

MORTON FELDMAN
PATTERNS
IN A
CHROMATIC
FIELD

ROHAN DE SARAM
MARIANNE SCHROEDER

Morton Feldman was one of the most enigmatic composers of the 20th century. That is to say, he was extremely intelligent and enormously opinionated, pulled no punches when it came to passing judgement on historical figures or his peers, and loved to talk about his work, so that there is a remarkable collection of his writings and many scattered interviews to give us insight into his music. And yet the information he offered, frequently anecdotal, was often philosophic or metaphoric in nature, so that it ultimately revealed few specifics about his compositional methods and aesthetic choices. For example, as forthcoming as he was about his obsessive relationship with painting, primarily although not exclusively the work of the Abstract Expressionist painters of the late 1940s, '50s, and '60s who were his close friends, we find that for all his talk of the congruities between artistic and musical qualities of scale, surface, or space, among others, much of his music – especially the later, longer scores of which *Patterns In A Chromatic Field* is a prime example – remains mysteriously idiosyncratic and marvelously cryptic. *Art Lange*

MORTON FELDMAN (1926–1987)
PATTERNS IN A CHROMATIC FIELD (1981)
ROHAN DE SARAM violincello
MARIANNE SCHROEDER piano

CD 1 = CD 2041:

Patterns In A Chromatic Field (beginning) 58:01

ISRC CH 130.1600743 to ISRC CH 130.1600744

CD 2 = CD 2042:

Patterns In A Chromatic Field (conclusion) 47:24

ISRC CH 130.1600745 to ISRC CH 130.1600746

For the listener's convenience each disc is provided with an additional track point;
this does not indicate a division of any kind in the work.

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Bernhard "Benne" Vischer & Werner X. Uehlinger.

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Chromatic Field
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MORTON FELDMAN: *PATTERNS IN A CHROMATIC FIELD*

I

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Expressionist painters of the late 1940s, '50s, and '60s who were his close friends, we find that for all his talk of the

congruities between artistic and musical qualities of scale, surface, or space, among others, much of his music – especially the later, longer scores of which *Patterns In A Chromatic Field* is a prime example – remains mysteriously idiosyncratic and marvelously cryptic.

Part of the mystery of the music at hand has to do with the title. Throughout his life Feldman embraced various tactics in naming his creations, reflecting his state of mind as his compositional perspective changed over time. Never one to think of his music in Romantic terms, early on he favored impersonal, descriptive words like *Projections*, *Intersections*, *Extensions*, and *Durations* to correspond to the abstracted methods of his graphic scores; shortly after reintroducing traditional (albeit personally modified) notation he began using simple, literal

designations of instrumentation such as *Three Pieces for Two Pianos* and *Piano Three Hands*, or later in life, *Violin and Orchestra* and *Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello* (his final work). During the '60s and thereafter he devoted titles to dedications, like *For Frank O'Hara* and *Christian Wolff in Cambridge*; while simultaneously incorporating titles that suggested clues to his methodology, including *Vertical Thoughts* and *False Relationships and the Extended Ending*. Throughout the '70s and '80s he chose from each of these options, and by 1978 his most recent obsession with Turkish rugs and their formal designs began to influence his compositional point of view, prompting titles like *Why Patterns?* and *Crippled Symmetry*. But Feldman apparently wavered between calling this work *Patterns In A Chromatic Field*, which offers a few direct clues to its influences and motivation, or the vacant, uninvolved *Untitled Composition for Cello and Piano*.

Does the title really matter? Could it affect the way we respond to what we hear? Feldman's preference for flat, plain, unmistakable titles mirrors his concern for a restrained, ambiguously defined musical field of activity – are the largely undemonstrative sounds intensely personal, or instead constructed as a distancing mechanism, to avoid any emotional entanglements? In this music, abstractly free of conventional rhetoric, the drama intensifies as the compositional process, totally transparent, simply moves from one event to the next. Nothing is ornament, everything is essence. By alternating the shape of the events (seen, or rather heard, as patterns) the music seems to expand and contract; single notes hover in space, intervals outline angles and twisted contours, repeated phrases echo in the void, then are ever-so-slightly realigned, syncopated, abandoned. Reducing the material into concise patterns focuses attention on specific details as they

occur in the moment. Everything exists within an eternal present. There is no past or future – the immediacy of the form sustains its own truth, as we hear it, in the manner of Edgar Degas' comment, "Drawing is not form, it is the way you see form."

