

Intermission 4 – Feldman’s Cinderella piece?

Background, analysis and evaluation

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Abstract

In this paper I describe a piano work of Morton Feldman, *Intermission 4*, which, in my view, has been accorded ‘Cinderella’ status within his output. It was withdrawn by the composer and not published until after his death. As with many of Feldman’s works, there is a quandary over whether to approach the piece as one that is capable of revealing a process or intention on the part of the composer, or one that reflects the composer’s reliance solely on intuition¹. *Intermission 4* contains relatively little material over its 21-bar span, making it particularly hard to undertake an analysis of it. I have attempted one, nevertheless. I finish with a brief examination of the piece’s reception and interpretation in performance, and my personal assessment of its worth.

Background

Morton Feldman wrote a series of piano pieces called ‘Intermission’ in the 1950s, the first two appearing conjoined as *Two Intermissions* in 1950, and the remaining four following over the period 1951–53.² There has been some speculation over the significance of ‘Intermission’ as a title: Feldman himself suggested that it was meant as a break from his daily routine working in his family dry-cleaning business (Noble 2013: 31). However, the works may equally be seen as diversions from an ongoing project that Feldman was involved in throughout the 1950s and 1960s, namely the composition of his so-called graph pieces, in which pitch/pitch-class and some other parameters were left largely, or wholly, indeterminate.

The *Intermissions* set is characterised by features that would become hallmarks of Feldman’s compositional style: specified pitches (in contrast with the graph works), but seemingly random pitch sequencing, slow tempi, low or very low dynamics, with the occasional *forte* outburst, minimal attack, periods of silence, and precious little rhythmic identity (referred to in Feldman’s case by the composer Christian Wolff as rhythmic stasis [Noble 2013: 74]). Unlike in the roughly contemporary graph pieces, all the elements of the *Intermissions* are written out in full, and the only one to employ an aleatoric device is *Intermission 6*, which is in mobile form: the scored events may be played in any order.

This essay is concerned with *Intermission 4*, something of a curiosity among the series – as suggested below – and one that was not submitted for publication by the composer. Indeed,

¹ The view is expressed fairly frequently in the extant literature on Feldman that his compositional approach was based purely on intuition, rather than on any system. See, for example, Griffiths p. 278.

² *Intermission 6* is for one or two pianos.

its untypical approach to pulse and metre and eventual rejection by Feldman have bestowed on it something of a ‘Cinderella’ status within his output.

Analysis

Intermission 4, examined here, was written in 1952. What immediately distinguishes this from the others in the series is the time signature of 4/4, which accords the work an angularity in places (at least, visually) that is absent from *Intermissions 1* and 2, 3 and 5, which are all in 3/8 time and seem to have a more buoyant metrical feel to them, and also from *Intermission 6*, referred to earlier. This, together with the prevailing intervallic choices (typically interval class 1– see the Appendix), on paper at least recall the later works of Webern³, a composer whom Feldman admired. Feldman’s score, however, is far more pared down as regards parametric choices, and is much less texturally dense⁴.

As indicated in the Appendix, there are at least 13⁵ instances of interval class 1 (traditionally minor 2nd, major 7th or its inversion) appearing either adjacently (linearly) or simultaneously (vertically) in *Intermission 4*. Given that the composition consists of a total of 21 bars, four of which are completely silent, the preponderance of this interval class – incorporating, as it does, different pitch classes – points to a fondness for chromatic completion on Feldman’s part; on the other hand, he completely avoids serial techniques that use fixed pitch-class ordering and instead explores the total chromatic palette in his own individualistic way.

There are 21 individual sounded items (sonorities) in the work, and all 12 pitch classes are employed. In fact, the whole 12-note range (with reiterations) is reached by bar 10, roughly halfway through the piece. Thereafter just nine pitch classes make a reappearance, with no recurrence of C, C # (D b) or D# (E b). In this second part, Feldman therefore opts not to complete the chromatic field (the composer’s own term) (Ames 1996: 103), thus countervailing what one might take to be a primary goal of Schoenbergian 12-note music, i.e. to incorporate all pitch classes on a substantially equal basis. Indeed, Feldman would seem to have a totally different objective in his treatment of pitch. Far from granting each pitch class equal status, he seems intent on giving greater prominence to just a handful of the twelve notes, with one having particular importance.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of all 12 pitch classes in the piece, from the one with most instances indicated in the top row down to the one with least. Note that all pitches marked with accidentals in this diagram are enharmonically spelt as sharps (even if in the score they may appear as flats).

