

Recollections of Morton Feldman

by Ivar Frounberg

Ivar Frounberg studied composition with Morton Feldman at the State University of New York at Buffalo. At the request of the editors of Danish Music Review, he summarized a radio interview conducted by Erik Christensen in 1988 to make the following article. It was first published in Danish in Danish Music Review (1988/89, No. 2) pp 59-60. The English translation is published here by kind permission of the author.

It all started with a Danish young composers society (DUT) concert in Louisiana, Denmark, in 1978 with Yvar Mikhashoff and Frances-Marie Uitti, for which I was responsible. My contact with these two musicians inspired me to apply to the State University of New York, SUNY. Due to grant applications I could not set off until 1980. Before I was formally admitted to the university, I had written to Feldman in advance. But for reasons that I will discuss later, I had not received a reply.

I showed up for a 'consultation', which was necessary to get Feldman's approval. I was pretty nervous as he immediately sent me away for half an hour, while an English composer, Mark Turner, was in the line of fire. After a cup of coffee in the cafeteria, I showed up again, with my score. He was very nearsighted and he held the score so close to his cigarette that I was afraid that it might go up in flames. "You can't do that," he suddenly said after reading the first page, and I feared that this spelled the end of my studies, right there. A little cautiously, I asked what it was that I could not do? "It's gestural!" - To which I replied that moving from a gestural introduction to something else was exactly the idea behind the score, as he would see, if he turned to the last page. "It's not necessary," he said. "It is enough to look at the first page of a score. There are certain rules that one must abide by." Which is where I glimpsed an opening. I had been to Italy several times shortly before, and there the rules were somewhat relative, which was what I said to him. "What do you mean by that?" he asked, "You cannot cross a red light, now you can?" Yes, I replied. If you see a nice looking girl on the other side of the street, in Italy that would serve as reason enough to cross a red light! Feldman sat silently for a moment and then said that I was basically a very nice guy, and so I could study with him. That was my entry ticket.

Feldman had just begun teaching groups, and as newcomers, Mark Turner and I were allocated the early morning slot along with Charles Ames and Paul Gallagher. The first lesson consisted of a tough Feldmanesque monologue, in which he critiqued European culture in particular. "There is no culture in Europe," he said. "Name a few European painters who compare with Jackson Pollock, Frank Stella and Mark Rothko." Mark gave it a first shot, but was arrogantly rejected. I protested on the grounds that the Albright Knox Gallery, an art museum that Feldman really appreciated, had an Asger Jorn painting. This he completely ignored. You were not supposed to correct the maestro. At some later stage, Mark was told off because he contradicted Feldman during a lesson. Feldman leaned in close to him, allowing his bad cigarette-breath to add extra emphasis to his words: "I'll tell you one thing, Mark. It is I, ME, MYSELF, who decides who the good composers are, and not you."

The morning lessons also cleared up what had happened to the letter I had sent to Feldman. He would usually pick up the week's mail, sift through it, and letters without a sender or with an unknown sender were immediately thrown in the bin. Other letters were stuffed into his inside pocket, while the rest - e.g. scholarship applications - were read aloud followed by the question: "Would you give this guy a thousand dollars?"

After our first 'individual' lesson, we would wait in the building's cafeteria for the afternoon's two combined seminars, "Composition Seminar" and "Advanced Orchestration", which would take place from 1pm until 4pm. And here Feldman continued that morning's monologue, sometimes seasoned with short presentations by the students, until 5 or 6pm. Each semester covered its own subject: we spent the first semester analysing the most central works of Schoenberg, and the second semester reviewing Boulez. My two term papers were

called "The Harmonic Structure in Schoenberg's *Erwartung*" and "The Relation between Structure and Instrumentation in Boulez *Sonatina for Flute and Piano*" - both assignments chosen by Feldman!

The seminars were livened up with Feldman's sudden whims, of an often very entertaining character, as when he asked Yvar Mikhashoff one of his incomprehensible questions that you could not answer. Yvar, who usually had plenty of time, especially when he was teaching, was clearly embarrassed and ran out of the room excusing himself with a remark about a waiting student, to the secret delight of the entire class - happy that we had not been picked out for a question this time round. Another time we had listened to a recording of Tchaikovsky's *String Sextet*, which Feldman liked, and while his cigarette slid around the grooves, he spelled his way through A-S-G-E-R L-U-N-D C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N-S-E-N¹, to my delight, and as the rehabilitation of culture-less Europe.

