

# MORTON FELDMAN. THE WHISPER OF NOTES

A P O D C A S T B Y F R A N C E S C O A D I N O L F I

Morton Feldman was a key figure in Twentieth century music, he radically redefined time, sound and the role of the listener. His importance derives not only from his break with past musical conventions, but especially from the way he created a new experience of listening, close to art, meditation, and silence. Feldman broke with the Western concept of musical time understood as progression, development, tension and resolution by freeing music from the urgency of movement. His compositions are slow, suspended, soundscapes that especially in the works of his later period can go on for hours, such as the *Second String Quartet*, the *String Quartet II* of '83, written for the Kronos Quartet, which lasts almost six hours.

It is no coincidence that the composer himself will declare: "time for me is no longer linear"; it can exist, therefore, only in a constant present in which to immerse oneself, centred on a poetics of minimal detail and precisely silence. His is an ode to the "pianissimo," by which in music the lowest possible dynamic is meant, an extremely attenuated and delicate sound, which thus becomes the central poetic gesture of the composition. As in the case of *Triadic Memories*, one of Morton Feldman's most representative scores, inspired in the technical composition by a work of Cy Twombly, which is based more on listening to the single moment than on an evolving narrative arc, with the sound materials developing slowly, almost whispered and the perception of time being suspended. Somewhat like entering a state of mind close to meditation, in which the performer must be present to each note.

Morton Feldman, born in New York City in 1926 to parents who had emigrated from Kiev to the United States, grew up in the 1930s and 1940s in a cosmopolitan city, characterized by the presence of so many European emigrated artists; a metropolis to which Mayor Fiorello La Guardia had given a strong horizontal cultural impulse by strengthening the role of

libraries, museums and public educational programs. "Morty", as people used to call him, had studied piano with Madame Vera Maurina Press, a Russian pedagogue in exile, who instilled in him - as the artist himself would recall - a sense of "vibrant musicality rather than musical skill". Madame Vera imposed no discipline on him and Feldman was thus able to process an autonomy and a freedom of purpose that would later be at the heart of his sonic research. She had him perform pieces by Alexander Skrjabin, among Russia's greatest Symbolist composers, and Bach transcriptions by Ferruccio Busoni, whose pupil she had been in Vienna.

These were years when Feldman was surrounded by a plethora of painters, sculptors, writers, choreographers, philosophers and musicians. He studied composition with Wallingford Riegger, an early American follower of Arnold Schoenberg and continued his studies with Stefan Wolpe, who would introduce him to the modernist expatriate Edgard Varèse, among the major pioneers of contemporary music. "When you write" - Varèse will tell him - "think about how long it takes for the sound to reach the back of the room". Directions that Feldman will put into practice, for example, by making chords vibrate unpredictably and letting them echo in the listener's mind. The one with Varèse will be a pivotal encounter to the point that he will say: "If I had not met him I probably would not have become a composer. He fascinated me. Also, he had this extraordinary availability that so many artists don't have. He would come to my concerts, I would see him and talk to him. He remained available until his death".

The two were joined by their rejection of narrative form, thematic development and classical rhetoric. The aim was the search for pure music, precisely non-linear music released by cause-effect. And it was no coincidence that in 1973, the University of Buffalo in the city of the same name in upstate New York would endow him with the Edgar Varèse Chair, which he would

retain for the rest of his life.

Years earlier, in 1950, there was another decisive meeting when he met John Cage. Feldman had just turned 24 and was composing music that he would later describe as "vaguely modernist," in the "sound worlds of a Schoenberg or a Berg."

They had met one evening at Carnegie Hall, where they had gone to hear Anton Webern's Dodecaphonic symphony conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos, scheduled immediately afterward Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*; in order to prevent the modernist spell be suddenly broken, they had both decided to leave the hall before the Dances began. Feldman would later visit Cage on the Lower East Side and soon move into an apartment in the same building.

During the day he worked two jobs, in Queens, in his father's children's coat company, where he would stay until the age of forty-four and then devote himself to the University and part-time to his uncle's dry cleaners. Then at night, everything changed, Morty would assiduously move in John Cage's effervescent network of artistic acquaintances, particularly poets and painters; and especially by these latter he would be attracted and the interest would be mutual. Not surprisingly, Jackson Pollock will ask him to write the music, performed by Daniel Stern, for the well-known short film dedicated to him by Hans Namuth on the dripping technique.

