has been with the *myth* of Feldman's music, part of the cultural industry that springs up around all great art. Sad to say, I spend far more time dabbling in the myth than in actually listening to the music. The myth is indeed, as Feldman characteristically put it, in danger of 'relieving us of the art itself'! It's great therefore at events like this Festival to get so many opportunities for just listening to the music.

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#### **Notes added October 2013:**

1. Now 193 pieces.
2. More up-to-date performance stats can be found at: <http://www.cnvill.net/mfperfs.htm>
3. It was in fact premiered in June 2006 in Aldeburgh, UK.
4. This is not now likely to happen.
5. This speculation proved correct! See: <http://www.cnvill.net/mfpossibility.pdf>