

Morton Feldman at Darmstadt 1984

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This text is an extract from the author's comprehensive review of the 1984 Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music published in Perspectives of New Music, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring - Summer, 1985), pp. 274-291.

Morton Feldman (b. 1926) certainly requires no introduction. Along with John Cage and Jackson Pollock, he represents an era in the annals of American creative history equivalent to the heady days of Stockhausen's Darmstadt.

Feldman's nearly six-day sojourn in Darmstadt almost eludes description. His flamboyant personality defies verbal capture, and his persistent practice of speaking, like Jesus, in parables renders successful summation practically impossible. His lectures, filled with allegorical ramblings and liberally sprinkled with anecdotes, quotations, and famous names (Feldman's personal address book must read like a roster of who's who in art and music) annoyed some participants, who objected to what they felt was a lack of technical specificity in his speech. I found his baroque oration informative, illuminating, and utterly magnetic – also extremely attractive after days of astringent technical exegeses.

Nearly everyone at Darmstadt came under Feldman's critical eye at one time or another. One of his pet peeves was lack of respect for what he inelegantly termed "big shots." The course, he said, should be restructured to admit as lecturers only those of "star" status; students and aspiring young composers should not come to Darmstadt to present their works to the world, but to sit at the feet of the masters and learn. German elitism was also attacked:

So you're taught Goethe, are you going to live forever? ... For those of you who feel that you are in the "seat of the truth" because you're in Germany where Goethe lived – drop it. Be more flexible; you have hardening of the categories.¹

His most scathing criticism fell on those participants of the tonality symposium who, like Schat, devised elaborate schemes for the contrivance of pitch to what he felt was the neglect of the other parameters of music.

¹ All Morton Feldman quotations were taken from personal interviews with the composer, conducted during the course, or from his lectures given as part of the Composers Forum.

You need a more matching relationship between pitch, timbre, register, instrument . . . I can't write a note unless I know its instrumentation, its register, its shape in context, and neither should you.

The primary topic of conversation during Feldman's Darmstadt "reign" was his new, stunning *String Quartet*,² which was given its European premiere at the Darmstadt *Orangerie* by the San Francisco-based Kronos Quartet. The *Quartet* was originally a whopping five-hours-plus long, but was truncated to approximately four hours in order to fit into the time allotted for its world premiere over the Canadian national radio; Feldman said that the shortened version was prepared by himself and members of the Kronos Quartet over the telephone.

The obvious question is: why so long? Feldman countered with a number of typically cryptic retorts: "Because I had the time and money"; "The Concorde takes four hours to cross the ocean, and I go farther than that in my piece"; and "Any good surgeon takes more than two hours to perform major surgery."

The real impetus behind the *String Quartet*, Feldman finally divulged, was a "middle-age crisis" during which he questioned the definition of music as an art form; the consequence was his conviction that:

... the historical function of music is essentially a *memory* form, to make memory comprehensible. And I decided that if that's what music is, it's too primitive.

The *String Quartet*, then, is a compositional outworking of Feldman's belief in the necessity for increased sophistication in the perception of music as a memory form. Memory as defined by the *Quartet* is the perception of change and reiteration within the time span of the piece. The entire work projects from an extremely minimal amount of material (ultimately, Feldman said, from only two intervals, the major and minor seconds) that is subjected to seemingly infinite restatement with varying "shifts of focus."³ Feldman described the procedure (one he said he had practiced for twelve years) as follows:

² *String Quartet No. 2* (1983)

³ Walter Zimmerman analysed the structure of the *String Quartet* in a lecture entitled "Kommentar zu Morton Feldmans 2. Streichquartett," given at the course. The analysis is scheduled for publication in *Darmstädter Beiträge zur Neuen Musik XX: Internationalen Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt 1984*.

I take an idea and do it in a pitchiness way, then in a more intervallic way, then in another way, in a language of another color, another register ... The focus, the parameters, are always flowing, a light here, a light there, because you cannot have everything at once ... For example, voice-leading could become a focus. Then I would say, “do without voice-leading.” Although the focus shifts, I wouldn’t say that my involvement was a one-night stand or short-term commitment, because I bring my whole attention to the moment.

Feldman’s procedure obviously conjures comparison with minimalist methods, a comparison, however, that, when suggested, he neatly side-stepped. Conversely, his concentration on the consecutive or successional disclosure of single points of focus over a long time span is antipodal to the tenets of the practitioners of high-density music, such as Ferneyhough.

The prospect of a four-hour performance *sans* intermission (or even division into movements) was a bit daunting; many audience members brought food and drink, stretched out on the chairs with their eyes closed, and walked in and out of the auditorium at will, as if they were at an all-night Indonesian shadow-puppet play (during such performances this kind of activity is common). Feldman insisted that such behavior, however, was not his intention and, since I was part of his entourage, I complied and sat straight through the entire performance. I am glad that I did, for full comprehension of the piece and its impact on one’s perception of time and memory demanded unvarying attention. For the first hour I diligently applied myself to the recognition of details of reiteration and change, as instructed, but, after that, “memory became atmosphere” (to quote Feldman quoting Proust). The music (soft, pristine yet not prissy, luminous, seductive – like the attractions of a geisha girl, to use a Feldmanesque apologue) hypnotized but never numbed. Indeed, I left the auditorium with the intoxicating feeling that my sensual being had been heightened and transformed (thank you, Morton).