

Morton Feldman: Lecture on *Violin and Orchestra*

June in Buffalo Lecture, 17 June 1986

Transcribed by Sebastian Claren and Chris Villars

Morton Feldman founded the "June in Buffalo" contemporary music festival at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1975, and directed it until 1980, after which it lapsed. In 1986, the festival was revived by David Felder, who has directed it each year since then. In 1986, alongside the evening and afternoon concerts, each senior composer on the university staff gave a two-hour morning lecture on his work. The following transcription of Feldman's lecture is made available here by kind permission of the Estate of Morton Feldman.

[The opening of the lecture is missing from the recording]

One of the first things that I did - which at that time was necessary, but at this particular time I wouldn't advise it - is that I found that when I started to teach at this university that the abstract of what the student's gonna do on a PhD dissertation was always, and still is, more interesting than actually what happens. So what happened was that I took away the abstract, which created a sense of crisis. Just to write a piece, a twenty-five minute piece, kind of piece that you would write not being under the pressure of doing course work, kind of piece you would write if you were kind of beginning a professional life so to speak. And I found that the student couldn't write the piece without the abstract. OK.

So by taking away the overview I feel more like a surgeon performing an operation in which, very much... I think the image of the surgeon is very apt because one doctor is really the orchestrator and the other doctor is the technician, another one is the internal medicine. And I think one of the reasons for the difficulty, why it's so difficult to have a reputation at least - never mind to write the music - to get a reputation in music is that the younger professional doesn't realize that you're really divided into *many* different factors. You don't want *person* writing the composition. You're a little General Motors; you're also the historian; you're also the theorist. I suppose it's true in every field, but I find it *extremely* true in composition. More true in Europe than I would say in America. In America the emphasis seems to be, as we all know, more on the notes and really not on the other aspects of what it is to write the piece and make the piece impressive. OK.

So I'm the surgeon on the operating table and I'm watching everything, everything, just like everybody else, because I too feel that I'm a mainstream composer. What is the mainstream? To get from here to Toronto there's only one highway. If you wanna go on a little road, you're gonna find yourself in a Doneville. Ever been to Doneville? There's no sense passing through Doneville if you wanna go to Toronto. And essentially that's the way I feel mainstream is. That mainstream was a fantastic laboratory where a lot of terrific people are writing music and problem solving. Naturally there was some schleps¹ there that mistook solutions to problem solving. But essentially it's a fantastic laboratory, you know, with all these people that's responsible for us, and we hardly even know what their music was like. So in that sense I'm a mainstream composer. And to me what is mainstream? It's moving some notes around, moving instruments around, keeping the motion going. Or as Aaron Copland once said to me after looking at a piece of mine: "How do you keep it going?" To be concerned how to keep it going. The minute you ask yourself how you're gonna keep it going, you're mainstream. You have to be. You gotta get it up there, it has to stay for a period of time. Of course some people take a little mainstream a little too seriously; it's a little too streamy;

¹ Inept or stupid people.

it's a little too main, the preoccupation with certain facts, you see. That's the question of one's personality and background. You can't even discuss the nuance of that. In a sense, how serious should you take it? To what degree do you rant and rave as a representative, for example, of anything, whether it's religion or music? And then... I don't know Mario Davidovsky too well. I like him a lot, and I'm just using Mario as an example of someone who... We started a conversation together at lunch and in twenty minutes the guy was turning red about how he was responsible for every note he writes. Oh I think Mario perhaps takes it a little, a little over conscientious in the sense of responsibility. Some people are a little more relaxed. OK.

One of the most interesting things when you're working with this composition, not with a cynical point of view, but there is a possibility that it might drop dead in the operating room. [Laughter] I mean, it does happen, you know. And it does happen the old famous remark that the operation was success and the patient died. I've seen a lot of pieces like that. [Laughter] I think, do you know how many good pieces there are in the world? I think there are thousands and thousands of terrific, good pieces that they don't remember at all. So my concerns of mainstream are concerns in the most generalized way. That is, I'm interested in notes, I'm interested everything. Mainstream isn't really interested in anything.

