

MORTON FELDMAN

FOR  
JOHN  
CAGE

JOSJETER HAAR  
JOHN SNIJDERS

"It's a little piece for violin and piano, but it doesn't quit." That's what Morton Feldman told Peter Gena in 1982, during the composition of *For John Cage*. At approximately 70 minutes in length, it does fit into the scale of Feldman's longer later works like *Triadic Memories* (1981), *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* (aka *Untitled Composition for Cello and Piano*, 1981), and *Crippled Symmetry* (1983), but also shares certain characteristics with the other, earlier pieces he composed for that combination of instruments. In 1951, Feldman composed two small pieces for violin and piano, *Extensions I* (in which the music is conventionally notated) and *Projections IV* (a graph piece which allows the performer to choose individual notes and durations within the composer's set boundaries). He didn't conceive another work for this duo until 1963's *Vertical Thoughts II* (which is again precisely notated—to the point of indicating twenty-two changes of speed and fourteen different metronome markings within a five-minute piece of music), and then again until *Spring of Chosroes* in 1978. Regardless of date or method of composition, in addition to a particular timbral palette all of these works share a delicacy of gesture and an especially sensitive relationship between the instruments, as well as an acute concision of form—that is, the extension of process and effect according to Feldman's idiosyncratic method. To see how these same characteristics may also be found in *For John Cage*, even (despite its length) the concise method of construction, it may be helpful to consider the music from another, peripheral, perspective. When in 1984 Feldman said "If my approach seems more didactic now—spending many hours working

out strategies that only apply to a few moments of music—it is because the patterns that interest me are both concrete and ephemeral, making notation difficult," he may have given a clue to the metaphorical relationship his music had with the visual arts. The patterns he was discussing were not merely patterns of sound—for example, notes in a particular sequence organized to some formal plan, a la serialism—but possibly visual shapes as well. Feldman often talked about how his early music was inspired, if not literally influenced, by Abstract Expressionist painters like Mark Rothko and Philip Guston, and how the irregular design of classic Turkish carpets presented him with musical ideas in later scores like *The Turfan Fragments* (1980) and *Crippled Symmetry*. (*Spring of Chosroes* is even named after a legendary sixth century rug woven with silk, silver, gold, and precious gems.) More specifically, he stated, "The degrees of stasis, found in a Rothko or Guston, were perhaps the most significant elements I brought to my music from painting. For me, stasis, scale, and pattern have put the whole question of symmetry and asymmetry in abeyance." By stasis, Feldman is referring not merely to the use of repetition, since the frequent repeated articulation of notes or chords in his music is never literal anyway, but consistently modified to varying tonal, textural, and perceptual degrees, however subtle; he is also commenting upon the lack of linear development of his material. Typically, as is the case in *For John Cage*, Feldman presents a pattern (or sequence) of notes and/or chords, and may repeat them an unpredictable and asymmetrical number of times, until they are succeeded by the next pattern, but the

pattern is never developed, reorganized, or manipulated in any conventional fashion. Thus successive patterns are linked (or woven) together in an ongoing fabric of music, and an individual pattern may appear to be static, unchanging, unmoving. This is an illusion, however, since movement may be alternately measured by speed, emphasis (or attack), and (instrumental) color.

Such alternative concepts in the organization and presentation of art, relevant to Feldman's music, actually date back beyond the Abstract Expressionists. As early as 1923, László Moholy-Nagy suggested that graphic notation might be an appropriate way for a new music to subvert its traditional manner of operation. And in 1919, Kazimir Malevich wrote "On New Systems in Art: Statics and Speed," an analysis of Cubism and Futurism furthering his advocacy of Suprematism. Malevich suggested that painting—even advanced concepts like Cubism and Futurism—allowed us to only experience an object in one, two, or three dimensional space, without using our full knowledge of the object at hand. Through our experience of "real" space, we know more about an object than we see in its painted representation. Thus the painted object actually exists for us in a fourth dimension, which requires the active participation of our intellect and intuition.

To visualize the object in this fourth dimension, experiencing all of its characteristics at once, is an expanded act of perception, a higher consciousness.

