

Notes on Three Feldman Recordings by John Tilbury

Triadic Memories (with, Howard Skempton *Notti Stellate a Vagli*) [Atopos CD ATP 012/013,
2008]

In preparation for a talk I was to give on Feldman and Skempton, I wrote down the following notes as a kind of aide-memoire.

On Softness

Softness – also length, and brevity. But ‘not for its own sake’.

‘Virtuosity of restraint’ (Skempton). Alice (in Wonderland) had to accustom herself to new dimensions.

Soft ‘as possible’. Relative. Degree and quality of softness depends on the acoustical and the psychological. Awareness of this dynamic quality within softness creates an extraordinary variety.

Softness draws the audience into the music - it encourages attentiveness and alertness. It also demands a ‘transcendental’ listening in its search for a revelatory experience. Softness heightens consciousness; also enhances the consciousness, for example, of the idiosyncrasies of the instrument at which one sits.

On the unintended

This respect for the unintended embodies the notion for the interpreter of *nowness*, of uniqueness.

Accidentalness is an active component, to be convincingly contextualized. The music responds to the contingencies of venue, of temperature, etc. etc. This, together with an emphasis on the sensual and physical qualities of the art of performance, creates an indivisibility of musician and instrument and at best of music and audience; an *at-oneness*.

Accidentalness need not cause embarrassment; rather the accidental (unintended sounds) is to be enjoyed, nourished, sometimes indulged. The ‘accidental’ is a corollary of the extreme softness which Feldman demands and which necessarily involves risk. The player is playing on the edge, on the frontier between sound and no sound.

The dialectic of the extreme fingertip sensitivity and control - intention - and the recognition of the impossibility, the undesirability of control, the vulnerability of intention and the inevitability of failure. This gives the music its unique quality.

On interpretation

Thus it is a foolhardy and naive interpreter who attempts to predetermine and structure his interpretation of this music, for it unfolds organically, responding to the idiosyncrasies of the instrument, the shape and acoustic of the room, the general ambience. All are active components in

the music-making. The music takes on a quasi-autonomous nature as if the musician is 'tracking' rather than consciously, 'professionally', producing the sounds; he/she steers a hazardous course in which phrasing and articulation, pedalling, are 'situational'.

Rather than expressing a 'form' Skempton's pieces express 'a state of being', and in this he resembles Morton Feldman. The music creates space and release for both performer and listener, providing an antidote to the congestion that blights our lives; and thereby satisfying a contemporary need.

On notation

In Feldman, as in Skempton, that which is given in the notation is essential; no rhetoric, nothing superfluous, the unity of pitch and register strikes me as a key characteristic and feature of the thinking of both composers.

Skempton's language is more prosaic, more down-to-earth, referential; this makes his music more accessible, on one level, but for Skempton, in terms of what his music is really about, it is more difficult - for him, and for his audience.

In Skempton's notations what is left unsaid is what he means but does not, cannot, write. What he means is precisely a lack of explicit intention; rather, his intention is 'blurred'. So the performer misses the point if he tries to figure out what Skempton 'means' by this 'lack of information'. The player is engaged in the act of interpreting; the material given him is no more and no less than he needs.

General

At its best Feldman's music can take our breath away, providing a revelatory experience, a transparency which has no need of argument. Feldman seems to occupy a metaphysical space and encroaches on the domain of spirituality normally associated with religion. Thus art wrests spirituality from religion; spirituality is not the private property of religion.

Blake regarded human imagination as the essential divine quality by which God manifested himself in Man. This was tantamount to equating man with God and art with religion.

Perhaps with Feldman one can make a case for a kind of musical utopianism. He embraces all sounds; what he does is to focus on certain sounds so that there are different shades, varying degrees of focus.

"If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is - Infinite." Blake - Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

John Tilbury 1996

For Philip Guston [Atopos CDs ATP022-1-2-3-4, 2013] (with Carla Rees, flutes, and Simon Allen, percussion)

In a radio discussion Feldman once referred to what he discerned, in many cases, as the professional musician's apparent fear of his instrument, a fear that creates, as he put it, a distance between performer and instrument. He talked of the need, in his own music, for a closeness of player to instrument, an at-oneness embodied in a radical commitment to the muscular, physical and essentially sensual qualities of the art of performance. There must be a feeling of adventure, of freshness; a vibrant, high-risk strategy in which each performance is imbued with a quality of uniqueness.