Again, on a scale of one to ten, to what degree this interest is overly conceptualized is another problem in teaching. I was on a panel with Milton Babbitt recently. Actually he was talking about certain aspects of serialism, of working out parameters in a sense, which had nothing to do with the focus of the reality of the piece. This is a very big concern, especially brought on by artificially intelligence. Remember artificial intelligence is where the intelligence is artificial. And to what degree we have to look in some kind of fortune-teller device to see our future either compositionally and just work on the level of our natural intelligence, is another big problem. I'm very concerned with that problem. I would say that's the most interesting problem sitting down for a day and doing some work. I once walked into a classroom here and I said something impressed everybody for months on end. I opened up with the question: how do we know what we don't know? In terms of rendering it into a composition. Talking about it, thinking about it, is one thing, but actually rendering it is another thing. Any kind of concept in order to render is another thing. Schoenberg has that. A very sad... Towards the end of *Style and Idea* where he talks about trying to explain to the class a lesson in double counterpoint. Very careful about his language. Spent a lot of time with it. Gave the assignment out, no one could do it. Big big problem, big big problem. Are we doing actually what we think we're doing? We stay with it. It's better not to say anything, you might come out with a lot of terrific results which you're not responsible for. Like some of the greatest discoveries. I heard recently... Barbara² told me about the telephone. Barbara, what exactly happened there with Graham Bell? Was it the telephone?

Barbara Monk: Yeah. The inventor, Bell, Alexander Graham Bell, thought it had already been invented, so he went ahead and made it. But he'd misread German. He thought Helmholtz had already invented it. He hadn't though. [Laughter]

Feldman: So sometimes, given a little kind of, you know... This whole idea of misreading for example, or like anybody involved with the most basic elements of anthropology would hear how there'd be a misunderstanding from one island to another how they would explain the information. Actually it's a phenomenal thing. During the '60s what's really happening in Darmstadt? It produces some very strange situations. OK.

Getting back to the operating table, I don't want to milk this analogy much longer. But one of the most interesting things that happen in the operating table - it's a propos this piece by the way - is

² The composer Barbara Monk, later Barbara Monk Feldman, in the audience.

that you need a transfusion. The transfusion is not with our own blood. It's with someone else's blood, with someone else's major sixth, someone else's trumpet, so to speak. History, essentially, and this intelligence - not artificial, *real*; Italian shoes, Scarlatti, even Pergolesi could write a good tune - helps us. And we're not mindful, we're just not mindful, where we need the blood transfusion. Will it become more or less like everybody else, doing it in our own way? I'm not an apologist for the history. I just can't reinforce how dependent we are on it, which is beyond the responsibility for every note. It's: "I surrendered here," so to speak. [Laughs]

A very humorous, almost a parody, of what I'm really talking about, happens towards the end of this piece. The piece is going along and I find that it's too pitchy. And I needed some more consistent type of intervallic work. And you hear in the cadenzas, or quasi cadenzas, at different moments two different rows of late Webern. See if you can pick 'em up. And I loved it, quoting these rows, because you really heard those intervals that become classic assumptions for putting a very good twelve tone piece together. And they were right, those were terrific choices. That, I felt, helped the piece tremendously at that particular moment. So when I talk about no overview I feel that I'm monitoring the piece, and feel that I bring to it at that moment that which I feel is needed. The piece is going along and I feel: what happened to the woodwinds? I got overly concerned with another family there. So I give it a shot of woodwinds. It was needed at the moment, like adrenalin. This section could be a little more sculptured, so to speak, it's getting a little too invasive. So I do it, at the moment. It's very difficult to leave your conceptual or, you know, concerns, to change for the moment. I might not like the role-playing of the notation, I leave it at that moment. I might want things coming back. I don't confuse it coming back with an aspect of form. I might want it to come back for another reason. A lot of my returns, in recent years, is more to disorient myself, being the listener, in terms how I remember it. That I use variation, not what Stravinsky would call as a kind of seductive aspect of composition, but also as an element of disorientation. That I heard it one way, and then I heard it another way, and then I heard it another way. Especially with very simple things like the two pianos, and the image that recurs all the time different in either the notes, or in its orchestration, or the registration.

