

Morton Feldman: *For Aaron Copland* (1981)

by Alexandra Matloff

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Duration: 3 to 6 minutes

Publisher: Universal Edition

Recommended Recording: Feldman, Morton. *Morton Feldman: Complete Violin/Viola and Piano Works*. Christina Fong, violin. OgreOgress productions 10-83168-LJ23, 2003. CD.

General Level: Max Bruch's *Violin Concerto No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 26*

A composer that “no musician or scholar interested in music of the twentieth century can afford to overlook,” the esteemed New York experimentalist Morton Feldman (1926-1987) was a unique character in the music world.¹ Although Feldman chose not to pursue a formal degree in music, he proved himself immensely successful as a composer. In addition to learning to play the piano, Feldman studied composition with Wallingford Riegger (1885-1961) and Stefan Wolpe (1902-1972).² Throughout his life, his colleagues played a large part in his compositional career. His friendship with John Cage (1912-1992) in the 1950s led to the creation of The New York School of composition.³ In addition, his relationship with

¹ Thomas DeLio, *The Music of Morton Feldman* (New York: Excelsior Music Publishing Company (Zinn Communications, Inc.), 1996), xiv.

² Catherine Hirata, “Morton Feldman (1926-1987),” in *Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*, ed. Larry Sitsky. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 131.

³ Steven Johnson, ed., *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts: John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, Willem De Kooning, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 159.

abstract expressionist painters inspired his craft.⁴ At the State University of New York at Buffalo, he served as the Edgard Varèse Professor of Music from 1973 until his death in 1987.⁵

Feldman, along with John Cage, Christian Wolff (b. 1934), and Earle Brown (1926-2002), founded the American experimentalist style.⁶ Although this consisted of many different types of writing, it was predominantly characterized by its “opposition to the values and aesthetics of the modernist avant-garde.”⁷ Feldman, who was an outgoing individual, wrote music that was quite different from his personality.⁸ His compositional style is recognized as “inward and withdrawn, seldom raising his musical voice above a whisper.”⁹ Feldman’s music is also characterized by its slow tempo and minimal, repetitive quality. In addition to his fame as an American experimental composer, he is also recognized for the graphic notation of his scores.¹⁰

Written in celebration of Aaron Copland’s eightieth birthday, *For Aaron Copland* (1981) is an excellent introduction to the music of Morton Feldman.¹¹ Through a simplistic approach, the composer creates a meditative piece that is quite accessible for any level of player while simultaneously presenting both unfamiliar and recognizable techniques. The most defining aspect of this piece is the expansiveness of the melodic gestures. With a metronome marking of quarter note equals 56, each measure includes either one or two notes, written as half notes, dotted quarter notes, or quarter notes. These note values are

⁴ Hirata, “Morton Feldman (1926-1987),” 131.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50.

⁷ Cecilia Sun, “Experimental music,” in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2007-2015), accessed February 11, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2224296>.

⁸ Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 527.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ DeLio, *The Music of Morton Feldman*, xiii.

¹¹ Brian O’Doherty and Francesco Pellizzi, *Vertical Thoughts: Morton Feldman and the Visual Arts* (Ireland: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 10.

differentiated through the variation of time signatures, which change almost every measure; the presence of rests; and the inclusion of quarter-note triplet figures.



Morton Feldman, *For Aaron Copland*, mm. 7-12

Additionally, each note does not always begin on the downbeat. Despite all of the variations in rhythm, the performer must accurately convey the correct number of beats throughout the piece in order that the music maintains the rhythmic current Feldman has established. In regards to the harmonic language, Feldman does not employ any accidentals and frequently writes harmonics, giving the piece a hollow sound. The composer also asks that the violinist play the piece muted and at *mezzo piano*, the only dynamic marking notated in the entire piece.

For Aaron Copland requires much patience on behalf of the performer in order to help the listener enter a similar mindset. The performer must also figure out what to do musically with the very fragmented musical line.¹² From the standpoint of improving standard violin technique, this piece draws attention to bow control, string crossings, harmonics, and sound quality. Because of the quiet atmosphere that *For Aaron Copland* creates, it is vital that the violinist be aware of the color and timbre the different strings produce. The sparse texture requires particular attention to intonation. The violinist will also need to determine the type or absence of vibrato.

¹² "Morton Feldman (1926-87) - For Aaron Copland," Vimeo video, 4:55, June 14, 2014, <http://vimeo.com/98233957>.