

# Four Feldman Choral Works

by John McCaughey

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**‘Feldman’:** almost a word! – a musical term of the 20th-century lexicon, synonymous with compositions of quietness and sparseness, vibrance and space. And the immediate association of the name is two-fold – with the New York School of John Cage, and the Abstract Expressionist painters of the same city, mostly artists of an older generation (like Cage), with whom Morton Feldman had close and formative friendships from his mid-twenties.

The primary project of the Cage School, the release of sound in its own right, had the result that almost every score of these diverse composers suggests a new paradigm in the complex relations between notation and action, composition and sonic result, performing and listening.

It belongs to the delights and frustrations of the scores of Feldman that the performer is often left wondering what to do, aside from playing softly! Each of his four works on this disc has a different system of notation, without necessarily being four different kinds of piece. Four different proposals, perhaps, for guiding the playing into the kind of sonic art that Feldman had in his ear and mind.

Out of that wondering of the performers come possible solutions which slowly but surely establish their own rightness or otherwise. And if the particular spell of the composer’s harmony and form establishes itself through the performers’ fragile efforts, transferred from the page to the physicality of their voices, the wondering turns into a special wonder, on

the part of the audience – a kind of suspended sonic experience where forward flow seems to matter less than the sense of a space, with reverberations forwards and backwards from given sound-objects, abounding in expressive shape, distance, animation, interaction.

These qualities naturally bring Feldman’s composition closer to the domain of his revered New York painters, in all *their* diversity. In distinction to Cage, Feldman’s pieces have beginnings, middles and ends, beautifully constructed, yet differing from those of a tonal-developmental narrative. Possibly the processes between start and finish are more akin to guiding a listener’s attention and awareness around the framed canvas of particular sound moments.

For the musical domain, however, Morton Feldman’s contribution as a creative artist remains *music* – and this in a newly ‘absolute’ sense, separate from the visual arts. Despite his desire to be considered “between categories”, Feldman seems less a multi-art Apollo than a Hermes – a messenger from the world of painting, showing music how it could change its own shapes in the world after Webern.

Three of these four Feldman works have titles, deliberately bland, containing the words ‘Chorus’ or ‘Voices’ in conjunction with ‘Instruments’. And they mean exactly that: a particular body of human sound notably important for this composer, heard in its own right among intersecting and overlaid bodies of instrumental sound. These pieces are far from seeking or setting texts, whereby sung sounds become vehicles for imported meanings, or export their own metaphors for a poetry beyond themselves. And yet the title-page of the most adventurous of all Feldman’s choral creations, *The Swallows of Salangan*, embraces a magnificent poetic suggestion of Boris Pasternak, that “we, like Salangan swallows, built the world – an enormous nest, put together from the earth and sky, life and death, and two times, the ready to hand and the defaulting...”

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*I prefer to think of my work as: between categories. Between Time and Space. Between painting and music. Between the music's construction and its surface.* (Feldman, 1969)

For Morton Feldman, a special part of the artistic act was the drawing, always in ink, of musical notation on the page—not unrelated to the work that he observed at first hand in the studios of his painter friends. The four pieces here are notated for choir and instruments in four different manners, each of which has equivalents in other, non-choral scores. Their marked individualities as compositions are bound up with their notation and with their highly original choices of instruments, while all share a similar mode of choral writing—successions of soft chords, varying in density from a single pitch up to clusters of eight or more, and notated within the traditional four lines of soprano, alto, tenor, bass.

No traditional grammar supports these chorales. Feldman clearly thinks of the painting-derived idea of “surface” as superseding or disarranging the force of *phrase* and other structuring devices beneath that surface. Yet one word that he did not disavow for his music was “breathing.” A special discovery here may be the four quite different ways in which his works breathe, within an unmistakable, shared Feldman style.

The “liberation” of the listener was an inseparable part of the creative impulses issuing from the New York School, as illustrated in the title of John Cage’s essay “Happy New Ears!” (1964). Cage proposes that listening and composing catch up with what the eye does in the enjoyment of modern painting—whereby attention is mobile, and can shift quickly between the canvas as a whole and points of detail.