Now let's get to the whole idea of writing a violin concerto or writing this particular piece. I doubt if I would have written it if I wasn't closely associated with Paul Zukofsky. I've already written two very important pieces with Paul. I work with him. You might know his article on tuning in an old issue of *Perspectives*³. I was never involved with tuning, but I did become involved with spelling also in recent years. And it became very, very difficult for me to actually go into the old way of doing it, because it seemed misleading. For example, if I had a double sharp, it appeared to be a leading tone, you know, or something like this. I had to get over a lot of my own background and how I would think about stuff, and things like that. It was very difficult for me to get into any other kind of division of the pitch. The quarter tone was, again, it was too much. I lost too much on the exchange with the quarter note! And I think I solved it with Paul, at least, and with other string players that I had long discussions with, that I worked with, like the Kronos Quartet, about this whole idea of the direction of the pitch, and how I still want the focus of the pitch. I don't wanna lose too much, but, you know, just keep it going. I like it. To me it's like turpentine, it thins out, you know, the work. Working many years with the minor second, it seemed pretty large after forty years! [Laughs] And I hear it, I have to hear it. I don't wanna come to any assumptions of that. I had predilections. I'm leaving it little by little. My recent pieces are not using spelling. I, er... Oh, I'll say it: I like it more on consonant chords than I do on chromatic chords. In my first *String Quartet* there is - I think I'm still nuts about it, I think about it sometimes - some little movement on a nicely, strangely orchestrated D minor chord. It's on a six four relationship, with different tuning, just sounds fabulous. While the chromatic thing doesn't sound, just doesn't sound that focused in

³ The journal *Perspectives of New Music*. Zukofsky's article *On Violin Harmonics* was first published in Volume 6 Number 2 (1968).

the ear. It's an ear thing. Never mind what it is, just as an ear thing. And maybe what I'm really talking about is a conversation I had with Ursula Oppens about she likes to keep her piano a little bit out of tune, she says, because it sounds warmer. So maybe it just sounds warmer. I don't really know technically what I want. I don't mind things out of tune actually, a little, somewhat.

Alright, so there's a very good row, where you hear some nice intervals, consistently. And I don't have an overview. That's something better, about Paul Zukofsky. [Laughs] OK.

It's an hour. It's one of my shorter pieces. And the performance isn't bad. We can't use it commercially. Paul and myself are not happy with the conductor. There's something when the... when the instrument... this is something we all find. Say you want something just to continue, and the orchestration changes, or the notation changes. For some reason the performers or the conductor always feel they're gonna [Feldman claps his hands sharply] go into a wall. And they always make a transition, as if it's a point of transition. And no matter how I discussed this with the conductor, who's a very sweet fellow, there was always this *pacing* that this [claps again] not gonna hit the car in front of 'em. And that was one of the disturbances in this particular piece, that you always feel the things that *not* go on. That the visual change or the notational change didn't make sense to the people that were playing it or conducting it. Happens all the time. So that's the one criticism about the performance. Other than that, Paul is just magnificent.

