

MORTON FELDMAN  
**TRIO**  
IVES ENSEMBLE

“Music’s tragedy is that it *begins* with perfection.” When he wrote this in a 1967 article for *Art News* entitled “Some Elementary Questions,” we don’t know if Morton

Feldman was thinking of Mozart or Webern...or the “idea” of music in its purest form, uncontaminated by the dictates of style and structure. In his mind, “perfection” most likely had little to do with “beauty,” and he no doubt distrusted the state of inevitability for which music (at least Western music, excepting its various improvisational forms), as a finished product, strives. For Feldman, like the abstract expressionist painters, believed in the unpredictability of the process to provide focus, and in the discipline of taste, rather than the analytical perfection of a system. Relationships, in music or in life, are tenuous, uncertain, evolving. If music therefore “begins” from a single point of perfection – even an illusory one – then its tragedy is that it remains artificial, a little false, cannot reflect the multiple realities of life, insecurity, ambiguity, and individuality among them.

How does Feldman’s *Trio* of 1980 begin? There seems to be little if any logical or rational information conveyed in the opening pages, no motives introduced for later development, no form outlined. The sounds are completely personal. Hard to penetrate, to define, to place in a familiar context. How can we relate to Feldman’s personal vision? We could try to relate to the notes objectively, as numbers, and read the score as an equation of intervals. Or metaphorically, say, as characters in a Beckett play, speaking but not really conversing, while sharing the same empty environment. Can they be “read,” symbolically, as a sign or a sigh? They have been, and will continue to be so. But such approaches are

merely for our convenience and comfort. If perfection demands a unified vision, then Feldman’s music is manifestly imperfect. It illustrates nothing. It contains no concrete images, no easily empathized emotions, not even a recognizable formal conceit. It lacks Mozart’s dramatic profundity, Webern’s certainty of construction. Any activity implies movement, but where is Feldman’s music going, especially extended to such lengths? There’s no apparent goal, and often the sounds repeat themselves, as if stuttering or stuck in a rut. Background and foreground are confused, confusing. The three instruments seem to align themselves for support, then dissolve into separate unrelated entities, only to realign again in new ways. Then dissolve, realign, and so on. What is the point? By putting his faith in intuition, in a reliance upon the *process* and not the perfectible (and therefore predictable) artifice of form, Feldman offers a music of trust. Trust that the sounds cohere, trust that the listener will find meaning in this otherwise unimaginable order. And there is order. At such a level of awareness, order is inevitable. (Nothing is arbitrary, but may be beautifully ambiguous.) Feldman composed “by ear,” but not by ear alone. All of his choices come from the full measure of his experience – artistic, philosophical, human. And art is the transformation of experience into energy via creative attention (awareness). Or, as Charles Olson, in his essay “Projective Verse,” wrote, “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it...by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader.” Olson’s distinction between “open” as opposed to “closed” verse – that is, one which relies on its own perceptible process to discover its own inherent form,

rather than using a predetermined methodology – has its musical analogy in Feldman’s music, involving, first of all, the belief that “Form is never more than an extension of content,” and, secondly, that in order to shape creative energy into an artistic whole “One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception.” As it is, this latter could be used as a guide through

Feldman’s music in the *Trio* and other such late period scores. Then, to find the *music* in the words that intensify and transform mere writing into poetry, Olson suggests that writers focus on the word’s “particles of sound” – i.e.: syllables: “Listening for the syllables must be so constant and so scrupulous, the exaction must be so complete, that the assurance of the ear is purchased at the highest...price.”

This is precisely the form and focus of attention that Feldman brought to his composing – an “open field” of possibility where energy and experience is shaped into music. The form is never objectified, never “perfect,” always unique, because, as Olson claims, the artist “...puts himself in the open – he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares for itself.”

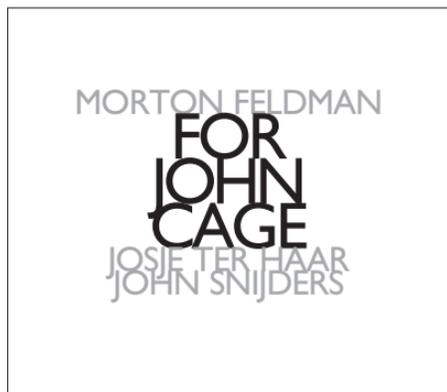
This puts the poem squarely into the abstract expressionist arena (and it is no surprise that Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, and Willem DeKooning, among others, all taught at one time or another at Black Mountain College, where Olson was rector during its final period) with which Feldman so closely identifies.

In the *Trio*, Feldman’s attention to his material and the gradual process of discovering one perception and following it with another perception *becomes* the exquisite balance and proportion of the motifs assigned to the three instruments, via compositional means – his concern for their ongoing, ever-changing relationships.

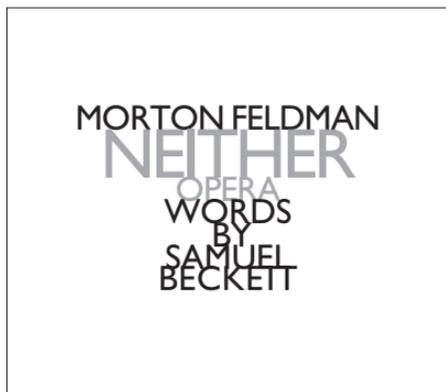
Robert Motherwell said, “...exactness of weights of feeling is everything in art.”) Though he achieves a total transparency of texture, and a complete equanimity of mood (there seems to be only a single loud outburst, when the piano raises its voice about 20 minutes into the music, and never again), there is a subtle and substantial differentiation between levels of light and shadow, created by the various combinations of instruments – a violin note perched atop or cello note buried under a piano chord, say, or the piano resonating (after the note has died away) around a cello pizzicato, a furtive unison phrase, or contrasting pitches in distant registers. These details (like the web of brushstrokes in a Guston abstract) are woven into the musical fabric.

Feldman’s canvas contains sparse, isolated tones and commentary in an environment of heightened concern. (Concern negates the idea that Feldman’s music embodies an existential void.) Concern creates tension, energized by the composer’s sense of responsibility, and desire. The music sounds familiar at times, where a motif occurs and is not forgotten, but returns in another place in another guise. Or multiple motifs (each instrument’s personal statement) are reassembled into something resembling something else, or only itself. Even Feldman’s repetition is never exact, as there are slight shifts in weight, shade, density, intensity. And when, eventually, the music ends, it just *ends*, for no need, or reason, with no explanation, no answers.

Art Lange, January 1997



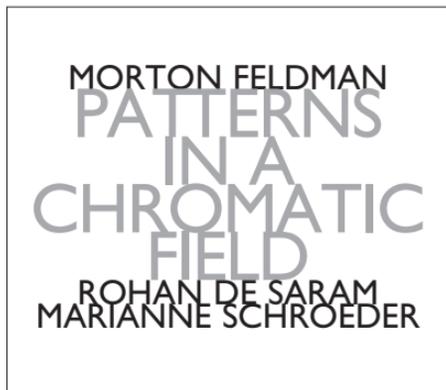
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## MORTON FELDMAN (1926–1987)

### TRIO

IVES ENSEMBLE

JOSJE TER HAAR, *violin*

JOB TER HAAR, *cello*

JOHN SNIJDERS, *piano*

*of the* IVES ENSEMBLE

**Trio** (1980) Total Time 76:04

DDD <sup>24</sup>Bit

ISRC CH130.1700758 to ISRC CH130.1700761

*The track points are provided for convenience only and are not indications of divisions of the work.  
A lower volume setting will produce a more realistic sound level.*

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