

## Morton Feldman in conversation with Michael Oliver, November 1984

The following short conversation between Morton Feldman and the presenter and writer on classical music, Michael Oliver, was broadcast as part of BBC Radio 3's Music Weekly programme on 4 November 1984<sup>1</sup>. The item was linked to a broadcast later in the same week of Feldman's Rothko Chapel. After giving a short introduction to Feldman and his music, Michael Oliver began the interview by asking Feldman about the structure of his pieces.

MF: I was just reading a letter Schoenberg wrote to Rufer<sup>2</sup> years ago, in which he said, "Well, even if they don't understand the music, no-one talks about my beautiful *form*."<sup>3</sup> You see? [Laughs] So, it's as if the *form* would be the metaphor, in a sense, someone could work with. I don't work that way. I put things together very much like a body is put together. [Laughs] I don't know, which comes first? Are we built up from the feet up or from the top down? I don't know! [Laughs] But I think this is a fantasy that a lot of young composers and a lot of professional musicians have about how something is made *in general*. In fact, I spend a seminar telling my students how, for example, *War and Peace* was made. Otherwise, how a certain painter painted. They don't know how things were actually made. They have some kind of idea that things begin like in embryo, like a natural growth so to speak, and the form and everything is just like handed down.

MO: But don't works of music in some ways grow like an embryo, from a seed, gradually taking shape?

MF: Yes, but that's the *arena*, that's the historical arena. For example, Picasso actually is working with a ready-made rectangle, a ready-made protagonist. And his ingenuity is the way he cut it up, so to speak. Some people acted as if the rectangle didn't exist and created a piece as if to get rid of it, say like Rothko, the way he would *bleed*. They would just use the rectangle and then forget about it. Some people start from the middle and work out. Some people just work around the edges, you see? [Laughs] Each one playing the dance of death around the rectangle! And in music it's essentially one concept in Western civilisation; it's beginning, middle and end. I had an elegant piece of Henze's for percussion<sup>4</sup>. He begins in an off-hand way, because he's a pro, he doesn't want to show that he's actually beginning. And his middle is interesting, because he doesn't want to really make an obvious development. And the ending, the ending either would... er... I said to a student sitting next to me as we were listening to this Henze piece, now let's see, he only has two alternatives; either he's going to come back to A, or he's going to go into a coda. Well, he went into a very short coda. [Laughs]

MO: Was there any other alternative?

MF: In that context, no.

MO: But even your works [Feldman laughs], even your works start at a given time and end a predictable time later.

MF: Yes. I'll tell you how I worked as a kid. I would start on one of my piano pieces in the early 50s, and like everything was just too marvellous; you open up, you get that chord, you get that little... After all, I used to play late Beethoven. I mean, I know what it's all about; that two notes, or the three note little thing that can make a piece. And what I did was... There was only one way I could circumvent this one way that we all walk in music. It was too much of a set-up. It wasn't direct enough, you see. And I wasn't Beethoven. I just couldn't open up with a diminished something... He only did that... How many times did *he* do it, you see? But I wanted that immediacy. You know, for teenagers in New York at that time Kafka was very important. He was

---

<sup>1</sup> Transcribed and annotated by Chris Villars from a tape recording of the broadcast made by Tudor Wright.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Rufer, Austrian musicologist (1893-1985), pupil and one-time assistant of Schoenberg, who wrote extensively on Schoenberg's music and the twelve-tone method of composition.