Now I don't like to talk about things in any kind of hierarchical sense, but let's put it this way, I can't get started in any sense of the word of getting started until the instrumentation is already settled in my mind. That palette I refer to as instrumental harmony, which I feel for my music and my thinking and my hearing has much more of a solidity aspect, of cementing a simultaneity or verticality, more than any other scheme that I could think of. I always had this kind of confrontation with having systems hear for you. And there's no sense having the system hear for you if the instruments are all wrong. [Laughs] It's like being in church and supposed to be meditating and people are either eating or they're screaming at each other. The context and the content has to go together. Without the instrumentation being absolutely, incredibly balanced, so to speak, with each other, it makes it very difficult for me to work. So going with what one feels, in my case - forgive me - objectively out of me, you begin to have a big problem, you see, with this adjustment, this continual adjustment of putting the piece together. Instruments are going at different speeds, they're speaking differently, everything's not working out. And if you're listening, things are not working out! [Laughs] And there's continually this kind of adjustment. Now I prefer the adjustment on paper. I work on the level that I am at that time, rather than going and having control of an instrumental group and making the piece sound like a million dollars. In that way I'm more concerned with just what the *notation* is, in terms of its instrumentation, than I am with what *idea* I had at the time, you see.

That is very, very difficult, especially with terrific instruments. I've been at Cal Arts for this semester and we had the Kronos coming in. One student that I was working with, very gifted, came from San Francisco. Her name is Mary. She wrote a piece for the Kronos Quartet. I thought the notation was overly... somewhat over her head. It was multi... Things were going in different rhythms in different times. It was the dream of a polyphony, the Holy Grail of contemporary music. And I said to her, "Mary," I said, "listen very carefully, because these four people are gonna come in, they're terrific, and have lot of experience of making things sound like a million dollars. So try and listen to the piece and just figure out in a sense, and admit to yourself, what you feel notationally is wrong with the piece, not so much the way they're gonna doctor the piece." In that sense I always wonder what one learns from performance. I never learned a goddamn thing! I've been around a long time, had a lot of performances, I never learned a thing. If the piece is played terrific, you wrote a masterpiece. If it's played badly, you wait for the next performance. [Laughs] I never really learned anything. And I don't think you should learn anything. I don't think the whole

idea of being a composer, the fact that you learned what to do *better*, that's not the idea. We develop a point into high style. I don't think that's the idea. Low style.

So the last point that I wanna make - I'm picking up your questions by the way. [Laughs] Style, that son-of-a-bitch of a term! Where everything is understood in terms of style. Not of skills, but of style. Cut it out. Because you're just gonna be crippled. There ain't no style, there are skills. And if the Second Viennese School sound terrific, it's because they had skills. Forget about style. Some styles are classic and some styles are... I like mainstream clothes. Of course I made them. A friend of mine once said, Morty Feldman is the only guy that can wear Brooks Brothers clothes and it looks like... it looks like... what do you call... you know, I don't look like the Kennedys. Everything I've got on is Brooks Brothers. [Laughter] My jacket is Brooks. This is Brooks. My underwear is Brooks. My stockings⁴... I can't wear stockings unless they're Brooks Brothers. They, they just fit right. Other stockings go an eighth of an inch above the ankle. Underwear, the crotch. Brooks Brothers, it's the crotch in Brooks Brothers. That's another thing about being mainstream, the travel and knowing what to wear. You know the Duke of Windsor had his pants made in New York, and his jackets made in London. Europe, they never know how to do the crotch to the waist. It's *always* wrong. The European shirt too, I can't wear it. It goes on top of the Adam's apple. On top! You get a shirt in Augusta, Georgia, they get right in the middle. Adam's apple. That's what I mean by mainstream.

We have to begin this piece. I actually came with another piece. Which leads me to one of the most humorous non-talks I ever gave was at McGill in, er...Where is it?

Audience: Montreal.

Feldman: In Montreal. I go into this crowded room and I have two pieces with me. I don't know which to play. Usually what I do is I decide on just smoke signals sort of. The way you're sitting, you see, or not sitting.

Audience member: Chemistry.