³ See, for example, the opening of Webern’s String Quartet, op. 28 and part III of the Piano Variations, op. 27.

⁴ For example, there are regions of silence in Feldman’s music that contrast markedly with Webern’s pauses.

⁵ Two others for possible inclusion are the C_b in bar 11 relating to the sustained c natural, and the B natural leading to B_b in bars 12-13. However, the first may be a bogus concern, since the C_b in bar 11 might well be an error (see later in the text). for reasons stated later. The other ‘interval’ relates to soundings that are 12 beats apart, and consequently the impact on the listener must probably be barely discernible, even if the B natural is sounded as part of a chord that is sustained through the use of the pedal.

Fig. 1 Availability of pitch classes in *Intermissions 4*. The rows indicate instances of a given pitch class. The columns denote the pitch class in question.

| G# |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| A | A | A | A | | | |
| G | G | G | G | | | |
| A# | A# | A# | A# | | | |
| C# | C# | | | | | |
| E | E | | | | | |
| B | B | | | | | |
| D | D | | | | | |
| F# | F# | | | | | |
| D# | D# | | | | | |
| F | F | | | | | |
| C | | | | | | |

It is evident that there is a preponderance of the pitch classes G#, A, G and A#, and their importance is also reflected in the fact that they are fairly evenly distributed throughout the piece (three occur in all four systems with G bowing out halfway through, having appeared four times in just 11 sonorities). The other pitch classes have more ambivalent roles, though it is perhaps interesting that F occurs first in bar 8 as the top note in a five-pitch chord marked *forte* (marked *f*: the rest of the score is designated *p*), and then as a single note defining the final sonority of the score (bar 20). The sole appearance in the work of pitch class C is also at what might loosely be called a climactic point in the score, simultaneously marking the completion of the 12-note chromatic scale in bar 10 (as previously noted) and indicating the commencement of a two-and-a half bar passage covering the mid-region⁶ of the piece that functions as a kind of flourish (given additional conspicuous shape by the use of the sustained pedal spanning the passage) before the scattering of sonorities and pauses that end it.

However, it is the overwhelming presence of the pitch class G# that warrants our main attention. Appearing seven times throughout the work, it seems to function as a kind of nucleus around which the other pitches hover in space, as it were: A, G and A# are in the same solar system perhaps, but many of the other pitches are distant stars, and the solitary C is a mystery phenomenon almost off our radar.

The repeated return to G#, its distribution across the four systems and its appearance in four registers tend to skew the whole tonal/atonal/serial conflict and instead impart a sense of stasis to the piece. Motivic, rhythmic and harmonic stasis are all characteristics of Feldman's output in general, apparently reflecting his interest in abstract art (see, *inter alia*, Persson 2002). The centrality of G# is furthermore reflected in its aggregate durational values, which total the equivalent of 14 crotchets, a larger score than with any of the other pitch classes. Moreover, its greater registral distribution (it is sounded in four registers) add weight to its role as a pitch-centric force.

⁶ For use of the term 'region' see DeLio 1996:48.

With regard to the frequency and sequencing of pitch classes in the piece, two possible scenarios present themselves. One is that they were arrived at using chance operations; the alternative is that the work was through-composed based on the composer's intuitive choices.

I now examine each of these⁷.

Chance operations were sometimes being used in the composition of new music at this time by such composers as John Cage and Earle Brown, both of whom were close to Feldman professionally and socially. Such procedures, as used by Cage, for example, included the rolling of dice or consultation of the ancient Chinese *I-Ching* texts. They might apply to the pitch and location of individual or combined sounds, or determine rhythmic patterns, levels of dynamics, register, instrumentation, or any other aspect of a work.