Philip Guston, on the other hand, will immortalize Feldman in a portrait of him with a cigarette in his mouth and in turn the composer in 1984 will dedicate *For Philip Guston* to him, one of his most remarkable works, a nearly five-hour score for piano, flute and percussion; filled with delicately dissonant tinkles that seem to flash by for an instant, appearing, disappearing and reappearing punctuated by subtle reverberations. A music written to fit our ears, composed to fit our brains and bodies.

With Guston, Pollock, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, De Kooning and, of course, with John Cage, they always met at the Cedar

Tavern, a bar and restaurant in New York's Greenwich Village, the favourite meeting place of the Abstract Expressionists and so many Beat Generation poets and writers. Feldman will recall: "I can say without exaggeration that we did this every day for five years of our lives". With Cage, to whom he was bound by a strong spiritual affinity, it could also happen that they would chat for hours about the meaning of sound itself, the mysterious possibilities it could offer, how one could go beyond compositional rhetoric and find ways to project sounds directly into time. Freeing them, as mentioned, from all function, letting them exist in the pure present of listening. As if time were a canvas and sound a brushstroke or a stain of colour. As in Rothko's paintings or Twombly's surfaces, which do not tell but simply exist as a visual presence, to be experienced in the present, in a direct, emotional, silent way.

By 1950 John Cage was revolutionizing music. In his works he used everyday objects such as percussion instruments, made use of prepared pianos, turntables, collages of sounds taken from radio programs, and so on until 4'33" in 1952, his memorable three-movement piece without any sound, an ode to silence.

Feldman, however, was not interested in Cage's sonic innovations, much less in the objects used to make them and not surprisingly he would always use classical musical instruments. Rather, he was ecstatic by Cage's permanent nonconformity, by that infinite sonic possibilism that he too would treasure to the utmost. Like that evening in 1950 in the composer's apartment when he gave form to his "graphic notation" that eliminated the custom of writing notes on staves. While Cage was preparing dinner, Feldman in the next room was creating on graph paper the first in a series of pieces entitled *Projections*, with a score that consisted of a grid of blank spaces and with the eventual performer invited to choose notes within the boxes that represented the sounds to be produced in the high, middle and low registers: it would soon be a practice adopted by the international sound avant-garde.

Then in a later series of works he would also specify pitches, allowing, however, the performer to decide when and for how long they should be played. Cage was

stunned. Feldman's graphic notation embodied the deep freedom to which an artist could aspire, and to achieve that one had to detach oneself from one's ego, relinquish control, step aside and let the sounds emerge autonomously from silence.

When, however, he realized that his notations could unleash improvised creativity sometimes even laughable, or solicit scores conceived as works of visual art as Cage had done, scores even displayed in museums, thought of as artistic works apart, Feldman decided to return to traditional notation. His intent was simply to move music away from rigid, mechanical and predictable structures, away from formal patterns, thematic developments and overly rational or systematic compositional logics typical of, for example, serial music; in this, the work of visual artists such as Rauschenberg or Rothko will be decisive.

Not by chance that Feldman's scores are close in spirit to Rauschenberg's all-white and all-black canvases and especially to Rothko's floating forms of colour, forms suspended against a monochromatic or shaded background. He will say that it was New York painting that had disclosed to him the ways of a music "more direct, more immediate, more physical than anything that had existed until that time." And if the Abstract Expressionists asked the viewer to focus on the painting itself, its texture and pigment, Feldman, likewise, wanted listeners to absorb the sound itself, floating in a suspended, non narrative but immersive time. That is why repeating over and over, especially in Feldman's mature work, the same musical cell, a short figure or chord, was, is like watching music: listening to it as a gallery visitor looks at paintings by relating to them from various angles and each look can be slightly different, just as each sound repetition turns out to be slightly different, in rhythm, timbre, pitch or context.

The fact, then, that he could count on steady daily job in the garment industry allowed Feldman to proudly claim his estrangement from the great circle of composers, allowed him to fly beyond it, to poke fun at fellow tonalists, who met the tastes of symphony concert audience and even those composers greedy for innovation at all costs.

In a century, the Twentieth century, that was frantically experimenting with new systems and languages, Feldman proceeded along very personal routes pitting, for example, his more experimental works of the 1950s and 1960s, characterized by a sense of indeterminacy and executive freedom, against the more essential and enveloping harmonic structures of the following decade, pervaded by melodic fragments of strong emotional impact.

Here are the years of the cycle for viola and ensemble of *The Viola in My Life*, compositions for cello, piano, oboe and flute such as *Piano and Orchestra* or *Routine Investigations* and, above all, the masterpiece *Rothko Chapel*, created in 1971 for the chapel of the same name inaugurated that same year in Houston, Texas. A small, huge, 190 square meters octagonal sanctuary designed for worshippers of all religions and inside fourteen paintings commissioned from Rothko: imposing, monolithic, in solemn dark hues. Rothko had committed suicide the previous year, and Morty, his great friend, was paying tribute to him with his most personal and moving work.