Feldman: No, just I pick out one person, body language. Is he to be annoyed the minute I, before you even talk kind of person, type of thing. [Laughter] Recently at the Schoenberg Institute I walked over to a guy and start insulting him because of his attitudes about John Cage. He said nothing. Later the professor said to me, "How do you know this guy is always ranting against John Cage?" I said, "I see he was that kind of guy the way he's sitting there, you know. The way he's looking I should be annoyed about." They thought, you know, I had secret gifts. But what was very funny about McGill is I came with these two pieces. I don't know what to play and the lecture's almost over and I didn't play anything. I had one short piece and I had another piece which was thirty-five minutes. There was a woman sitting in front row dressed to kill. Nobody knew who she was and she kept insisting that I play the long piece. "Oh please play the long piece. Oh, please, we would like to hear the long piece." I put on the long piece. She listened for two minutes, she got up and she walked out! [Laughter] They're still talking at McGill about that lady. They never saw her again. OK.

When did I write it? I wrote it in '79. There are a lot of humorous elements about Paul Zukofsky in this piece. He was supposed to be down in the Warsaw Festival, and they only sent him a one way ticket. [Laughter] And he refused to go unless they sent him a round trip ticket. And nobody got him on the phone. He didn't realize that you can't call out of Warsaw that easily. And he had no communication about his ticket. And finally I said, "Get a ticket, you'll be reimbursed, get a ticket."

⁴ "Stockings" here means "men's socks," a now outdated usage.

That week Pan Am closed their offices in Warsaw, so he couldn't get one to London and back. He knew some people in an airport, some other professional musicians, they said, "Don't go unless you have a round trip ticket." He never went. The only annoyance I have about this was that it cost me fifty bucks talking to the Parisian conductor, and there was no piece to conduct. It was cancelled.

Then Solidarity. Supposed to rehearse in Danzig, and that's the home of Solidarity with the big strike going on. So Paul was living out in his family's house up in Long Island and expecting to go at any moment. There was no food in the house. And I would get this food report. [Laughter] He calls up - and this is true - he says, "I'm down to my last piece of loxes⁵." [Laughter] I said, "Paul, there's a luncheonette out there." He says, "It's two miles away and the phone might ring." [Laughter] A little humour before a very serious piece of music.

[A recording of *Violin and Orchestra* is played.]

And then there was a panel in German on the piece.

[Extended applause]

OK, what kind of questions?

Audience member: You talked a lot about your conversations with the Abstract Expressionists, about the interchange of ideas that you had. And I think a lot of what we see that they have done in art has a lot of analogies to your music. When I mentioned this to Bunita Marcus, she said: Yeah, and lot of what you were doing, and saying had influenced your music, had an influence on the painting. And I wondered if you could speak about it a little.

Feldman: Well, you can't speak collectively. I only had about two very intimate friends in particular, [names unclear]. We had this kind of dialogue going on for ten years. However what I wanted... And there's a remark - I'm not annoyed - but there's a remark that's attributed to Robert Rauschenberg which is essentially my remark, you know. [Laughs] But it goes for Bob too. For those of you, you know, that know about Rauschenberg's ideas, he said that he wanted neither... You know there is always this discussion of life and art. I hope it doesn't stop. And John Cage of course. I once told John, I said, "Well, you opened up the door, and I opened up the window a little bit, as far as life and art go." But what was attributed to Rauschenberg is where he said that he wanted neither life nor art, but something in between. And that was in a sense a remark that I mentioned to him. I actually wrote an article and a composition called *Between Categories*.

Now, painting is not music, and I don't know where there can be an analogy. Music is linear and it's narrative and I think it's closer to literature. And I think that's one of the problems in its aspect of directionality, is that it's linear and closer to a narrative or literature. I feel where the painters have helped me tremendously is in this whole aspect of - and I didn't need the Abstract Expressionists for that You'll find it, and they found it, in one picture perhaps of Matisse, *The Red Studio*, which is in the Museum of Modern Art - with this whole aspect of: What the hell is it? This stasis: What is it? Background? Foreground, it's not there. And of course, Matisse didn't need it either in terms of his invention because of the pictures of Titian, where a guy is standing... There's a fabulous picture in the Vienna museum, where - big picture - the guy is standing there. It's all dark in the background. All he has is a little outline. You get the whole room with just this little outline of a chair, you see. Didn't need it. He didn't need too much information.