The listener to this CD, as with any recorded music, is to some extent his or her own composer, choosing particular items or the whole, determining the listening environment, technical medium and loudness setting. The volume control becomes specially important with Feldman’s music, where softness is a given. It is suggested that the listener set the opening track *Chorus and Instruments* at a level that is quiet, yet clear in details of the choral and instrumental fabric. The remainder of the disc should then follow with little further adjustment as a coherent soundscape—at least, that is the attempt of the sound design.

Each of the four Feldman works can then be heard to create a different dynamic relation to its own softness. *Chorus and Instruments* notates some rare points of swell and fade for the chorus, even dipping below the prevailing *piano* towards the close. These moments cast light on nuances of the material that lies between. *Voices and Instruments 2* sustains its subdued level throughout, yet acquires a dynamic sense through fluctuations between greater bundling of the clustered sounds and their diffusion across a wider pitch-space. *Voices and Instruments 1*, in order to keep its wind scoring in balance, summons forth some moments of intensifying force. And *The Swallows of Salangan* almost transcends notions of louder and softer, in its flickering fullness of sound.

Track 1: *Chorus and Instruments* (1963) closely resembles in its notation the instrumental quintet of the same year titled *De Kooning*. The most visually striking of the four Feldman scores, it also poses special challenges for the realization as performed sound. Feldman's hand-written pages place the chorus with its procession of chords in the center, amongst a mysterious assemblage of instrumental colors extending far beyond the voices' range—from tuba, double bass and timpani below, to violin, celeste and antique cymbals above. The seven instrumentalists articulate mostly single notes, linked by diagonal dotted lines, passing through the terrain of the choir, whose harmony ebbs and flows, from a unison up to clusters of ten notes.

Two types of “field” are created on the page. The first is an open space in which the players' single note-heads freely trace out their diagonal tracks. Secondly, notated measures are imposed in changing time-signatures and tempi, mostly with just single attacks on their downbeats. These can affect the entire ensemble, or sometimes are inserted as blocks into the surrounding freer field. Choir and instruments both participate in both kinds of “space.” The result is a music, within the domain of the soft and the slow, that is at times crowded with diffuse energies, a gentle commotion of strands and amalgamations—in some passages advancing on its own volition, elsewhere more clearly measured.

Amid the fabric, the listener will also gradually detect the background presence of pedal tones, sometimes two of them at a semitone distance, acting as gravities that draw the diffusion into more solid shapes. A glowing octave on B-flat thus emerges in mid-piece. Towards the finish,

the instruments retreat, almost to a bystander role, listening and commenting from above and below the central chorale. A final phrase from the choir is stated three times, progressively truncated, with just two soprano pitches (C and E-flat) oscillating in still-restless harmonic colorations.

Two things bear on the special relationship created in *Chorus and Instruments* towards its own title. Firstly, despite the profusion of timbre, a coherent harmonic spectrum, from low to high, places a wider embrace around the choir in its central position. Second, a particular sense of intimacy is engendered by the single notes of the far-flung instruments as they join and adjoin the collective singing. Far from the traditional notion of “accompaniment,” this intimate sonic experience would be hard to match in the choral-instrumental repertoire, with the possible exception of Webern’s choral works.

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*The degrees of stasis, found in a Rothko or a Guston, were perhaps the most significant elements that I brought to my music from painting. For me, stasis, scale, and pattern have put the whole question of symmetry and asymmetry in abeyance.* (Feldman, 1981)

The two works bearing the title “Voices and Instruments,” composed in the same year, take on different characters, again arising from their contrasted modes of notation and their choices of instruments. In common between the two, the music at certain stages arrives at a kind of living-breathing standstill, an amalgam of vocal and instrumental sonority, which both expands the clock-time occupied and suspends its sense of passing. Such transfixed moments are especially prolonged in *Voices and Instruments 2*, where they are part of a deep, questing meditation; the earlier piece enfolds them in a more darkly dramatic expressionism.

