

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Fox, Christopher. 1987. 'Reflections from a Slow Country'. *Contact*, 31. pp. 31-34. ISSN 0308-5066.

---

## Christopher Fox

### Reflections from a Slow Country

---

The following review-article was written in June and therefore predates Morton Feldman's sad and untimely death on 3 September at the age of 61. The author has asked that it be published unaltered.

Walter Zimmermann, ed., *Morton Feldman Essays*  
(Kerpen: Beginner Press, 1985), £19.15  
[ Available from Universal Edition (London) or direct  
from Beginner Press, Wasserburg 13, D-5014 Kerpen,  
West Germany ]

Morton Feldman, String Quartet No. 1  
(UE 16385, 1979), £24.15  
String Quartet No. 2  
(UE 17650L, 1983), £24.50  
*Crippled Symmetry*  
(UE 17667, 1983), £10.00  
*For Christian Wolff*  
(UE 1766L, 1986), £17.00

[ All available from Universal Edition (London) ]

For the past decade and more, the West German new-music scene has worshipped at the shrine of American music: of what used to be known as American 'experimental' music in particular and, specifically, before the altars of John Cage, Morton Feldman, Conlon Nancarrow and Harry Partch. Of these cult figures, Feldman has perhaps benefited most from this, and nowhere more so than in the publication of his collected writings. The composer Walter Zimmermann's labour of love draws together for the first time virtually every word that Feldman has ever committed to print – 23 essays and eight shorter 'Statements' – together with three essays about Feldman by Zimmermann himself, the composer's writer friend the late Frank O'Hara, and the musicologist Heinz-Klaus Metzger (all three long-time devotees). There are also transcripts of Feldman's contributions to a seminar on 'The Future of Local Music' at the Theater am Turm, Frankfurt, in February 1984 and of his lecture at the 1984 Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik. Finally, there is a very full bibliography (compiled by Paul van Emmerik) and a list of the complete Feldman output to 1984. The whole volume is attractively printed and is fronted by a splendidly fleshy portrait of the composer in profile by the late Philip Guston.

The volume is not, however, without its curiosities. Feldman has evidently been less than assiduous in maintaining his archives, and five of the essays could not be traced in their original English versions: these appear in German only (having been translated from Italian, Swedish and French!); otherwise all Feldman's words appear in English with German translation alongside. The transcription of Feldman's drawl from the recording of his 1984 Darmstadt lecture yields a few marvellous mishearings, one resulting in the invention of a new author, Stan Dell – a snooker star, perhaps? – for *Le rouge et le noir*. But these mishearings are a not inappropriate addition to a lecture which spends some time discussing Beckett's use of re-translation as a working method.

Most of Feldman's essays (as opposed to the shorter 'Statements') were written in the period 1962-72; only four in the present volume, all written in 1980-81, are more recent. As explanation, Zimmermann includes a 'Statement' written in 1975:

Until about 10 years ago I wrote often about music. I no longer do. The writing was usually polemical in content. In recent years I do not want to argue with talent. I want to be thankful for it regardless from where it comes.<sup>1</sup>

If some of this is perhaps not strictly true – Feldman still enjoys an occasional argument with talent, as the text of his Darmstadt lecture reveals – his description of the general tone of the earlier writings is accurate. He tested the musical world of the 1960s against a set of ideals – Cage, Debussy, Stravinsky, Varèse – and phobias – professionalism, academicism, anything systematic – and regularly found it wanting. But his polemic is subtler in its attack than, say, that of Boulez, often proceeding by stealthy analogy rather than by frontal assault.

Usually, Feldman's analogies are drawn from painting, demonstrating again the profound impression that the visual avant garde of 1950s New York had on American experimental music. So, in the essay 'After Modernism' (1971), he talks at length about the relationship between Cézanne, Mondrian and Abstract Expressionism but, in the midst of this discussion, launches two crushing blows against his musical colleagues in Europe: 'just as the Germans killed music, the French killed painting';<sup>2</sup> 'only in Europe do you find men like that – men who make a whole revolution, guillotine anybody and everybody who disagrees with it, and then change their mind'.<sup>3</sup> That both these blows draw their weight from an extremely partial reading of Western cultural history is unfortunate, but such is the stuff of polemic.

