

MORTON FELDMAN

THREE VOICES

JULIET FRASER

One of the many paradoxes about the late works of Morton Feldman – usually regarded as those he wrote between 1978 and the end of his life in 1987 – is that their apparent similarities mask so many differences.

How are they similar? Most obviously because most of them are so long: a solo piano work which lasts 80 minutes, a trio for flute, percussion and piano of over three hours, a six-hour string quartet. They also tend to be written for just a few, subtly differentiated, acoustic instruments: violin and piano, bass clarinet and percussion, piano trio.

From a distance the similarities dominate; the differences emerge the moment one listens to any one of these works with the expectation that it will sound like any of the others. So it is with *Three Voices*. It's long; although Feldman's score does not specify a speed for the music, he wrote to the work's dedicatee, the American singer Joan La Barbara, that 'I didn't indicate a metronome marking — feeling that your tone and how you breathe should pace it — it sounds good both "slow" as well as a "fast" slowness (whatever that means): And the tonal differentiation in *Three Voices* is the subtlest of any in late Feldman: there may be three vocal lines in the score but there is just a single singer.

Three Voices is full of wonderful differences, and it seems that Feldman was also aware of this. In the letter to La Barbara he wrote that he was 'somewhat shocked with the more sensuous if not "gorgeous" sound of most of it', a quality of which he was apparently so unsure that he even offered her the right of refusal: 'Of course you can always return it for whatever reason.' He was also aware of a curious dialogue in the work between this 'sensuous' beauty and ideas about abstraction. In a lecture that he gave in Toronto on 17th April 1982, just two days after finishing work on *Three Voices*, he explained that his compositional ambition was always 'to do it abstractly.' In *Three Voices*, however, 'it went the other way. It is luscious, it's sexy, it's gorgeous, you swoon with it.'

Feldman was exaggerating, yet perhaps more than in any other of his late works one has the sense that in writing *Three Voices* he was in unfamiliar territory. This was the only work in which he used pre-recorded multiples of the same performer and even the title suggests he was unused

to his medium, because what we hear in *Three Voices* is not so much three voices as a single voice three times, an individual singer magnified, refracted by technology as if she were in some sort of aural kaleidoscope.

Another aspect of the different-ness of *Three Voices*: Feldman always composed with a profound understanding of how much the timbral qualities of instruments could bring to his music, almost as if he were disposing intrinsically beautiful 'ready-mades' in abstract patterns. In *Three Voices*, however, he only specified the timbre of the voice at the points where he used words, of which there are only a few. 'Who'd have thought that snow falls', 'snow whirled' and 'nothing ever fell', (all taken from Frank O'Hara's poem 'Wind'), and even these arrive late – in Juliet's performance it's twenty minutes into the work before they first appear, and across the whole work they are used for less than a quarter of the time. For the rest of the work Feldman left it to the singer to decide the vowel, a rare degree of imprecision in a composer who two years later would tell an audience in Darmstadt that 'I can't hear a note unless I know its instrument'.

Feldman had written for voices before, of course; a soprano is the lone protagonist in his opera *Neither*, and women's voices, either solo or in ensemble, are a recurrent feature in the chamber music he wrote during the 1970s, but in all these works the voice is heard with other instruments and is often deployed as something remote, other-worldly, almost disembodied. In *Three Voices* everything focuses on the singer, and the music Feldman gives her to sing is as unremittingly demanding as anything in his instrumental writing. As the voice twists and turns, rises and falls, folding in on itself in complicated repetitions and variations, we are conscious both of the intricacy of the pattern-making and the physical demands it is making.

It's unnerving, too, that a work so intimate can take up so much time. O'Hara's poem turns on a similar paradox: the reader gradually realises that the snow is imprisoned inside a toy snow-shaker, and the scurrying scales which start to fall and whirl in *Three Voices* are similarly contained, figures trapped between mirrors.

WIND

to Morton Feldman

Who'd have thought

 that snow falls
it always circled whirling
like a thought
 in the glass ball
around me and my bear

Then it seemed beautiful

 containment
snow whirled
 nothing ever fell
nor my little bear
 bad thoughts
imprisoned in crystal

beauty has replaced itself with evil

And the snow whirls only

 in fatal winds
briefly
 then falls
it always loathed containment
 beasts

I love evil

Frank O'Hara

(1995), p.269 "Wind" from THE COLLECTED POEMS OF FRANK O'HARA by Frank O'Hara, copyright © 1971 by Maureen Granville-Smith, Administratrix of the Estate of Frank O'Hara, copyright renewed 1999 by Maureen O'Hara Granville-Smith and Donald Allen. Used by permission of Alfred A.Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Looking through Feldman's body of work, it's striking how many vocal pieces he wrote. From the early, exquisitely succinct *Only* (1947) for solo voice, to *Rothko Chapel* (1971) for viola, percussion, celesta, soprano, alto and chorus, or the one-act 'opera' *Neither* (1977), his extraordinary setting of Beckett (one can't quite say 'collaboration with'...) for soprano and orchestra, Feldman eschews traditional groupings to present the voice as an equal player; singer, at last, as a musician.