As performers we know the piece; on the basis of week after week of rehearsal we know the score, we know the organization, the way it evolves, the intimidating enormity of the scale of the work. So how do you approach performance? Concentration is of the essence; concentrating on the moment, on the physical nowness, on the finger as it touches the keyboard, the hand on the musical instrument, the key moment at which pure cognition takes place before the reflecting action of consciousness. The consideration of scale is immaterial, except, perhaps, on a subliminal level. (Speaking personally as an improvising musician, at its best it's as if I am not aware that I am performing; it's about being, and doing; the concept of mistakes, right or wrong notes, for example, let alone formal considerations, just doesn't come into it.)

Likewise, concentration is a key issue for Feldman the composer. It's the word he uses most when he speaks about composing: "I approach my compositions where I'm starting off with no ideas at all. What I don't want is ideas. But what I do need is utmost concentration. If I begin to lose concentration that's when I...or rather put it this way, when I find that I'm crossing chords out, notes out, then that means that I'm actually losing my concentration... When I work I forget (the angel forgetfulness)...I consider sitting around waiting, not having a thought in your head...to me that's work. I think the work aspect is the degree of concentration you put into making this music possible."

So with Feldman there is this element of spontaneity and of subjectivity (although in the later works the huge scale does necessitate the consideration of 'form'). When he sits down to compose he is thinking in real time, acoustic time, not compositional time. Significantly, Feldman wouldn't talk about compositional reality; in fact, he said there was no such thing; he preferred to talk about acoustical reality. "And so for me the real is not the object, the real for me is not the compositional system, the real for me is to what degree, almost in Kierkegaardian terms, I can exist, I can plunge, I can leap into this thing which I call life, which I call the environment...So don't talk to me about systems, don't talk to me about aesthetics, don't talk to me about life, in fact don't even talk to me about art, and let's end it with this thought: that it all has to do with nerve, nothing else, that's what it's all about; so in a sense it's a character problem."

Genuine spontaneity (unpredictability) is something which is absolutely crucial. It is at the heart of Feldman's music: the idea that every sound has a unique quality. There can be nothing of the routine in Feldman performance. As in life itself there can be no blueprint; there are so many contingencies, so many things that can happen which can alter the way you play a particular chord, make a particular sound, in relation to any previous performance. Playing Feldman is about living your life. And it is known for people to weep when they hear it.

I recall a BBC radio discussion when the composer Cornelius Cardew, one of the greatest exponents of Feldman's music, posited the inadequacy of art in relation to the awesome power of nature and natural phenomena. Kant, too, had called into question the primacy of the experience of art in relation to the experience of nature. Perhaps then it is the kinship of Feldman's music with nature, rather than with art, its aspiration to nature (like the paintings in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, where people sit and weep), which is able to generate such an extreme response.

John Tilbury September 2nd 2013

On performing *For Christian Wolff* [Atopos CDs 025-1-2-3, 2016] (with Carla Rees, flute)

“As I was writing the piece I found that for the first time in my life I consciously decided to write a piece that was austere... And then when I got back, for whatever reason, I titled it *For Christian Wolff*.”

We may balk at Feldman's description here. For our contemporary sensibilities the word 'austere', (e.g. the scourge of 'austerity'), does not sit easily with a work of such pristine beauty.

Feldman talks about his 'monolithic' music of the sixties where, as in the later work, *Palais de Mari* and *For Christian Wolff*, for example, he avoids fragmentation. 'You can have a lot of detail', he says, 'and it is not noticeable...' The moves are within the monolith, keeping it going, but they are discreet. Feldman calls *For Christian Wolff* a 'rondo of everything'. Everything is recycled and comes back but modulated in some way so that the listener hears them differently. In relation to *For Christian Wolff* the question of form arises and a 'rondo of everything' sums it up succinctly. ('Form', someone once waspishly stated, is what musicologists use to keep themselves in business.)