Only exceptionally in his writing does Feldman attempt anything approaching conventional musicology. The essay 'An autobiography: Morton Feldman' (1962) gives an account of his early work and the influence on it of Cage, memorably summed up in the sentence, 'Quite frankly, I sometimes wonder how my music would have turned out if John had not given me those early permissions to have confidence in my instincts'.<sup>4</sup> 'Conversation without Stravinsky' (1967) gives an equally memorable account of mid-sixties experimental musical life in London; 'any direction modern music will take in England will come about only through Cardew, because of him, by way of him', he writes.<sup>5</sup> (*O tempora, o mores!*) 'Crippled Symmetry' (1981), the most recent of the essays collected here, is the only one to deal with specifically technical details and the only one to include music examples.

Of the essays on Feldman, that by O'Hara, 'About the early work', is probably familiar to Feldman fans: it first appeared in 1962 as a sleeve note for the Columbia record 'New Directions in Music 2'.<sup>6</sup> This appears in both its original English and in German translation; the essays by Metzger and Zimmermann are published in their original German only. Metzger's 'String Quartet – Über das Spätwerk' was first heard on Hessischer Rundfunk in 1984 and is a characteristically thoughtful piece of cultural cross-referencing, linking Feldman's First String Quartet (1979) to the Kabbala as well as to the radical experimentalism of Cage, and comparing it to contemporary European quartets by Luigi Nono (his *Fragmente-Stille, An Diotima*), Gilberto Cappelli and Mathias Spahlinger.

The most provocative of these introductory essays,

though, is Zimmermann's 'Morton Feldman – Der Ikonoklast'. He justifies his title's claim (a nice irony here for a subject with impeccable credentials as an art historian) in his opening sentence: 'The Old Testament dispute between Moses and Aaron over the transmission of truth either through images or without them stands at the heart of Morton Feldman's aesthetic.'<sup>7</sup> He sees a connection with Feldman's Jewishness in his search for an 'imageless' music, a connection echoed by Metzger's citation of the Book of Exodus, Chapter 20 Verse 4: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.' (Authorised Version)

Zimmermann's essay takes the form of a chronological account of Feldman's development from the graph scores of the early 1950s right through to the fully notated scores of the late sixties onwards and, at greater length, to the music of 1977-84. He describes Feldman's growing fascination with Turkish rugs and how their use of repeated, but subtly varied, patterns – what he calls their 'crippled symmetry' – has influenced his music since 1977. The fact that Turkish rather than Persian rugs particularly fascinate Feldman is also explained in this essay. Zimmermann recounts a conversation with the composer in which he described the difference in approach between Persian and Turkish rug-makers: Persian rug-makers work with the whole pattern in front of them, Turkish rug-makers work section by section, folding completed sections underneath the current one, so that they must rely on their memory of the intended total pattern rather than on any immediate visual reference.

As with any musical inspiration whose source is visual, the correspondence between inspiration and final form is tenuous, but for Feldman there are obviously useful analogies here. The way in which he organises his material in time can be compared with the memory-based, rather than strictly schematic, Turkish approach to rug-making, and his elaboration of small repeating patterns into extended compositions is clearly related to the artisan's visual motifs within the larger frame of the rug. Zimmermann has attempted to reinforce this analogy by producing a 'Muster Teppich' (Rug Pattern) based on Feldman's Second String Quartet (1983). On a square grid he allocates an equal space to each of the score's 124 pages and, using different visual symbols to represent each different musical pattern within the piece, demonstrates how these patterns are deployed through the six hours of the quartet.