⁵ Lox, or loxes, is salmon that has been cured with a salt rub or brine.

Now I think that my whole involvement, not only with Abstract Expressionism and this whole idea about Pop Art - which Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns didn't even, not Pop Art - it was a kind of *content* with paint and to painting, which was *less* the content of art history. One of the big problems in abstract painting is that a lot of people think they're just schmearing⁶ on the canvas. In many ways it's very historical, and the references are very historical. If you investigate the career of my closest friend in art, Guston, even that picture of me on that book of essays⁷, has a Piero della Francesca... that blue, that della Francesca blue. And the profile is... Piero never did a full face, it was always in some way in profile. Pollock, strangely enough in a sense, if you visited him he only had books on Michelangelo. And that endless line of his. His *Autumn Rhythm*, in a sense, was his involvement with this unending rhythm. Where did the line end? Where does another line begin? So they were very art historical. And of course Rothko was Rembrandt. How he bled out the things. We have things like that too, it's called cadences [Laughs] and transitions. So those parallels exist in painting at all.

I think that what they did and what we didn't do, we don't do. When Jackson Pollock painted he'll put it on the floor. That he got from the American Indians. He grew up in Arizona. And he watched them walk around in their sand painting. And we don't walk around. We might walk around in our inversions, going this way. But we don't walk around the piece. We don't go like this, the way I used to watch Guston in the studio, help him take out a section and just see if he can get... Does he need it? Should he push it here, you see. We don't have those kind of revisions, which still exist in painting. For example, an experienced eye you could take a look at a Renaissance painting, you could see where they rubbed it out and they just pushed it over here, or just moved it over here. And then, I've seen some X-rays of frescos where in the cartoon with the original plan for the painting, the guy was standing like this, but in the X-ray and in the finished thing he's standing like this, you see. Those kind of erasures, and I'll even find 'em like that in Mondrian, to leave the erasure, to some degree. We have other problems, which makes it a very special art. Perhaps a superior one. I once wrote an article with a very flower-esque line... If I can quote myself: "The tragedy of music," I wrote, "is that it *begins* in perfection." We have something else. They have two colors against each other - it's OK - which you could see in an art show in Sarasota and you're not gonna get excited. We have two notes together, in a certain place, just two lines, and it blows our brains out!

This is... I don't know what it is! A lot of problems I'm struggling in I don't even wanna answer. I ask the question. I'm not even involved with giving... Perhaps I mentioned to some of you in other places, in other rooms, I'm even questioning whether music is an art form. I think essentially it's a music form. The art form element is the metaphors, the allegory, the atmosphere. I mean it certainly did alright as a music form. You're gonna start complaining about the history of music? Blow your brains out! So, it did alright. Whether it could become an art form I don't know. You know that remark of Boulez - it's cynical, it's nasty, but maybe it's true: "The only American composer is John Cage". But John is not involved with what a lot of us are involved with. Maybe it's true. That doesn't mean that he's making it into an art form. My view about John Cage, and I said it at the Schoenberg Institute and Leonard Stein then said he thought about it for a long time. I said that he had three students, Schoenberg, and the fourth one was Cage. And what Cage was involved with was what everybody in the mainstream was involved with: variation, finding ways of variation. And the *I Ching* is not Las Vegas, you see. It's that Yin Yang balance. He said this, and she said this, and maybe something will be resolved after the conversation. That's the *I Ching*: It all comes out in a wash. Which led to Xenakis, to some degree, and he'd be the first one to admit it, a kind of statistical aspect of construction.

⁶ Spreading or smearing.

⁷ Philip Guston's painting *Friend - To M.F.* (1978) is reproduced on the cover of *Morton Feldman Essays*, edited by Walter Zimmermann (Beginner Press, 1985).

