

The Eternal Footman's Snicker: Thoughts on Morton Feldman's *Triadic Memories*

“Is Wagner a human being at all? Isn't he rather a sickness?” – so asked Friedrich Nietzsche in his 1888 essay *The Case of Wagner*. Nietzsche had once greatly admired the German opera composer Richard Wagner. But in this late work, he criticized his characters for being two-dimensional. They were unable to execute serious dramatic tasks, and this forced him, Nietzsche thought, to simulate topics like love and redemption with histrionics. This made his music superficially bombastic but artistically empty. Nietzsche attacked Wagner's desire to create an “overexcitement of the nervous mechanism,” the “convulsive nature of his affects,” and his taste “that required ever-stronger spices.” In overwhelming his audience, it seemed to him Wagner was deliberately spreading a kind of sickness among them. He also thought the histrionics made the operas counterfeits of true drama. Hence his description of Wagner as “an actor.” For Nietzsche, such fakery was typical of modern art, so Wagner wasn't an aberration but the embodiment of his age. That's why he concluded with a backhanded compliment: Wagner was “the modern artist *par excellence*.”

Making sense of *Triadic Memories*, Morton Feldman's epic masterpiece of 1981, isn't easy. It's minimal but not minimalist; it's got no tonal center but isn't atonal; it has neither Schoenberg's heightened emotion nor Stockhausen's mechanical rigor; and there's none of the wit that characterizes pieces by composers like Satie or Cage. The twentieth century was a century of “isms” – expressionism, futurism, impressionism, modernism and postmodernism, neoclassicism, primitivism, serialism... none could be used in isolation to explain *Triadic Memories*. Feldman's music is sometimes compared to Mark Rothko's paintings ahead of works by other composers. Rothko was an exponent

of “color field,” a branch of abstract expressionism which frees color from representation. The object of study is simply color itself. By the 1980s, Feldman had freed sound from harmonic laws and classical structures in order to study it in a similar way. But any comparison between painting and music should be made cautiously. A piece of music relies on time passing, a painting doesn’t. In painting there’s a physical object that is “the work,” in music there isn’t. And as a sonic medium, a piece of music is capable of quotation, which means it can reference other styles, other genres, and even itself in ways a painting can’t. Broad comparisons between Feldman and Rothko and other contemporaries are certainly illustrative. But for me, the only way to the heart of *Triadic Memories* is via the nineteenth century.

Nietzsche described Georges Bizet’s opera *Carmen* as the antithesis of Wagner’s music. He said it was better-structured and more entertaining. He also appreciated its gritty, godless treatment of love and morality – a relief from the hypocrite Wagner, a supposed atheist who never shied from using Christian themes. But I suspect Nietzsche was mostly joking. The epitaph to *The Case of Wagner* says “through what is laughable, say what is somber,” and the essay is shot through with gags. To understand this one, we need to put Bizet’s current standing aside. In the 1880s, he was an insignificant figure, dead at the age of 36. And he was French. For Wagner, nationalist egomaniac that he was, being ranked beneath any French composer would have been an egregious insult, let alone one who’d died before establishing a reputation. The humor and personal barbs aside, Nietzsche was certainly serious about envisaging a music that would be sufficiently un-Wagnerian to cure the sickness of modernity. And I believe his vision is realized in *Triadic Memories* more clearly than anywhere else.

Nietzsche accused Wagner of exercising oppressive control over his works and the people that performed them. Feldman did the opposite. Beyond the notes, their order, and their durations relative to one another, the score of *Triadic Memories* is almost devoid of instructions. It's also dedicated to *two* pianists, Roger Woodward and Aki Takahashi. To have two dedicatees is intriguing enough. More intriguing still is that their recordings are very different. Woodward's is over thirty minutes longer than Takahashi's, and they contrast in dynamics, color, and phrasing. Yet both worked with Feldman himself. Where Nietzsche's Wagner was an obsessive micromanager, Feldman seems effectively to have resigned the authority of the composer. And for Nietzsche, Wagner's operas, while very long, were unstable for being loosely strung together from disjointed units. The reason we all know "The Ride of the Valkyries" or the "Bridal Chorus" is because they hold places in our imagination independent of the larger works to which they belong. Nietzsche captured this detachability in his fantastic, biting description of Wagner as "the greatest miniaturist in music." *Triadic Memories*, by contrast, is a gigantic totality built from thousands of tiny sections that are inseparable from it. There's a German philosophical term for something that both subsumes and preserves its constituent parts: *das Ganze*, "the whole." Being in this state makes the piece remarkably resistant to easy consumption. We listen to all of it, or we listen to none of it. Nietzsche's Wagner was an impresario who intoxicated crowds with overblown hit numbers. Feldman almost seeks to drive people away.

It's not just because of Nietzsche's essay that nineteenth-century music can be used as a foil with which to understand *Triadic Memories*. The word "Triadic" refers to the triad – three pitches sounding simultaneously, the foundation of tonality. Today we

call most music from the mid-1600s onward “tonal.” But the term “tonality,” a theoretical concept used to describe a particular harmonic system, was only born in the 1800s, when François-Joseph Fétis, and later Hugo Riemann, began codifying that system. *Triadic Memories* uses tonality’s building blocks without ever committing to an overall tonal scheme. The piece is like a graveyard, each isolated major and minor interval a tombstone for the music of past generations. One of many manifestations of the Romantic concept of the infinite in nineteenth-century music is found in melodies that move seamlessly between voices without being broken into phrases by cadences. Feldman only uses thematic fragments. Some almost sound like shards of larger melodies that never get heard. And in the dying stages of Romanticism, a style sometimes called “maximalism” emerged – works for enormous forces that made for final, emotional outpourings of nineteenth-century ideals. Mahler’s Eighth Symphony, nicknamed “the symphony of a thousand” because of the number of players involved in the premiere, is one famous example. Feldman’s Spartan textures and hushed dynamics invite a different kind of engagement. They call for attention rather than submission.