Composed for viola, choral vocals, percussion and celesta, *Rothko Chapel* possesses an almost mystical atmosphere, with its isolated chords, fragmented melodies and that infinite, hypnotic stillness. A work that seems to be made of the same silent, meditative and vibrant material as the paintings it accompanies. According to the American music critic Alex Ross, Feldman had thought that music decades earlier, during World War II, when he was attending the High School of Music and Art in New York City. A composition, Ross argues, that could also be a heartfelt and dramatic memorial to the Holocaust. The composer will never confirm but it is likely that to the thunderous horrors of the 20th century the tall, burly Jewish boy who died in 1987 may have thought to oppose precisely the dense, enveloping silence of so many of his works.

Then in the last ten years of his life, the course changes again, with the composer avoiding possible melodies and persuasive chords, choosing the path of works designed to last even hours and returning to insist on a verticality of composition that does not involve deve-

lopments, progressions and narratives that are horizontal and linear in time but a sound that exists for itself, like a sound picture, precisely, to be contemplated. As he will say in a 1982 interview: "I am interested in the experience of sound, what makes us feel; sound doesn't have to go anywhere. My music has no meanings to explain. It just exists." This is the ultimate rejection of the formalism of dodecaphony and European serial music, of Stockhausen and Boulez who aim for rigorous structures; Feldman, on the contrary, thinks of composing on an intuitive and perceptual basis, avoiding fixed systems.

Boulez will write that "Music is the projection of structured thought in time". Feldman, on the contrary, suspends, expands the temporal instant, lets sound be. As is the case in *Triadic Memories*, among his most iconic works, a piano solo masterpiece of abstract minimalism, a 1981 composition dedicated to the classical pianists Roger Woodward and Aki Takahashi that can last more than 90 minutes and in which silence is as fundamental as sound. It is a work that deeply reflects Feldman's late-mature musical aesthetic, steeped in slowness, dilated temporality, repetition, indeed silence, almost obsessive attention to timbral detail. He would say that it was also, and above all, Cy Twombly who had inspired him, an artist he had known personally; he had been struck by a series of paintings, presumably the ten-part work *Fifty Days at Iliam*, in which Twombly modulates the tones of the same colour, achieving with wax crayon - which Feldman calls very thin chalk- shades, intensities, directions, and gestures that change almost imperceptibly between paintings.

In *Triadic Memories* the aesthetic approach is identical, with repetition serving not to reinforce an idea but to show it under new nuances, as if the memory itself is transformed each time we see (or hear again) the same gesture. It works, therefore, with the sustain of the piano, that is with the extension of the sound obtained with the resonance pedal. By pressing it, not all the way down, but only partially, thus acting in a kind of intermediate, fuzzy space, balanced "between two worlds," between the absence of resonance (pedal up) and full resonance (pedal all the way down); hence motifs that return and each one slightly modified, as if

it were a blurred memory of the same sound event. And with silence precisely as an active part of the music, in this cyclicity and absence of narrative development so imbued also with the Zen idea of emptiness and not-doing. *Triadic Memories* thus lets the music happen in an interminable, moving ode to whispering.

Those who have known Morton Feldman, recounted over the years by collections of his writings, lecture transcripts and interviews, were often surprised at how this loquacious, conversation-loving gentleman, able to entertain those around him at length, had devoted himself to compositions in which silences and whispers often dominate unchallenged; evidently it was the only possible response to the atrocious turbulence of the century in which he lived.

Over the years, many performers have re-performed, recorded and spread his works: Aki Takahashi, his collaborator and key performer; Marilyn Nonken; John Tilbury, legendary interpreter of Cage and Feldman; the Kronos Quartet; the Ives Ensemble or the Flux Quartet, with performances scattered across labels such as Hat Art, New Albion, ECM and the seminal Mode.

Feldman himself often performed his own works, especially for piano, and actively participated in rehearsals and concerts. Pop and rock have also paid homage, albeit not directly, to the composer; Brian Eno, in particular, a pioneer of ambient music, who has always considered Feldman a maximum source of inspiration for his use of suspended time, silence and those characteristic, imperceptible sound mutations. Also celebrated by Sakamoto or Aphex Twin, Feldman, among the greatest composers of the Twentieth century, thus continues to inspire soundscapes in which slowness insuperably, continuously and poignantly has reclaimed its existence.

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