

Feldman2

by Tom Chiu

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I first heard of the mystique and aura of Feldman's String Quartet #2 (FSQ2) in late 1998. About three months prior to FLUX's premiere of this grand work in 1999, I received four thick, bound, over-sized scores – and at that moment, the piece's immensity struck a new chord with my psyche. With every performance, I grow more awe-struck by FSQ2 – nothing else in my music library can receive the level of reverence and admiration that this masterpiece deserves.

There are many aspects of the piece that overlap characteristics of standard repertoire – traditional notation, recognizable motivic structure, etc. What takes it above and beyond and to a new realm is its glacial scale and scope, which erases many conventional perceptions of form. For instance, unlike the neatly packaged four-bar phrases in both old and new music, FSQ2's melodic cells can repeat as much as thirteen times, and some sections can last fifteen minutes or more before moving onto something new. That the piece has clearly defined sections certainly helps the musician conceptualize its architecture. But the sheer size of FSQ2 throws musical memory for a loop. In a standard pop song the chorus might come back within a minute, and in sonata form the first theme almost always recurs within ten minutes; but with FSQ2, recapped sections might not occur for sixty minutes or more.

From the perspective of string technique, playing FSQ2 requires incredible physical stamina. The length is a huge hurdle in itself – let's face it, string players (in fact, any musician) are not trained to play six hours without a break. Another big challenge, perhaps less obvious, is the act of playing very quietly. It actually requires much more physical energy to do less than more.

Downshifting both the speed and pressure of the bow goes against many years of training, and much repertoire requiring us to be in constant motion. Furthermore, the suspension of the right arm in mid-air – working against the gravitational pull of the arm's natural weight – can become rather uncomfortable. Imagine yourself typing on a keyboard that is positioned about one foot higher than its normal placement, and doing that for six hours. That partly describes the experience of playing this piece. To deal with this, we are constantly experimenting to find ways to minimize motion and streamline energy use.

Much has been made about the biological challenges of performing FSQ2, including an announcement in the Village Voice (prior to the premiere) that comically fancies the potential use of a catheter. But I have learned that the lack of bathroom breaks is just one part of the biological equation. The other physical component is about fending off dehydration and the depletion of energy, which is far more critical than any concerns of a biological mishap. Moreover, it has become clear that the challenge of maintaining mental focus exceeds the physical demands. It's just way too easy to get swept up in Feldman's mesmerizing sonorities.

As for the performance itself – each one is unique, impacted by the space, the city, the audience, and the time of day. Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, Norway, the UK and various American cities have produced different experiences in concert halls, museum spaces, and even a hotel convention room. Most of our sixteen performances to date have occurred after dusk, but one actually began at noon and finished before sunset, and another started post-midnight and ended pre-sunrise. Whenever and wherever the next journey takes us, I know that eventually, an appreciative applause will emerge from the stillness of the final, suspended silence. I will gather myself and my thoughts, then take a deep breath. And be humbled by another transcendental experience of a lifetime.

– Tom Chiu, 2003 (updated 2014, 2017)