It might be said, by those who are concerned with such matters, that Feldman's compositional strategies serve to dissolve form. Perhaps it is the organicity of the morphology of Feldman's music which makes formal analysis irrelevant? The trajectory of a Feldman performance may be influenced by the very first bar, by the unintended emphasis of a note, an idiosyncratic blurring of the rhythmic profile, a dynamic which is not quite what one had intended, or, simply, by a mistake. All this is a million miles away from 'form'.

'Scale' is something else; scale is about range and scope. One can feel or anticipate the potency of scale as a performer, as one sits at the piano, or with the flute, waiting to begin *For Christian Wolff*. This awareness of scale (rather than form) is what can profoundly influence the role of the performer, which is to present the work in all its richness and potentiality; its multi-meanings.

Formal concerns do not easily escape accusations of superficiality. Feldman said: "the form is easy - just a division of things into parts. But scale is another matter." So can one find different musical strategies for going 'beyond' form in Feldman's later music? Rather than expressing a 'form' this music creates space and release for both performer and listener. The form is dissolved; and there is no blueprint.

There are many bittersweet moments in *For Christian Wolff* and during our extensive rehearsals Carla Rees and I became intensely aware of this. And there are long stretches of stasis, the 'frozen moment' of stasis (it was Pollock who helped Feldman to understand and incorporate the notion and practice of 'stasis' in his music). But an awareness of stasis also presupposes an alertness, a readiness

to act, to respond to the unexpected. So it's a kind of paradoxical situation; enjoying, living the present, but being ready for a future fraught with uncertainty, in which stasis can be ruptured. To negotiate these changes is a challenge to the interpreter.

At the beginning of *For Christian Wolff* Feldman prescribes, as he often does, the tempo 63-66. And the dynamic marking is *ppp*, with sustained pedal throughout. In a discussion with Greek composer, Iannis Xenakis, Feldman remarked that a performance of his music had been, in his opinion, "a little stiff... I wanted them to breathe with each other more naturally. Breathe rather than count... They counted correctly. Maybe that was it, that it was a little too mechanical in the counting."

Bearing this in mind, Carla and I determine the 'same' pulse in different ways, so the pulse fluctuates; our individual pulses interact. We prefer not to count; we feel the pulse. The music floats above the pulse. And the die is cast in the opening minutes. We are feeling our way forward together. This means, in practice, that sometimes the tones collide, or, for example, what should be a quaver sounds more like a grace note.

To achieve a balance, particularly between piano and celeste, makes demands both technically and artistically because the relationship between the three instruments is a shifting one. Right at the start, with the little chromatic motif, the celeste tones are masked by the piano and flute - they seem to live in the shadow of the music - with the celeste faintly echoing the piano tone (This is of course mainly because of the low dynamic I have chosen to set the volume control on this recording). In fact, the celeste tones are variously inaudible, but I know they are there!

During the (recorded) performance there are places when the flute dynamic involuntarily drops, which hadn't happened in rehearsal. I have to make an instant decision in respect of the piano/celeste relationship to the flute. Elsewhere in the piece the intensity of the flute sound diminishes. This necessarily elicits a response from me because the sound is 'one' (not 'three') . And, in return, Carla has to deal with my idiosyncratic moments/decisions/mistakes. In general the celeste volume seems to be subdued. I try to make a virtue of this; it provides another dimension. (Occasionally, embarrassingly, in the heat of the moment I get the piano and celeste the wrong way round.)

Like nature, Feldman's music has an indestructible quality, for all its surface fragility. As a personality Feldman was abrasive but brittle; he could be insensitive to the feelings of others but one sensed in him a vulnerability. "The real for me is how I can leap into this thing which I call life. Music must have sensuous dimension", he once said.

The sensuality of touching the instrument. Often, before I start playing the piano I gently caress the instrument. Comparable to love-making, you approach your lover with a degree of trepidation; there is no clear objective. Then, the first touch...

John Tilbury, October 2016