Three Voices, written in 1982 for Joan La Barbara, was the last solo vocal piece he wrote before his death in 1987 (*For Stefan Wolpe*, dedicated to his composition teacher and written for chorus and two vibraphones, post-dates it). It sets part of *Wind*, a poem by his friend Frank O'Hara that had been dedicated to him and which he had set earlier in its entirety in *The O'Hara Songs* (1962) for bass-baritone. Writing later about *Three Voices*, Feldman said: 'One of my closest friends, the painter Philip Guston, had just died; Frank O'Hara had died several years before. I saw the piece with Joan in front and these two loudspeakers behind her. There is something kind of tombstone about the look of loudspeakers. I thought of the piece as an exchange of the live voice with the dead ones – a mixture of the living and the dead'. Conceived as a trio for the one voice, with two pre-recorded parts and one to be performed live, the score is conventionally notated (all parts are written out with precise rhythms and pitches, though often in differing metres) but is beguilingly short on some details. There is, for example, no tempo indication, no vowel specified for the many lengthy passages without text, no dynamics bar an initial *ppp*, and no guidance as to which voice should be the 'live' one. Instead, performance history has resulted in the printed edition including an introduction written by Joan La Barbara (in 2007) in which she relays her remembering of conversations about the piece with Feldman and shares her own performance practice.

Respectful of this performance history and aware, of course, of the work's evolution in the hands (and voices) of other interpreters, I struck out on my own to create a version that exposes the intimacy and physicality I feel to be inherent in the music. In two specific areas have I deviated from

precedent: I decided not to worry about singing with 'almost no vibrato' since my natural vibrato is hardly unwieldy and it seemed altogether wise to avoid the psychological knotting-up of performing such a demanding work with a clamp on;

I have also taken a subtly liberal approach to the vowel, moving between 'ah', 'aw' and 'oo', partly as a nod to the natural vowel modification that takes place in different registers, but more because it felt justifiably Feldman-esque to exploit different timbral shadings, smudging somehow the otherwise sharp division between material sung to text and material sung to a vowel.

Versions range in length from about 45 minutes to over an hour and a half. My version comes in at 53 minutes, the result of having settled on a workable mean pulse from which I then invited certain passages to deviate gently.

Designing one's version requires an artful balance between the tensions of conflicting demands: the differing exhaustions of a breathless sprint vs. that of a long-distance marathon; a precision that retains its humanity without tipping over either into something clinical or distractingly flawed; a dynamic that points to something delicate and interior yet allows for flow and freedom in delivery.

A balance had to be found, too, when designing the sound of the final mix. Here, the O'Hara poem provided an important cue. Feldman chose to set only a few lines of O'Hara's poem, but I was struck by the pervasive sense of enclosure, darkness and desolation when the poem is read from beginning to end.

The concept for the sound is found in the image of the snow globe: although the scene may at first seem *beautiful*, the confinement becomes *loathsome*. This 'gorgeous' music is placed in a comparatively dry and 'dead' space, bringing the listener into the glass ball to witness, from a cool distance, the rawness, fragility and vulnerability of the voice.

The challenge of recording this piece is to avoid rendering the delicate tapestry either too cold, too clinical, or too gorgeous; to rest in the ambiguous space between beauty and evil, between the living and the dead. On every level, from the text of O'Hara's poem to the demands of Feldman's music, this is a work that is about the very human effort of

wondering, reaching, grasping.

Juliet Fraser

BIOGRAPHY

Soprano Juliet Fraser has a repertoire dominated by the very old and the very new. In new music, she has performed as a guest soloist with Plus-Minus, ICTUS, We Spoke: New Music Company, London Sinfonietta, Klangforum Wien and BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra in festivals such as Wien Modern, MaerzMusik, ManiFeste, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival and Tectonics Glasgow. She has premiered well over 100 works, many of which have been written for her, and has worked particularly closely with composers Michael Finnissy, Bernhard Lang, Christopher Fox, James Weeks, Larry Goves, Matthew Shlomowitz, Andrew Hamilton and Rebecca Saunders. She is also co-founder and principal soprano of EXAUDI, the acclaimed vocal ensemble.

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MORTON FELDMAN (1926–1987)
THREE VOICES
JULIET FRASER

Three Voices (1982)

Total Time DDD ²⁴Bit 52:13

The 8 track points are provided for convenience only and are not indications of divisions in the work.
The volume of *Three Voices* is intentionally low, particularly at the start.

ISRC CH 130.1600735 to ISRC CH 130.1600742

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