

# Morton Feldman's Madame Press

by Chris Villars

On September 17, 1969, Frances Feldman, Morton Feldman's mother, read in *The New York Times* the obituary of "Mrs Vera Maurina Press", her son's former piano teacher. When Feldman returned to New York from a visit to Europe, he called his mother, and the first thing she said to him was, "Madame Press died last week at ninety."<sup>1</sup> In the following months, he wrote a tribute piece, using his mother's words as its title.

Vera Ivanovna Maurina was born in Moscow on March 22, 1876<sup>2</sup>. Her father, Ivan Aleksandrovich Maurin, was a titular councillor (ninth grade of the Russian civil service) and the notary public of the Moscow district court. Her mother was Olga Sergeevna.

Vera studied piano at Moscow Conservatory, in the class of Pavel Pabst. She graduated, with a silver medal for excellence, in 1895, and subsequently improved her skills further by studying with Ferruccio Busoni. She embarked on a career as a concert pianist and performed many concerts in Russia and abroad, including, in March 1903, a concert in Berlin before the emperor, Wilhelm II. In 1906, together with the violinist Michael Press and his brother Joseph, a cellist, she moved to Berlin. There they formed the *Russian Trio*. The *Trio* performed widely, and to much acclaim, in Europe and Russia.



**The *Russian Trio*, with composer Paul Juon, in Berlin c.1906:  
Joseph Press, Paul Juon, Michael Press, Vera Maurina.**

<sup>1</sup> "Morton Feldman Talks to Paul Griffiths, August 1972" in *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964-1987* (London: Hyphen Press, 2006) p47. Also [Online] <https://www.cnvill.net/mfgriff2.htm>

<sup>2</sup> The facts of Vera's life presented in this note are derived from Russian, German and US public records.

Vera married Michael Press in Berlin on January 5, 1907. Between 1909 and 1915, the couple had three daughters: Theoda, Angela, and Dinorah. Vera taught music and continued to give concerts.

In 1922, Michael and his brother emigrated to the United States, arriving in New York. Sadly, Joseph died there of pneumonia two years later. Michael pursued his career, performing, teaching and conducting. In 1928 he joined the faculty of the School of Music at Michigan State College in East Lansing, Michigan. He taught there until 1938.

Until the late 1930s, Vera and her daughters remained in Berlin. Then, presumably in response to the worsening political situation there, they too emigrated. Angela emigrated first, arriving in 1935. Initially she joined her father in East Lansing. Later, she married Samuel Haber and settled in Chicago, eventually moving to New York. Vera emigrated in March 1938, settling in New York. Dinorah and Theoda followed in 1939, joining Vera in New York.

In 1937, the year before Vera emigrated, Michael Press filed for divorce. The divorce, which Vera contested, was granted a month after she arrived in the United States. Nine days later, Michael remarried. He died of a heart disorder just eight months later, aged 66. Despite the divorce, Vera continued to use Michael's surname, and described herself as widowed rather than divorced.

Soon after her arrival in New York in 1938, Vera joined the faculty of the Chatham Square Music School, which provided teaching for students of limited means. Morton Feldman must have been one of her first pupils when, aged 12, he started taking piano lessons with her that same year. He continued taking lessons with her until 1944.



**Chatham Square Music School, 211 Clinton Street, Manhattan, c.1940<sup>3</sup>.  
Redeveloped in the 1970s, it is now the site of a major healthcare facility.**

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<sup>3</sup> New York City official tax photo 1940

Vera retired from teaching in 1965. She died of pneumonia in New York on September 15, 1969, aged 93. Her ashes are interred in the Ferncliff Mausoleum at Ferncliff Cemetery, Hartsdale, New York, in the same niche as her daughter, Angela Haber, who died in 1955.

In an autobiographical note published in 1962, Feldman recalled his time studying with Vera:

“At the age of twelve, I was fortunate enough to come under the tutelage of Mme. Maurina-Press. [...] It was because of her that I was instilled with a sort of vibrant *musicality* rather than musicianship.”<sup>4</sup>

He later said that his involvement with a particular kind of emotional *tone* developed through being taught by Vera:

“If you have a feeling, a tactile feeling for the instrument, and if you, just with your finger... [*plays a couple of notes on the piano with one finger*]. That I learned from my teacher. The way she would put her finger down, in the Russian way, just the finger, the lightness of the finger, and produce a B-flat... you wanted to *faint!*”<sup>5</sup>

*Madame Press Died Last Week at Ninety*, the tribute piece Feldman wrote after hearing of Vera’s death in 1969, is scored for an instrumental ensemble of twelve players, and lasts just 4 minutes. The celesta plays only twice; the same arpeggiated chord is played at the beginning to open the piece, and again at the end to close it. Between these two enigmatic chords, a poignant two-note motif is repeated ninety times, once for each year of Vera’s life, as Feldman understood it<sup>6</sup>. In an interview in 2018, Nils Vigeland gave this description of the piece:

“The piece begins with an arpeggiated chord on the celesta – a life begins. Then two alternating flutes play their rhythmically unchanging descending major third (a representation of a cuckoo clock) above evenly paced harmonies. In the middle of the piece, the figure breaks down as does the instrumental texture. The trumpet now plays the cuckoo motif but too quickly – the clock is being rewound. Then the flutes retake the motif as before with the same harmonies as the opening but in a condensed recapitulation. Then the celesta plays its arpeggiated chord – a life has closed. What a remarkable and touching dramatization of the passage of a person’s life.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman* (Boston: Exact Change, 2000) p3.

<sup>5</sup> “Darmstadt Lecture, 26 July 1984” in *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964-1987* (London: Hyphen Press, 2006) p199. Also [Online] <https://www.cnvill.net/mfdarmstadt1984.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Vera was in fact ninety-three when she died.

<sup>7</sup> “Looking for the space between the notes”: an interview with Nils Vigeland about Morton Feldman, March 2018 [Online] <https://www.cnvill.net/mf-interview-with-Nils-Vigeland.pdf>