So I'm involved essentially, not so much with, er... I'm involved more with attitudes about the approach, rather than the work itself. Attitudes. For example, I'm a closet tribal rug collector, very involved in nineteenth century Turkish nomadic rugs. Now what I liked about rugs first of all is what I like about my music, to some degree. The fact that it might have certain aspects that's identifiable with me I try to ignore. There's always something that's identifiable, or that's indigenous, even in an anonymous rug. I could tell a rug, where it comes from, by its colors, because other places didn't have those colors. And that is the anonymity of a rug, and yet it locates its region. Just like the use of instrumentation locates the region. Western, Eastern, you see.

Audience member: Meaning the geographical and temporal region?

Feldman: Yeah. Western civilization, certain period, you could pick up the piece. I could tell a piece of mine that I wrote in the '50s I didn't hear in a long time that's involved with what I would consider would be my concerns in the '50s. It has that history. Everything has its history.

There are two questions to ask. First of all: what are skills? And then - that's nothing - and then: how do we apply these skills and what's relevant to the work that we're doing? Those are the only two questions. Whether your mother's gonna like it.

Audience member: Is this another question? You said a third question.

Feldman: [Laughs] Again on the scale to what degree you got an addupal⁸ problem [Laughter] and not to what degree you have a social problem. I mean, I hang out in England a lot. And you see these Dukes in Oxford. You know they're full of social consciousness. [Laughter] England has social problems about social conditions, which affects their attitudes. I remember... What's that marvelous lady, Bernard⁹, she just died? The one...

Audience member: The Duchess of Windsor?

Feldman: [Laughs] The Duchess of Windsor! The one female, dowager composer in England.

Audience member: [Inaudible]

Feldman: That's a man! Twelve tone, the first twelve tone composer. Wrote a lot of music.

Audience member: Elizabeth Lutyens.

Feldman: Yeah, Elizabeth Lutyens. So I remember I had a concert someplace in London - Smith Square - and it was over and I took a bow from my seat. Elizabeth Lutyens walked up to me and said - nice lady, strong lady - she says, "Morton, in this country we go up front and shake hands with the conductor, we acknowledge the audience, we acknowledge the performers." [Laughs] Too marvelous! It was very funny, this little speech she gave me about how to behave as a professional in England.

So my background was... I found a safeguard, I found a safeguard in having... I had history and was aided too, so to speak, by getting involved with the art world at that particular time. However, as a kid I played poker with Milton Babbitt.

Audience member: Did he win?

⁸ Made up word, meaning 'to do with adding up.'

⁹ The composer Bernard Rands, in the audience.

Feldman: Well, I don't know. We used to play every week. But it's very interesting because if anyone here is impressed with what Milton did with twelve notes, you should see what he does with fifty-two cards! [Laughter] What the hell is twelve notes anyway! So, another secret.

I'd like to talk about two things which I noticed, before I go off and disappear in Bermuda. This whole idea of a perceptual attitude to your art, and a conceptual attitude to your art, and the pros and cons of both. If I'm on a committee - that's how I happen to have been with Davidovsky - I wouldn't take the Feldmanesque pieces, or the adventurous pieces, I picked all the twelve tone pieces, what they study with my old friend Seymour Shifrin or whatever. I picked all the pieces that didn't make any claims. It made a certain degree of claims, that it was an educated musician and they're doing the right thing, at the wrong time. But I felt those were the pieces that justified in the context of the situation, had a kind of humility, you see. I gave a little talk in Japan recently, and I contradicted this idea that the Orient has a kind of humility, or an anonymity, towards these things, while Western Civilization is ego oriented. And I questioned that. I think that without the Christian iconography there couldn't have been a Renaissance. And I think that was to attest not only to the iconography, but to the humility of the people that did those paintings. Like the humility of surrendering to a fugue, [Laughs] and the humility of just surrendering to a certain different kind of criteria, in a sense. You know my definition of a scholar: someone who forgets about themselves for five minutes. And I feel that our heritage, our Western heritage, in a sense, has that kind of humility towards this, this particular... I don't call it tradition. I don't call it a language. Those are... Unfortunately those are terms, those are... That's the fly paper you get caught in and you waste your life! Even in defense of them. You know, the kind of quasi fascist attitude of Webern, when he says: "To live is to defend a form." Born again! I've known Bernard for a long time. He's not gonna go, he's not gonna go on the Titanic to prove a point. And none of us are. [Laughter] Those days are gone forever. Even though it might have made the German tradition as great as it is. Without that attitude we wouldn't have had that heritage.