Track 5: *Voices and Instruments 2* (1972) is written in Feldman’s characteristic hand—at once spindly and elegant—with a notation that resembles the later instrumental trio *For Philip Guston*. Conventional time-signatures are in control throughout, unlike the more graphic *Chorus and Instruments*, but with continual shifts of meter from one measure to the next, so that the listener in a live performance, observing the conductor’s

gestures, is aware of a ruffled metrical surface. Acoustically, however, these rhythmic energies are shrouded in the envelopes of voices and instruments moving across the irregular bar-lines.

Although this is not a choral piece as such, its three female vocalists become a quasi-choir, singing at close intervals and eschewing the distinct identities of chamber music with solo voices. As with the shadowed meters, their ensemble engenders a kind of sonic shroud, a quality and atmosphere deepened by the extraordinary instrumentation among which they are set.

It is basic to Feldman that sung notes are rarely doubled by instruments, but the four instruments here interact and interleave closely with them. Two cellos play into the singers' pitch-space, fused as a pair for much of the piece in the unearthly sound of artificial harmonics. Flute and double bass frame the ensemble, although at the outset the flute sounds even below the double bass at the bottom end of the initial sound-object. This object's detailed "painting" is an interesting study in art that conceals art—a feeling of stasis masks a restless movement of notes within the ensemble. Later the flute ventures towards melodic independence in a vantage-point above the singers, extending to piccolo. The double bass also breaks out, in a solo pizzicato line to trigger the piece's ending. Double bass is, indeed, the one instrument in common between Feldman's first three works of this recording—the instrument that he played in high school, and deftly composes as a constant, almost observing presence among other instruments of different character.

Track 8: *Voices and Instruments 1* (1972), unlike its companion-work, is fully choral, and comes closest of the four Feldman pieces to a classical sound in its instrumentation. The notation, likewise, is more regular. A simple 3/4 meter prevails through large stretches (much of the time with a single attack on the downbeat), expanding to larger meters to create slowings of events. And the score itself is published in conventional engraving, as with much of Feldman's later work. If the personality of the composer's handwriting is thereby removed from the page, the music also conveys a highly personal interaction with certain regularities of the tradition.

The focus of the Cage School on *sound* as the liberated and motivating factor meant for Feldman a freeing from “anxiety” about the past, which he believed beset his prominent European contemporaries. Yet here is a distinct hint of Beethoven in the air! The woodwind formation of two flutes, clarinet, cor anglais, horn and bassoon, joined below by double bass and timpani—and occasionally punctuated by a single, recondite chord from piano—inherently carries such a memory. It becomes more explicit in the orchestrational voicings, including octaves. The initial three-note cluster in female voices, downwardly A-flat / G / D-flat (with double bass on C), opens into a whole environment in which one might be reminded of the C Minor / A-flat Major constellation of the Fifth Symphony, while remaining equally remote from a Neoclassical 20th century.

Even if the Beethoven association seems overstated, it points to an aspect of Feldman more strongly at work in *Voices and Instruments 1* than other pieces. Feldman is quoted by the composer Thomas Adès as saying of Beethoven: “It’s not so much how he gets into things that’s interesting, it’s how he gets out of them.” Theatre-based notions of *situation* and *event* arise here, which offer alternatives to visual-arts thinking in relation to Feldman, and specially so to the deep inner reverberations of *Voices and Instruments 1*.

Whereas his other three works of the recording seem to emerge from unique, self-generating sonic moments, *Voices and Instruments 1* at its outset presents some familiar composite gestures. They might once have been called “motives,” and they enter the terrain that grows around that opening A-flat chord, with its prowling double bass and timpani. Moving across the voices and instruments like Webern tone-color melodies, they recall elemental uses of intervals and their shapes. These include: the B-A-C-H succession in transposition (chromatic, sequential); a rising, simultaneously major and minor scale (2nds in steps and half-steps); a wedge figure (widening 3rds); falling arpeggiation (3rds and 4ths and cadential 5ths). The situation of such memories within a Feldman score is utterly other, but the disorientation works in both directions. A charged quality prevails throughout the piece. We might say Feldman “gets out of it” in a manner more like a dramaturgy than a painting, and one that has intimations of a tragic scenario—the lament, which Alex Ross and other writers have noted as a pervasive atmosphere in his music.