Feldman regards his 'rug' period as beginning with *Why Patterns* (Instruments IV) for violin, piano and percussion (1978; a version with the violin replaced by flute doubling alto flute dates from 1979, and it is actually this one which the composer cites and quotes in his 'Crippled Symmetry' essay); Zimmermann, on the other hand, suggests that characteristic concerns of the 'rug' period are also evident in *Piano* (1977). To my ears, however, it is in the music from 1978 that the really significant change occurs with the introduction of tiny, obsessively repeated groups of pitches, varied by octave displacement, by slight dynamic changes or by minimal shifts in rhythmic organisation. Over the course of a piece a number of these patterns will occur, usually succeeding one another without any form of transition, and then re-occur, usually somewhat altered but never changed beyond recognition. The other immediately apparent development in the 'rug'

period is the shift away from large ensembles to chamber groups (orchestral or near-orchestral forces dominate Feldman's output from the previous ten years). Indeed, of the seventeen pieces listed by Zimmermann as being composed between 1978 and 1984, only three – *Violin and Orchestra* (1979), *The Turfan Fragments* for chamber orchestra (1980) and *Clarinet and String Quartet* (1983) – are for more than four players.

But perhaps the most striking feature of the recent music is its time scale: these are all *long* pieces, with the Second String Quartet carrying off the prize for sheer length (although the Kronos Quartet makes cuts and normally plays a short, four-and-a-quarter-hour version). As readers of my review of the Second String Quartet's 1984 Darmstadt première in *Contact* 29<sup>8</sup> may remember, I left that piece after two hours; in 1986 I only heard 45 minutes of the three-and-a-half-hour flute and piano piece *For Christian Wolff* at its Darmstadt première. My response to this music is therefore that of someone who, while finding it very beautiful from moment to moment, cannot actually sit through it from hour to hour. Yet these pieces do seem to need to be so long: the processes of evolution that Feldman's material<sup>9</sup> undergoes are slow and must be heard to happen in 'real-time' (compare, for example, the music of Brian Ferneyhough, in which evolution happens in 'fast-forward' time). In the verbatim transcript of his 1984 Darmstadt lecture, Feldman describes the writing of the Second String Quartet thus:

Many times I would turn and say, 'Didn't I do this over here?' And I would go over and look through it and use it and then use it another way, of course . . . when you first get material, you're idealistic. And what happens in this piece, there's a disintegration of it, like in Proust . . . For example, there is one section in the 'II. Stringquartet' which comes back now, the modules are different than any time before. But if I did it the first time, it would be less acceptable for your ear. As it becomes saturated and saturated, you accept it more and more and more. You're less idealistic. You are less willful [*sic*]. You just let it happen. You hang loose, so to speak, artistically. You just let it happen without trying to be deterministic.<sup>10</sup>

And at the same time,

. . . as the piece gets longer, there has to be less material. That the piece itself, strangely enough, cannot take it . . . there's less going into it, so I think the piece dies a natural death. It dies of old age.<sup>11</sup>

But perhaps this is no longer music for the concert hall; it is, rather, a music for other kinds of space, other kinds of listening. Certainly nothing about this music is stranger than the fact that its composer should be content for us to experience this new sense of time within the uncomfortable constraints of an institution originally devised for the diversion of the 18th-century bourgeoisie. At the London performance of the Second String Quartet in the 1984 MusICA series, it was suggested that the audience could physically (as well as mentally) come and go during the piece, but this approach seems to misunderstand the nature of Feldman's work. This is not ambient music, in Brian Eno's sense of the word, but music with a beginning, middle and terminal demise, all of which should be experienced.