The philosopher Kant believed that our ability to reason within "an intuition of space" was "the greatest power of the mind," and Mondrian proposed that our understanding of a reality beyond

three-dimensional experience was "the strongest quality in art."

For Malevich, this fourth dimension was intuitively connected to movement through time. In "From Cubism to Suprematism in Art" he wrote, "Cubism and Futurism created a picture from fragments and sections of objects through dissonances and motion." But in his view Cubism's dissonant multiple perspectives and Futurism's sense of motion lack, beyond the experience of three-dimensional geometry, the inner force or energy which would allow Suprematist art to convey movement through space, in time. Patricia Railing, in her essay "On Suprematism: 34 Drawings," interprets the influence of Russian philosopher P.D. Ouspensky on Malevich by writing, "If the notion of the fourth dimension contains two ideas, according to Ouspensky, that of space and that of motion in space which can only take place in time, then dynamic Suprematism contains the notion of time in the direction of movement of its forms." Since painting is an art of applying pigment to a flat surface, thus creating colored masses (images or objects), Malevich sought to paint "planes as the visible aspects of dynamic forms in space" that could express the energy of movement through time. Looking at his paintings—the single-colored red and black squares, or the placement (actually geometric displacement) of his shapes in space—there seems to be a link to Rothko's pulsating colored masses, potentially expressing a similar relationship of material to space and time. (Color moves along beams of light just as sound moves along airwaves; thus Feldman on stasis: "It's frozen, at the same time it's vibrating.")

If pitch, tone, and duration might be the three equivalent dimensions of music, then movement through space could be considered the same fourth dimension as Malevich imagined in painting. Feldman conceived of his material—individual pitches, combined into vertical chords or extended intervallically along linear planes—as having weight and texture (thus the incorporation of microtones in later scores using violin or cello such as *For John Cage* and *Patterns in a Chromatic Field*, in order to create a more complex series of relationships similar to the measurable degrees of visual emphasis outlined in Kandinsky's "Point and Line to Plane"). He too desired to work with the same "flat surface" as the painters he admired. This led him to intuitively locate the shape and position of his pitches through space—much as Mondrian intuitively determined the precise position of his lines within the two-dimension (vertical and horizontal) environment of his paintings—by organizing them into patterns which followed along a path parallel to Malevich's visual determination of "weight, speed, and direction of movement." (In a sense, all three felt the need to devise an intuitive system—what Feldman called a "subliminal mathematics"—with which to organize their art.)

In *For John Cage*, as in other works of this period, Feldman's pitch patterns never encompass melodies per se, rather his reduction of melodic contour down to simplified interval relationships (seldom more than three or four pitches, and sometimes as few as two to a pattern, often limited to mere half-steps and sometimes confusing the relationships with ambiguous microtonal inflections, but using octaves to accentuate movement) is comparable to

Rothko's reduction of shape to masses of color; just as his continual process of rhythmic displacement (as notes from the two instruments alternately shadow, complement, or contrast with each other) is comparable to the geometric displacement of Malevich's shapes. The movement of these pitches through such sparse space, with no implied harmonic system, suggests a restless feeling, heightened by the wistfulness of the violin's vibratoless tone in contrast to the "purity" of the piano tone. The two instruments entangle and intersect their sounds, engendering the tension of two planes slicing through a dynamic space, until the very end where they combine in a unison line (five steps of a chromatic scale, G to B) for the only point in the entire work.

What to make of all this? Of course, the music exists in its own arena of experience, which only listening to it may fulfill. These other speculations are attempts to give it meaning in our own fourth dimension of experience, where our intellect and intuition must align with Feldman's personal creativity. For all of his identification with the Abstract Expressionist painters, whose creative process was visible on the canvas, Feldman preferred to cover his tracks, and the scale of his later works, like *For John Cage*, obscures their overall form or design, so our primary experience of this music lies in the patterns, Feldman's musical shapes, as they pass before us moving through space, in time.

Art Lange, January 1999



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MORTON FELDMAN (1926–1987)

FOR JOHN CAGE (1982)

recording by

JOSJETER HAAR *violin* · JOHN SNIJDERS *piano*  
of the IVES ENSEMBLE

For John Cage 69:13

The track points are provided for convenience only and are not indications of divisions in the work.  
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