

Morton Feldman: Remarks on music for the film “Something Wild”

From **The Johannesburg Masterclasses, July 1983, Session 9:**

Before I go, I have to tell you what I opted for in a movie. I was hired to write a United Artists big Hollywood movie. And there was a story conference in which they wanted to hear the music I wrote for when the superstar [Caroll Baker] was being raped in Central Park. The director [Jack Garfein] was the superstar’s husband. I had a string quartet in E major just playing this... [Sings]

OK, I think it was a sixth chord. If I do commercial work I think of those things. Anyway, I think it was in E major with a sixth chord, pizzicato on the cello and then... then on the black notes you hear a celesta going something like E flat, D flat, E flat, G flat, D flat [Sings]. That’s in the celesta. When it comes back again, it’s in the French horn. Against this lovely thing [in the string quartet]. And I’m playing it, I’m playing it beautifully, you know, and giving this kind of Woody Allen scenario. And Hollywood is sitting around me and the director gets up: “My wife is being raped! That’s the kind of music you’re writing!?” So I said, “What kind of music do you want?” He said, “[Sings opening to Shostakovich’s Fifth Symphony]” – Shostakovich!

Three days later I got a phone call from Aaron Copland, and he 's laughing and he said, “Morty, what happened?” And I said, “What, did they ask you to write the film?” And he says, “Yes!” And I told him what happened. And he laughed, and he says, “Oh, I suppose you're not going to go back on it, so I might as well tackle it.”

And so Copland wrote this film. It was a disaster, and he got the most money ever written for a film in film history. I think he got around a hundred and twenty thousand dollars. The film was called “Something Wild”.

And that was funny, my encounter with orchestration for Hollywood: “My wife is getting raped, and all you can think of is a string quartet!” [Laughs] It would have been beautiful if he had left it alone!

It would have been beautiful, so sad, the ambivalence. You don't know if the rape is in one key or in the other key, you know. The whole thing was so lovely and sad. The juxtaposition was kind of sad, tender thing, you know. He made a mistake. And the big mistake he made was that the rape took place - and this is how I got the idea - the rape took place after her church choral rehearsal. [Laughs] She's in church... I had to pick the music for the thing - they kept that in¹ - I picked a gorgeous thing by William Byrd².

¹ The choir scene Feldman describes was not in fact included in the film as finally released.

² At the time he was writing music for this film, Feldman made an arrangement for chamber ensemble (flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, two violins, viola, cello, and double bass) of Josquin des Prez’ motet *Tu pauperum refugium*. The unpublished manuscript of his arrangement is preserved in the Morton Feldman Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel. The existence of this arrangement suggests that Josquin’s motet was the piece Feldman chose for the choir scene in the film, and not a piece by Byrd. When he repeats this story in the quote from 1984 given below, he specifically names Josquin as the composer. Feldman clearly intended to use the motet in its vocal form in the film scene he describes. Why then did he make an instrumental arrangement? Perhaps he thought of using the music elsewhere in the film score, or perhaps he simply enjoyed the challenge of making the arrangement and saw it as a standalone piece.

And they said, “Well, we don't hear Carroll!” So I wrote in a little line, where I kind of skipped two measures, and you hear her coming out of the crowd in a kind of fake thing. But not too much, you know, because she couldn't sing! I had to spend hours with her, teaching her how to sing. So the quality of the Byrd, and then walking into the darkness of Central Park, you see, where it was nice.

The Byrd... it made the rape even more terrible. Maybe that's why this Shostakovich here I hear all the time is annoying. [Laughter] But it's great, I got paid for the job; totally, completely. But it was so funny with Copland calling up, laughing, “What happened?”

From **“The Future of Local Music” Seminar anecdotes and drawings, Theater am Turm, Frankfurt, February 1984** [reprinted in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman* edited by B. H. Friedman (Exact Change, 2000) pp 187/8]:

I once did one Hollywood movie, but I was fired. And I'll tell you why I was fired. The director's wife was the star and the story opens up. She's coming from choral practice; she is a young girl in a choral practice and then she walks through Central Park in the *finister*.

So they wanted me to make the music. So I picked a piece of Josquin³ that they were practicing in chorus. And so the director says to me, “Write a part for my wife.” So I said, “I can't write a part in Josquin, like another part in Josquin.” But what I did was that, she was an alto, and it's just a moment instead of all the altos singing, for two measures I had her terrible voice just sing a little something and then I went to teach the chorus.

So, and then she is raped. And then we had a story conference with ten people, the writer, the director, it was a big Hollywood movie, and it's called a kind of P.O.V.-conference, point of view, and from whose point of view is she being raped? One has to establish, in a sense, what the point of view is in relation to the looker when she is being raped.

So I wrote the rape music. And the rape music was a string quartet playing just an E-major. Just a celesta with one finger playing against a chord *sehr schön* in the orchestration, beautiful and she is being raped. And it's his wife, he says, “My wife is being raped.” This is the Actor's Studio, he was a famous man, so he acts everything out. “My wife is being raped and you write celesta music?” he said. “I want something like papa papa papa.” Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, that's what he wanted.

And I was fired. I grew up with their lawyer, and he says, “Call me up,” just the day after the conference. And he says, “We got a problem, Morty. They want you out of the film.” I said, “Great. How much am I going to get?” He said, “I'm going to give you the whole thing.” So I got all the money. And at that time it was a lot of money. I got about 17,000 dollars for one conference.

Then I got a call from Aaron Copland. They hired Aaron Copland. And he is laughing, he says, “What happened?” He knew that I was writing the music for the film, and I told him what happened. He says, “That means I shouldn't go to any conference, ha?” He says, “OK, I'll do it in my house in the country.” And it's true. I found out he never went to any meeting, never had a discussion.

³ See note 2 above.