*I loved the living essence of historical symbolism, or, putting it another way, that instinct with the help of which we, like Salangan swallows, built the world—an enormous nest, put together from the earth and sky, life and death, and two times, the ready to hand and the defaulting. I understood that it was prevented from crumbling by the strength of its links, consisting in the transparent figurativeness of all its parts.* (Boris Pasternak, *Safe Conduct*, 1931)

Track 13: ***The Swallows of Salangan*** (1960), now nearly 60 years old, has taken on a legendary status as a famous rarity—a work of quite unusual scope and effect, frequently referred to by Feldman himself, but barely known as a concert experience. The reason may lie in the striking multiplicity of instruments in which the chorus is embedded—5 flutes, 7 cellos, 5 trumpets, 2 tubas, 2 pianos and 2 vibraphones. Two separate performances in 2014—in Birmingham, UK, (Thallein Ensemble and Via Nova) and Melbourne, Australia (Astra Choir)—along with an earlier one in the Czech Republic may even be the sum of its hearings outside the USA, in marked contrast with Feldman’s later *Rothko Chapel*, which has been widely performed and recorded.

Despite being the earliest of his four works here, *Swallows* has remarkable power to cast revelatory light over all of them, and on Feldman’s art in general. The notation is again quite different from the other three cases, but has parallels with scores of the time, such as *For Franz Kline*. A procession of 61 chords is written in neat columns of note-heads across the pages, prescribing individual notes for the entire ensemble of four-part choir and 23 players. All are instructed merely to play softly, with minimum of attack and, after the first simultaneous chord, to choose their own durations for each sound before progressing to the next. The ensuing diffusion thus differs in its details in every performance, but is “prevented from crumbling” (in Pasternak’s phrase) by Feldman’s great intuitive sense of what zones of sound come to pass after that first coordinated moment. Focal moments of emphasis are written among the richly-clustered chords—a pair of grand octaves on B-flat and G succeed each other at one point, later a C-minor sonority followed by B in octaves; elsewhere phases of predominantly white-notes color the sound under high pedal-tones of C and A in the topmost voices. While these emphatic moments are not heard as such among all the diverging voices, they provide

gravities towards a core in the “nest” of sound, approached and receded from in ways to suggest backward as well as forward movement of time.

One might say that the quiet commotion of the CD’s opening work *Chorus and Instruments* has here grown over, into a tangle of flight-paths. In this concert version in the reverberant space of Melbourne’s Carmelite Church, the audience was surrounded by the distinct sound-bodies, so that each listener had a different perspective on the enveloping sonic haze. A stereo-recording cannot reproduce this, but has its own capacity to wheel above the fray, like an airborne swallow, moving closer to one timbral center or another. The richness with which the piece lives up to Boris Pasternak’s remarkable words about the nest of the world, and the “transparent figurativeness” of its links, can best be assessed in the listener’s own experience of this track. But other words, about a celebrated painting by Pasternak’s compatriot Kasimir Malevich—“Black Square,” as described by the American critic Peter Schjeldahl— have suggestive power for understanding the context of Morton Feldman’s achievement: “The brushwork is juicy and brusque: filling in the shapes, fussing with the edges. But the forms are weightless, more like thoughts than like images. You don’t look at the picture so much as launch yourself into its trackless empyrean.”

A strikingly similar insight, directly on Feldman’s *Swallows of Salangan*, came from another art critic, when the piece was just four years old. Here was Dore Ashton in 1964, drawing it into the context of Symbolism: “... I heard the piece as an evocation, not of any ‘thing’ or event, but of a complicated *état d’esprit*. Feldman uses the voices as a transparent veil . . . fusing the whole in a spherical abstraction. The soft-washed image then recedes before the mind trying to grasp it, leaving only its moving aura behind. The aura is the essence of the piece.”