My own reservations about Feldman's recent work stem, in fact, as much from a dismay at the composer's attitude to its presentation as from the spinal pain

caused me by the presentations I have heard so far. If the recent long pieces are a new kind of musical phenomenon, then surely it is part of Feldman's work as their composer to concern himself with developing a new kind of presentation for them. Certainly composers of similar phenomena (Cage in *HPSCHD*, Stockhausen in *Sternklang*, La Monte Young in *The Tortoise, his Dreams and Journeys*) have involved themselves in attempts at new kinds of physical relationship between audience and sound; in his writings, as collected by Zimmermann, Feldman gives no hint, when discussing the long pieces, of even considering this problem.

But this particular divorce of compositional activity from performance practicality is not unique in Feldman's work. In the 'Crippled Symmetry' essay, in which he discusses rhythm (both local and structural) in his music from 1978 onwards, he states that 'my notational concerns have begun to move away from any preoccupation with how the music functions in performance'.<sup>12</sup> The specific example referred to here, from *Trio* for violin, cello and piano (1980), is awkward as performance material only in its idiosyncratic use of accidentals (I cannot hear the interval G flat-B sharp until I translate it enharmonically, although that could be my loss, I suppose) and in ignoring the standard convention for notating the irrational rhythmic relationship 7:6, but there are other more arcane instances in the quartets.

In the Second String Quartet, double sharps and double flats abound: a notational practice which Zimmermann traces to the version of *Cheap Imitation* that Cage made for the violinist Paul Zukofsky in 1977. In *Cheap Imitation* the violinist is expected to interpret double flats and double sharps as subtle pitch gradations within Pythagorean mean-tone temperament, but, as Zimmermann says, for Feldman it is not the specific and precise microtonal inflections of these notations that is interesting, but rather that, as enharmonic variants, they 'represent the edge of the note's identity'.<sup>13</sup>

Another disorientating notational device occurs in the First Quartet and in the piece itself entitled *Crippled Symmetry*, for flautist, percussionist and keyboard player (all with doubling) of 1983, in which the vertical alignment of the parts in the score bears little relation to simultaneity in performance. This inconsistency is not the result of a desire to allow the players some freedom in the speed at which they move through their music (as in Feldman's *Durations* pieces from 1960-61), since here rhythms are precisely notated; on the contrary, it occurs simply because Feldman drew vertically aligned bar lines before deciding to allocate different time signatures or different numbers of repeats to each part. As a compositional strategy, this technique of using less than immediately legible notations as a means of distancing oneself from one's material has clearly stimulated him, but I wonder if performers find its retention in the final form of the performance material unnecessarily distracting. Certainly, as a score-reading listener, I find that the score of *Crippled Symmetry* makes very little sense as a notation of the sort of ensemble music that the piece involves.

Despite these notational vagaries, it is the First String Quartet that I find the most satisfactory: partly because the quartet medium itself affords an infinitely richer timbral and dynamic range than the bland flute-dominated combinations of *Crippled Symmetry* and *For Christian Wolff* (the piece even has an *ffff* section);

partly because, at 90 minutes, it is not so inordinately long. Like all the recent works, the First String Quartet makes extensive use of reiterated ('reiterated' is a word Feldman prefers to 'repeated') patterns and of reiterated chordal patterns in particular. As the composer says, however, these chords are 'dispersed in an overlay of four different speeds' (produced by superimposing four different bar lengths); the 'irregular time intervals . . . diminish the close-knit aspect of patterning; while the more evident rhythmic patterns might be mottled at certain junctures to obscure their periodicity'.<sup>14</sup> The resulting music has a density quite unlike that of anything else Feldman has written; as Cage wrote, after hearing the quartet in 1980, 'It was beautiful *because* it wasn't beautiful. Through length it became not an object.' Nevertheless he, too, goes on to comment that 'it would have given the same impression if instead of captive the audience had been in a different architectural situation permitting at any point in time or space exit and entrance, that is, at home'.<sup>15</sup>