Focusing on frequency of pitch class alone here, I have attempted to determine what the likelihood would be of arriving at the number of instances of pitches presented in the 21 sounded items in *Intermission 4*. Using the Random.Org tool⁸, available online, I generated 21 numbers on a scale from 1 to 12, representing the 12 notes of the scale, to discover the maximum frequency of any individual number (= pitch class) that might arise. The maximum frequency value for any one pitch was 4 (in the case of four separate pitches over 21 runs of the tool). Strikingly, three pitches were unrepresented. The scenario whereby a single value might recur seven times seemed remote, even if the exercise had been repeated a number of times. To restate the point, therefore, and simplistic as the method used might seem, the statistical probability of arriving at a situation where one pitch (G#) recurs seven times⁹ within a total of just 21 sounded items is hardly strong.

However, there is another sound argument for supposing that Feldman used no chance operations to compose any aspect of this piece. There is considerable documentary evidence to support the idea that he was against the use of such procedures, seeing them as systematic and, therefore, contrary to what he considered to be, and indeed promoted as, his aesthetic. Cline (2016: 156) provides a similar argument regarding the necessary elimination of the view that chance operations are a feature of Feldman's working procedures. In the same volume Cline mentions that the composer never stated that he had employed such procedures and had even criticised the method, and goes on to suggest that, despite the presence in certain works of phenomena associated with chance operations (Cline is discussing the graph pieces), the evidence for their use is far from compelling (Ibid., 183-184).¹⁰

So were the choice and sequence of musical items in *Intermission 4* purely intuitive? Much has been written about Feldman's holistic approach to composition (see, for example, Cline 2016:140-162), and his treatment of his scores as visual creations, which he often used to attach to his wall, adding to them as a painter might daub or adorn his/her canvas. This is closely connected with his well-known love and appreciation of abstract painting and oriental

⁷ There might, of course, be other approaches to the examination of pitch selection in this work, though they may be so subtle as to defy analysis. In the case of *Intermission 4*, there is no documented evidence of how Feldman wrote the piece, probably partly because it was withdrawn and apparently forgotten about. Whatever the case, by all accounts Feldman was reluctant to explain his compositional processes.

⁸ <https://www.random.org/integers/?num=22&min=1&max=12&col=3&base=10&format=html&rnd=new>

⁹ Volker Straebel, in his liner notes to *Morton Feldman First Recordings* (Mode 1996 and 1998) refers to this as attaining 'tonal connection'.

¹⁰ See also Sabbe 1996: 10.

rug patterning, and his tendency in his writing and talks to stress the importance of the ‘all-over aspect’ of his musical works, rather than any minute focus on its elements:

Feldman incidentally considered the graph paper on which he wrote his music as a kind of canvas. Wolff, who often saw Feldman at work, once remarked that ‘Feldman's interest in indeterminacy has to do with his interest in painting. He used to put sheets of graph paper on the wall and work on them like paintings. Slowly his notations would accumulate and from time to time he'd stand back and look at the overall design’. (Feisst 2002).

The literature on Feldman and the talks given by him very often point to this rather unconventional way of composing – not working from left to right necessarily, but by viewing the whole canvas, as it were, and filling it in or leaving it blank, as his intuition dictated (this does not necessarily only apply to his graph works). Fascinating and controversial though this side of Feldman’s art may be, it is a subject that requires differentiated focus and far more profound investigation, and at this point it is appropriate to return to an examination of the score in question.

We have, then, an overall soundscape that, though it utilises the full chromatic range, involves the recurrence of one pitch in particular, a focal point perhaps, which bestows on the piece an air of stasis. The mood – at once melancholic, downbeat, refined and delicate, to my ears at least – is partly sustained by the fact that the dynamic marking is low¹¹ for all sounded items except one (marked *forte*) and regions of silence. Furthermore, 10 of the 21 items have quaver values, mainly surrounded by rests, which appear to punctuate that silence as a series of almost fragile interjections.