In reality though, he was also a very, very sweet man who underneath the harsh surface had a strong intuitive sense of how people were feeling. After long lectures, we would often go out to eat together, and on one occasion Bunita Marcus issued an invitation to a birthday party: everybody was invited, except for the newly arrived composer from Denmark. Feldman immediately sensed that I felt left out and saved the situation by encouraging Bunita to also invite me. On a later occasion, I again experienced Feldman's gentler side. I was stuck in a composition to be performed in a concert. I had completely lost my way, and so Feldman invited me to his home one morning, to have a look at it. I showed up on time at 10am and I did not leave there until half past one in the afternoon. Not because we looked at my work all the time; that was over in half an hour. But because I had to lie with him on the floor, looking at his oriental rugs.

His apartment was very sparsely furnished. First you went into the kitchen, which was completely scrubbed and empty (except for a newly arrived cardboard box of frozen fish); then you would enter a room with a piano squeezed up against the wall to the kitchen, and the door frame was covered with small bits of music paper, each with only one chord on it. Apart from that, I remember the bare walls with a single painting (Jasper Johns?), a glass table with two chairs, and on the floor, his oriental rugs, which he had brought home from a province in Turkey, all the way from the Soviet border.

He was greatly fascinated by the structures in these rugs, so much so that they played a part in his own music. It may seem odd that oriental rugs could influence his music, but they had a very real impact on his compositional method. He knew quite a bit about carpets - he was a big, internationally recognised carpet collector - and he could talk for hours about these 'rugs'. He told me how they were woven, and how you could see the wear patterns left by the knees and foreheads of those in prayer, and what it meant for a rug's character that it was designed specifically as a prayer mat.

Asymmetry was something he emphasised in his music. When looking at an oriental rug, it may appear symmetrical, but there are small deviations from this symmetry. It is not a given that the figures are placed directly opposite each other in relation to the central axis of the carpet. This is due to the fact that the weavers maintain the design as a finished idea while weaving, but they do not draw this idea on paper. The pattern comes into being while they weave and it evolves along the way. And this corresponds very directly to the intuitive way Feldman composes his music.

At the same time, you can also read the passing of seasons in the weaving by way of the colours. They differ from spring to fall, and they change from year to year, which enables you to determine which part of the carpet was made in a particular year. In other words, the rugs reveal a time sequence: they constitute visual art that unfolds in time, while Feldman's music can be characterised as music 'outside time'.

¹ Professor Asger Lund Christiansen was a prominent cellist in Denmark and a longtime member of the famous Copenhagen String Quartet.

Feldman used this knowledge when he composed, by way of creating 'patterns'. He would try things out at the piano until he came up with a chord he liked. Chord, instrumentation, dynamics and positioning within a given bar would come together to form a seamless whole, a 'pattern'. It could be a particular chord with specific instrumentation and dynamics, placed as the up-beat of a two-part 5/16 bar that he would cut out and paste onto the doorframe. I had seen a strip of finished bars when I arrived - elements from a pre-compositional process. When he had then progressed to composing, he would draw lines on his music sheets to form a 'grid' - i.e. by way of bar lines. There would always be the same number of bars per page. Whether the bars were long or short, when they were played, they looked the same length on the paper. Then he would 'project' - i.e. he would take one 'pattern' at a time and place it in between the lines that divided the music paper. He placed them where he intuitively sensed that they belonged on the page. Perhaps with immediate repetitions, perhaps repeated over long, irregular stretches. Perhaps never to resurface. And thus he continued until the music sheets, the composition, were 'filled in', so to speak.

The result could be called a 'vertical structure'. Music without polyphony, as nothing went on beyond each individual 'pattern'. Each line stands as a pillar on its own and it is the relations between these pillars that form the musical pattern. It is music 'outside time', as you experience it in his exceedingly long works from the 1980's. One should not listen to the shape and the dramatic course. What matters are the relations between the individual elements and their miniscule changes.