Zimmermann's claims for Feldman's work are considerable, none more so than that 'Morton Feldman's music can be a cure for dead-end situations'.<sup>16</sup> The particular dead-end Zimmermann has in mind is what he, like Feldman, views as a contemporary European obsession with making sounds do the bidding of compositional *schema*. Zimmermann sees Feldman 'freeing sounds from the wills of composers', getting ever closer to a position in which he can discover 'what the *sounds* want' (my emphasis). In his 1984 Darmstadt lecture, Feldman laid claim to the *authentic* European tradition by tracing his education to the 1940s and the European emigré culture which flourished on the American east coast. 'I'm a European intellectual', he announced:

Did Boulez study with Schönberg? No. Anybody in Paris at that time study with Schönberg? No. Anybody teaching in Darmstadt studied with Schönberg? . . . John Cage *studied* with Schönberg. And that's why his work is continual variation. His whole life is based on the teachings of Schönberg, gone another way.<sup>17</sup>

But his is an idea of Europe that is no longer in accord with the real Europe: Feldman's Europe is 'outside' history, hermetically enclosed, and his dispute with the European avant garde is really directed at the *old* Darmstadt tradition. For him, Boulez and Stockhausen are still the main targets (Stockhausen is an especial *bête noir* – even in 1984 Feldman found it hard to talk for long without a swipe at 'crazy Karlheinz'), and he gives no hint of any awareness that Europe is full of composers for whom the old Darmstadt *tabula rasa* aesthetic is no longer valid. In the same way, Feldman's music can seem to exist outside time: articulated by civilised instruments, respectfully played, its language using an hermetically sealed 'art-music' vocabulary on which the changing, expanding musical world has left little or no trace.

If then Feldman's music may not be the cure for dead-enditis that Zimmermann believes it to be, *Morton Feldman Essays* is nonetheless a stimulating volume, as much a monument to Zimmermann's generosity of spirit as to the music and ideas of one of modernism's last great raconteurs. It would be foolish to claim that Feldman's writings have the coherence or depth of insight of, for example, Cage's writings; too many of these 'essays' are really *pièces d'occasion*. But,

like Cage, Feldman is a composer whose writing illuminates his music while rarely seeming to deal with it directly:

If I can annoy you with another bon mot. Dégas, you know, spent too much of his time writing sonnets. So he meets Mallarmé on the street, and Mallarmé says, 'How are the sonnets going?' And Dégas says, 'I don't have any ideas.' Mallarmé says, 'You don't write poetry with ideas. You write it with words.' (Laughter) European, you know, Mallarmé.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walter Zimmermann, ed., *Morton Feldman Essays*, p.142.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>6</sup> 'New Directions in Music 2', Columbia Masterworks ML5403 (1962).

<sup>7</sup> *Morton Feldman Essays*, p.10 (my translation).

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Fox, 'A Darmstadt Diary', *Contact* 29 (Spring 1985), p.45.

<sup>9</sup> I use the terms 'material' and 'process' here, conscious of the fact that, on p.209 of *Morton Feldman Essays*, a 'young English boy' (me) is taken to task for 'talking about his material in relation to his process'. Feldman continues, 'Evidently [sic] we wouldn't agree on what material is!'

<sup>10</sup> *Morton Feldman Essays*, p.206.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.203.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19 (my translation).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.130.

<sup>15</sup> John Cage, *For the Birds* (London and Boston: Calder & Boyars, 1981) p.149.

<sup>16</sup> *Morton Feldman Essays*, p.10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.189.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.202.

For more on Feldman's late works, see Robin Freeman's review of *Darmstadt 1986* which follows.



## MORTON FELDMAN

12th January 1926 – 3rd September 1987

UNIVERSAL EDITION (LONDON) LTD.  
regrets to announce the death of one of its  
most notable and long-standing composers.

His most recent works were:  
1986 – For Christian Wolff; Coptic Light; For  
Stefan Wolpe; Palais de Mari; 1987 – For  
Samuel Beckett; Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello.

More information about this distinguished composer's music is  
available from the promotion department:  
2/3 Fareham Street (Dean Street) London W1V 4DU  
Telephone 01-437 6880