The second word of his title, “Memories,” is also bound up with nineteenth-century music. Take the first 729 measures, which are all in 3/8. This time signature is redolent of the waltz, a genre that flourished in the 1800s starting with Schubert and Chopin. But only a handful of those 729 measures contain three even beats. The opening few minutes in particular are almost literally a disturbing, ruinous version of a nineteenth-century salon piece. Feldman also makes music, an esoteric art form, evoke memory, a complex neuropsychological process, in broader ways. Sometimes he puts repeat-marks midway through measures, rather than at the end. This creates spells of irrational

duration, resulting in a feeling of blurred imprecision. In other places he repeats a phrase, a chord, or even a single note several times. This negates any sense of what came before and what might come after, especially when the repetitions reach as many as eleven. Thematic fragments occasionally reappear in slightly altered forms – a tone up or down, or an octave up or down. Meanwhile others are heard only once before sinking without trace. These are just some of the ways in which the essence of memory itself is captured. And if *Triadic Memories* is about remembering tonal music, then Feldman is tacitly implying that tonal music has ended. In this sense, the piece quietly documents the crisis of legitimacy facing classical music at the turn of the 21st century.

With its engagement with this crisis, its troubled relationship with the tradition from which it emerged, and the fact it was completed just a few years before its composer died, another central topic of *Triadic Memories* is loss. This brings me to an additional reason to introduce a work by Feldman, a Jew born in Queens in 1926, by thinking about Wagner, a German anti-Semite who died in 1883 and was later adulated by the Nazis as a cultural icon. Feldman dismissed one critic's interpretation of his music as a "mourning epilogue" to the Holocaust. In the same conversation, though, he said that "after Hitler perhaps there should no longer be art. Those thoughts are always in my mind." The French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann believes the Holocaust can't be represented in art. He said, "the Holocaust erects a ring of fire around itself, a borderline which cannot be crossed because there is a certain amount of horror which cannot be transmitted." This was why he didn't use reconstructions or archive footage in *Shoah*, his famous nine-hour documentary. A piece like Shostakovich's 13th Symphony, the "Babi Yar," does attempt to represent the Holocaust by transmitting its horror, much like the movie *Schindler's*

List. *Triadic Memories* is like *Shoah* insofar as it makes us think about loss through absence: absence of melody, regular rhythm, classical structure, and tonal and atonal systems of harmony. Given Feldman's famous desire to be "the first great composer that is Jewish," and that the Holocaust was ever-present in his thinking, I do believe *Triadic Memories* is at least partly about the event. Like Lanzmann though, Feldman stands at the edge of a "ring of fire" – observing loss without attempting to transmit horror. Whether or not you agree with that, it's certainly the constant, acute sense of something missing that crowns this piece with a dark halo.

Feldman himself described *Triadic Memories* as "probably the largest butterfly in captivity." I think this refers to structure and character. The patterns on butterflies' wings are sometimes natural-world examples of "evolving symmetry." A triangle would have evolving symmetry if it was made up from smaller triangles, each of which was made up from triangles that were smaller still. Measure 976 of *Triadic Memories* is the third of a five-measure group, and it contains one chord which contains three notes, and the chord is played six times. Similar structures are found throughout the piece. And like Feldman's butterfly, the word "largest" is never far from mind when thinking of *Triadic Memories*. It is, after all, a single movement lasting nearly two hours. But despite this size it's also incredibly delicate. Like most pianists, I hold the *una corda* pedal down from start to finish (so, everyone wish my left leg good luck!), there are lengthy rests in which sound is simply left to decay, and the piece routinely moves very slowly through perilously high registers. Sometimes it feels like it might dissolve and disappear entirely. This delicacy demands the most protective possible environment, which is why there are no program notes for tonight's concert. It's also why the house lights are about to be dimmed. We

listen as best we can, and the inevitable alien sounds, whether it's a squeaking seat or chatter from outside, become a necessary part of the experience. We need them to be fully aware of the work's sheer fragility.

Deep within the barren darkness of *Triadic Memories*, might Nietzsche have found *the* antithesis to Wagner's histrionic counterfeits? Something acutely real and exquisitely beautiful, something curative? I discovered the piece during the terminal stages of my doctorate, which was on Wagner and the Nazis, and there was definitely something about it that cleared the nationalist-romanticist fog in which I'd become enveloped. Instead of attempting to describe that very personal experience though, I ought just to stop talking and play! My advice, especially if you're hearing the piece for the first time, would be to close your eyes, focus on the sounds, and let them take you wherever they may. As a final thought, I have some favorite lines from T.S. Eliot's *Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock* that could stand as epitaphs for *Triadic Memories*: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws | Scuttling across the floors of silent seas." Or perhaps better still: "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker | And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker | And in short, I was afraid."

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