In terms of structure, *Intermission 4* seems to divide into an exposition of two different kinds of texture. One [I] is a Webern-like, angular gesture (as previously touched on) extending over bars 1-3, with a somewhat similar passage appearing over bars 10–12. The other [II] is the series of more or less isolated interjections, as described above, that occur between these more angular passages and then follow the second of them to end the piece. Both I and II have significant roles. The former represents the opening of the piece and the ‘flourish’ previously mentioned that serves as the mid-point of interest. These contrast – though not robustly – with the more detached items that follow them, denoted here as II.

Nevertheless, there is something else going on here. Both I and II incorporate the appearance of G and G#, sounded either as a simultaneity (bars 2, 8 and 9) or as two sounds in immediate succession (bar 6). Moreover, the pervasiveness of this patterning is enhanced by the exact reiteration of the simultaneity in the same register in bars 8 and 9 taking place immediately before the mid-point flourish referred to. This also serves as a point of focus and resembles – superficially at least – the twelve-note pivot points familiar from Webern’s serial music.¹² Something like Feldman’s fragmentary, minimal, ‘pseudo-pivot’ here, and its bouncy rhythmic quality, can be found elsewhere in his output.¹³

¹¹ Low dynamics are typical of Feldman’s music and dominate much of his output. One rationale for this is that a constant dynamic level is a means to reduce dramatic contrast – a rhetorical device Feldman had an aversion to – and to ‘flatten’ the surface. Both of these notions are discussed by Cline (2016: 116-119).

¹² See, for example, Webern’s Piano Variations, op. 27, part 3, bars 34-37, which marks the end of one tone row and the start of its retrograde.

¹³ See, for example *Two Intermissions* (I), bars 21-22.

This very brief survey of a very short piece must conclude with some attention being given to two other points in the score. The first is the grace note in bar 10. Grace notes are a favourite device of Feldman's: he developed a range of grace note options that populate many of his scores (including those unattached to other notes, those with incomplete ties, and what Cline calls 'modified' grace notes [2016: 84], drawn with a minim-like note head). The grace note here is a conventional one and is attached to the pitch class C, which appears, as mentioned, just the once. This is probably of no great significance, though it does add to the dynamic quality of the 'flourish' passage, especially since the grace note is a D, which, together with the C, complete the (interrupted) 12-note chromatic (as stated previously).

The other item worthy of note is the first crotchet in bar 11 which is marked as a C \flat . Why is it not marked B natural (there is a B natural in the same place two staves down)? Could it be a misprint and should we read it as a D \flat , for example? Another possibility is that the draft omitted one ledger line and the intended note is an E \flat . (Neither would present a challenge to the prominence of the four pitch classes highlighted previously.) Feldman's scores often contain misprints and apparent errors in their original format, and this may be yet another. Feldman, perhaps unhappy with the piece, must have let any minute revision of it go. We will probably never know.¹⁴

Evaluation

This section comprises two 'evaluations'. The first relates to the analysis I have undertaken here of *Intermission 4*. The second looks at the piece's worth from a more aesthetic perspective, its fate at the hands of the composer, and its subsequent reception.

Given Feldman's prolific output, at least in terms of playing time, there have been remarkably few analyses of his works – that is, beyond some general descriptions, frequently in the form of liner notes. Christian Wolff, another composer of the New York School, is on record as declaring one composition by Feldman as being "unanalyzable" (see Noble 2013: 6-7 for a brief account of the supposedly 'unsystematic' and 'unstructured' nature of Feldman's music). Nevertheless, the analyses that have been conducted, for example in DeLio's *The Music of Morton Feldman*, suggest a certain degree of organisation in the scores reviewed, and have put paid to the notion that Feldman just made things up as he went along.¹⁵

Having said that, *Intermissions 4*, at first glance, provides little evidence of any underlying structure or methodology, and my analysis – at least in the composer's eyes – might well seem a fruitless exercise. There is every reason with this work to entertain the idea that Feldman did indeed simply rely on intuition. Furthermore, the piece exhibits characteristics of Feldman's music that pervade his whole oeuvre. These are (almost) consistently low dynamics, minimal attack (inferred), fragmented sonorities, use of the complete chromatic, silence as a patent structural device, and, crucially, the reiteration of certain pitches given priority over others, which enhances the static quality of all his music.

