

Feldman's B Flat by Howard Skempton

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There is a brief, unpublished text by Morton Feldman entitled "The Country Tea Room" in which he reflects on his visit to England in 1966. He is struck by the "emphasis on music being written for children – or children writing for us... Ah! but amateurs have always started early in life – this gives them the smugness of never really having to work hard."

In other essays, he rounds on the professionals. Both amateurs and professionals are condemned, it seems, for sticking to the straight and narrow: the amateur for being too narrow and the professional for being too straight:

"Professionals insist on essentials. They concentrate on the things that make art. These are the things they identify with it, think of, in fact, *as it* – not understanding that everything we use to make art is precisely what kills it." He goes on, "This is what every painter I know understands. And this is what almost no composer I know understands."¹

Painting is different. The difference is highlighted in "Some Elementary Questions":

"Renoir once said the same color, applied by two different hands, would give us two different tones. In music, the same note, written by two different composers, gives us – the same note. When I write a B flat, and Berio writes a B flat, what you get is always B flat. The painter must create his medium as he works. That's what gives his work that hesitancy, that insecurity so crucial to painting. The composer works in a pre-existent medium. In painting if you hesitate, you become immortal. In music if you hesitate, you are lost."²

This paragraph is a key to an understanding of Feldman's work. It is immediately preceded by the memorable line, "Music's tragedy is that *begins* with perfection", to which Feldman refers in a conversation with Fred Orton and Gavin Bryars:

"I think of ["ambivalence..."] as a sense of something that has been very influential in my life, which made me realise there's something "fishy" about me as a composer. In an article I once wrote – a little high-flown but certainly true – that the tragedy of music is that it begins with perfection. You can see all the time, while you are looking at a terrific picture, where the artist changes his mind."³

In his writing, Feldman keeps his distance from "music" and from "the composer". There is indeed something gloriously "fishy" about him as a composer. Which is why he is wrong to suggest that his B flat is simply a B flat. Feldman's greatness as a composer is due in large part to the fact that his B flat is palpably his own. Compared to Feldman, other composers (Berio, Boulez, and the rest) seem to be constructing their works with Lego. Maybe composing is mainly this: working "in a pre-existent medium"; which is why Feldman is uniquely "fishy". Others – electro-acoustic composers and improvisers – have a painterly feeling for pitch, but they liberate pitch at the cost of keeping it in exile. Feldman librates pitch in order to bring it home.

Feldman made it clear, when it was fashionable to accept all possibilities, that he was not interested in either electronics or microtones. Some may see his predilection for dislocating notation in his later writing for strings as a means of introducing microtonal inflections, but his aim was probably even more subtle:

“The magic is to make sounds out of pitches. Or the magic is to bring back pitches. They might be sounds. Of course, I do that in my quartet. I’m going from pitches to sounds. Again it’s a retranslation.”⁴

Feldman strayed from “the straight and narrow” for good reason. He proved that it pays to be lost. In music, if you are lost, you become immortal.

¹ “The Anxiety of Art”, 1969

² “Some Elementary Questions”, 1967

³ “Morton Feldman”, *Studio International*, November/December 1976

⁴ “Darmstadt-Lecture”, 1984