I think all we need now, Ladies and Gentlemen, is 60s! At 40s you give a little encouragement and make some suggestions. At 50 you give advice. At 60 you warn! [Laughter]

[Break in the recording]

Just try and locate the sound of the cello, *again*, a born again cello! [Laughs] The beauty of the virgin lines called counterpoint. But not for the whole piece, maybe just for two measures, so we remember it. A few little things here and there. A few little nostalgia. A few little reminiscences. A little shape, a little line, a felt rhythm, that's all you need. You know, well you can't! It's too late! Too late! I gave a lecture - it was the best lecture I ever gave, I could never give it again - on the first movement of Webern's *First Cantata*. When I got finished with what the hell that guy did, you know, crazy notes, jack in the box wasn't it. After I got finished telling the students what Webern did in that particular piece, their mind is blown, they were just wiped out. We can't get in that again. We're not gonna do it again. It's just metaphors for problem solving anyway. I mean, you just have to know in a sense that you gotta do something to get that son-of-a-bitch! You gotta stay overnight, with a cluster! [Laughter] Not like when Bunny¹⁰ went camping in the Adirondacks. And she's there, and she's knocking herself out over hills and dales. I got a phone call from some guy called up that Bunny was in a nearby hospital. She went camping with sneakers, and she couldn't walk. And she told me that the most discouraging thing at the knocking herself out, she got to a hill, and there was a lady in high heel shoes and a husband and two kids and they're having bagels and lox for Sunday morning! [Laughter] The Adirondacks and she's knocking herself out. They got to the same place! They drove up to it! She had to knock herself out! So that's it. I mean we're living

¹⁰ The composer Bunita Marcus.

in a yuppie world and you don't have to knock yourself out anymore with history. You could buy bagels and lox and go to the Adirondacks and not even learn it. It's too late, in that sense.

But there's always a mystery about what do you have to do? What are you doing? What do you have to do to get there? They're not gonna talk about that, it's taboo what *there* is. And it's just a fascinating subject, it's just a fascinating subject. What do you have to do to get there? What's missing in one's work? Absolutely fascinating subject.

And it never works out. If any of you remember that George Stevens remake of the Theodore Dreiser *American Tragedy*. I think it's called *A Place in the Sun*. It was with Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor. I always had that image of an artist trying to get on in the world when... Because in a sense we're like social climbers. We wanna be buried next to Monteverdi in Venice. Now, I'm Jewish, and I'm from Long Island, I'm never gonna be buried next to Monteverdi! [Laughs] But in *A Place in the Sun* George Stevens does a very clever thing: every time Montgomery Clift - making out with Elizabeth Taylor, the boss' son, the richest fella in town - when he went to the first dinner he was wearing a suit and they were wearing tuxedos. Next time he was invited out, he came in a tuxedo and they were wearing white jackets. And every time Montgomery Clift came on the scene he didn't know what to wear. Where everybody came in the scene they knew what to wear for the occasion. That kind of country club aspect of careers and styles and what to write is the only thing in life you gotta figure out. Nothing else. Soon as you figure that out, then everything is OK.

[Long silence]

See, when you don't create a silence in a structure, it's hard to get out of it. We're two minutes over time. Thanks a lot.

[Applause]

And though I have efficiently distressed a lot of you, go and have a nice lunch. That's what my mother used to say: "All you need is a good night's sleep and a good dinner." [Laughter]