Fruitless analysis or not, though, my survey hopefully pinpoints some useful clues to the structure and layout of *Intermissions 4*, and there is one last point to make. My observation of

¹⁴ All players on the recordings mentioned play the C \flat .

¹⁵ This, despite the fact that Cline (2016: 349-350) largely derides John Walsh's analysis of *Projection 1* in DeLio's collection.

the mid-point ‘flourish’ as a crucial moment gains support from the suggestions of other authors on Feldman that his works of this period are often capable of being divided proportionally (Cline 2016: 169–171). The appearance of a key episode a quarter or a third of the way, or halfway, through a piece is quite possibly a common occurrence with the composer, although Feldman seems to have purposely obscured the notion.

Whether or not Feldman would have pooh-poohed any analysis of *Intermission 4*, the fact remains that he withdrew the work, for reasons that remain uncertain, and it was not published until after he had died. However, its Cinderella status seems to linger on.¹⁶ It is relegated to the last page of the Peters Edition volume published in 1998 and entitled *Morton Feldman Solo Piano Works 1950-64* (the first two Intermissions are on pages 1 and 2 of the 56-page collection), and there are few recordings available.¹⁷

Of those that are, mention may be made of the interpretation on Mode records by Philipp Vandré and three that appear on YouTube. For the record, the YouTube renditions are all indelicate, the inference regarding minimal attack is largely ignored, and all players grossly over-emphasise the *forte* marking accompanying the first chord in bar 8. Vandré’s performance is more in line with what we have come to expect of an interpretation of Feldman’s music, although he too makes the mistake of playing the *forte* chord far too loud. None adhere to the convention in the performance of Feldman’s music that the grace note should be played ‘slowly’ though, admittedly, there is no such instruction in this score¹⁸. The few recordings of the piece, and seemingly even fewer comments written or spoken about it, add to its position as a neglected work.

Intermission 4 is something of an enigma, then, both in terms of its creation, its structure, its history and its general interpretation and reception. To me, as a listener and player, there is something deeply pleasurable about the piece, its mysteries notwithstanding. The issue about whether there is some intentional structural patterning to the work in the way I have endeavoured to show, or whether it is the result of the composer’s arbitrary dabbling with a set of staves pinned to his wall, remains. Perhaps Wolff was right in his estimation at the time; but the music of Feldman grows in popularity among scholars and music-lovers alike, a trend which surely betokens something more than a love on their part of the purely random.

¹⁶ Nevertheless, this was by no means the only work by Feldman apparently to be rejected by him. The same fate awaited *Intermission 3*, for example.

¹⁷ Feldman is generally well represented on disc, although there are no available recordings at the present time (2017) of some of his works.

¹⁸ Probably, more research is warranted as to whether this is a ‘convention’ or not. Certainly, Steffen Schleiermacher keeps to the practice of the ‘slow’ grace note in his recording on the hat ART label *Morton Feldman Works for Piano 2* (1994) of *Two Intermissions*, *Intermission 5*, and even in the ‘fast’ movements of *Last Pieces*. In fact, Feldman often used the phrase ‘should not be played too quickly’ with reference to grace notes, particularly in the scores of the late 60s and early 70s (see Fulkerson 2001).

Appendix

Feldman. *Intermission 4*. Instances of interval class 1, appearing either adjacently or simultaneously (13 instances).¹⁹

1 $\text{♩} = 48$ ① ② ③

④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦

10 ⑧ ⑨ ⑩

Ped.

16 ⑪ ⑫ ⑬

Musical examples from *Intermission IV* by Morton Feldman, from *Solo Piano Works 1950-1964* (EP67976)

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¹⁹ Of course, over(under)arching structures may likewise be discerned, such as the transition from E to E \flat that starts in bar 4 and ends in bar 7. But little is likely to be gained by cluttering up the picture in this way.

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