<sup>3</sup> Schoenberg to Rufer, 16 December 1931: "For it is really very odd that no one has yet discussed the obvious beauty of my *form*. And yet it is something that ought to be evident to many who will never be able to follow a melody or a theme by ear or in their imagination." *Arnold Schoenberg Letters*, edited by Erwin Stein (London: Faber and Faber, 1964, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), Letter 132.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Werner Henze, German composer (born 1926). The piece was probably *Prison Song* (1971) for percussion and tape.

a big influence. I wanted that opening, that “Someone was telling lies about Josef K”<sup>5</sup>. I wanted that *immediate* opening. And there was always this set-up, this preparation. What I did was write six measures, seven measures, and then I found myself there, and at *there* was the beginning of the piece. In recent years, not so much now but ten years ago, I like to put, not beginning-middle-end, but... Oh, I like codas, and I started to put codas in certain pieces. And I liked it very much. As a kid I was always very impressed with the ending, for example, of *Ionisation*<sup>6</sup>. I got very into the best aspects of composers in handling the triangle of beginning, middle and end. I actually tabulated who was good for beginnings, who was good for ends. Varèse’s beginnings are sensational. Stravinsky’s endings are sensational (I think out of boredom, he wants to get out of it or something!). Nobody has a good middle really.

MO: You can’t avoid having a middle can you?

MF: You cannot... Yes, you cannot avoid having a middle.

MO: It’s the thing that comes between the beginning and the end.

MF: But I think a lot of it has to do with what we think is interesting... I mean, I had an extraordinary experience in my own four-hour *String Quartet*<sup>7</sup>. There are natural tendencies, but I don’t know if they’re artistic. I think they’re anxiety. You have to begin effectively, and you have to end effectively. Like you’re as good as your endings! Most people, they don’t remember too far behind the ending! But I think it *is* an anxiety. Here I am in this long piece, I have a certain sense of the time and there’s a natural clock of anxiety, not artistry, that tells you it is three-quarters in. If you have something to say, you better say it now! [Laughs] Three-quarters into the piece that *bell* rang for me as well, but instead of becoming “interesting” in quotes, I just repeat two notes over and over again with different *spelling*, you know, harmonic spelling, different kind of doubling, different kind of registration. And it goes on for about ten or twelve minutes and it’s one of the most interesting aspects of the piece, because at that time we’re focussed in, like under a high-powered microscope, and where if I opened up with just that two notes in the beginning, we wouldn’t hear it. Now we could hear it, you see, and I think it is one of the most interesting parts of the quartet. There is a possibility that music is not an art-form, that it has to do with musical forms, which are essentially memory forms. The implication of how we try to work on our concentration in terms of memory forms is absolutely... er... is just incredible. What I’m interested in is not so much memory now, but what happens in a long piece that becomes memorable. And I’m always asking myself, you know, just because you want to say I want to have a madeleine, to taste it again, or I want to go out and smell a flower to... Just because you *set it up*, you see, doesn’t mean in a sense that it’s going to become memorable. And I keep on bringing back things, almost as if I’m asking myself, is this the *line* that’s memorable? And you don’t know what is memorable, what’s not memorable. I was very touched years ago when I saw *Krapp’s Last Tape*. The thing is just going along, just rolling along, and then he talks about seeing a girl on the other side of a station, a provincial station. And he kept silent. He brings it back, the girl in the green raincoat. Never forgot it. That’s all it was, it was the girl in the green raincoat. That has influenced me very much in my work<sup>8</sup>.

MO: Now, how is that paralleled in music?

MF: Oh, the way in my *Chromatic Fields*<sup>9</sup> you’ll certainly hear an unbearably beautiful consonant type of reference over and over again. Or some little modal configuration just emerging as an image so to speak.

---

<sup>5</sup> “Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K”: Opening line of Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial* (1925).

<sup>6</sup> Edgard Varèse, *Ionisation* (1929-31) for percussion ensemble.

<sup>7</sup> Feldman’s *String Quartet 2*, referred to here, lasts around four hours in the shortened version he prepared for the premiere and subsequent performances by the Kronos Quartet. The UK premiere of this piece by the Kronos Quartet took place in London on 12 August 1984, just three months before the present broadcast.

<sup>8</sup> “What remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform? No?” Samuel Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958).

<sup>9</sup> *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* (1981) for cello and piano.