In this way, Feldman is not concerned with musical illusions or allusions, and the scale of his vision is in direct proportion to the accumulation of events as they proceed, across the field of our attention; in the essay "Crippled Symmetry," he wrote "As a composer I am involved with the contradiction in not having the sum of the parts equal the whole. The scale of what is actually being represented, whether it be of the whole or of the part, is a phenomenon unto itself." Or, as Samuel Beckett opined about James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, "His writing is not about something. It is that something itself."

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Werner X. Uehlinger

MORTON FELDMAN (1926–1987)
PATTERNS IN A CHROMATIC FIELD (1981)

ROHAN DE SARAM violincello
MARIANNE SCHROEDER piano

hat(now)ART 2041

Patterns In A Chromatic Field

Total Time DDD ²/_{Bit} (beginning) 58:01

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ROHAN DE SARAM

MARIANNE SCHROEDER

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When Samuel Beckett told an interviewer “I am interested in the shape of ideas, even if I do not believe in them,” he was articulating a personal point of view that could apply to the motivation behind *Patterns In A Chromatic Field*. Which is decidedly *not* to say that there is any insincerity in Feldman’s compositional choices, and yet his music does not exclude the possibility of doubt – or, at the very least, as he has acknowledged, a sense of ambivalence. But more precisely it is the shape of ideas that directly informs Feldman’s process, and thus its form. In “Crippled Symmetry,” he states “The most interesting aspect for me, composing exclusively with patterns, is that there is not one organizational procedure more advantageous than another, perhaps because no one pattern ever takes precedence over the others. The compositional concentration is

solely on which patterns should be reiterated and for how long, and on the character of its inevitable change into something else.” Disdaining “organizational procedures,” Feldman puts his faith into intuition, designing the length, alteration, and change to a subsequent pattern by ear, and by eye.

In speaking of Feldman’s eye, we are recognizing the devotion to modern painting – crucially Mondrian, Guston, and Rothko, with others to a lesser but still necessary degree – which he has so often used as a source for explanations of his compositional aesthetic. It is more than an influence, it is part of the same creative impulse that motivates his music. If we are looking for metaphors, non-musical associations that may disclose some of the music’s secrets, we can find them here in the asymmetrical

rhythms which Feldman identifies with Mondrian, with cello and piano moving subtly in- and out-of-synch by way of an intricate application of meters that change every measure, as well as Rothko, whose last paintings, according to critics Robert Goldwater and Brian O'Doherty largely a product of insecurity and questioning, share with this music a somber, stark remoteness, with a bleeding and blending of tonal color affected by subtle modifications of instrumental timbre. And of course, Feldman's focus on patterns as a compositional construct emerged with his interest in Turkish (specifically, Anatolian Yoruk) rugs, where the geometric patterns are typically symmetrical, with, it is important to note, inevitable imperfections – slight variations of hue or shape or misaligned details within the design. And the connection may reach beyond the similarities in form – is the cello's phrasing (with microtones) that opens the work borrowed from Turkish music by ear?

But the shape of ideas – the acute mindset that allows Feldman to focus his intuition on the design of the patterns and their varying number of repetitions – can also be examined through the metaphor of poetry. In previous essays I have compared Feldman's process, with his emphasis on one pattern's "inevitable change into something else," with Charles Olson's dictum from his essay "Projective Verse," outlining, tellingly, the idea of a poetic "composition by field," whereby "One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception." But equally significant is a quote from Chas E. Boles reviewing the biography of poet and Zen disciple Philip Whalen, where he says "Reading Whalen's poetry is to partake of a continuous stream of consciousness monologue/dialogue dream nerve movie echoing Heraclitus in that the poem, as framed sentence, is a shape shifting undulation which one can step in and out of in the process of being."

This, it seems to me, describes a similar response available to Feldman's later, large-scale works. The unbroken flow of events continually offers details, either reaffirmed or replaced, which affirm our experience in receiving them, but do not constitute a self-contained, self-fulfilling entity. The overall picture is difficult to fathom, instead we experience it moment by moment, like the processing of our own thoughts. Dale Smith's description of Whalen's poetry could stand for Feldman's late music, if we substitute the words: "Rather than presenting poetry with lyric sensitivity, he uses the poem as a field, or graph, on which he arranges discrete phenomena." Whalen himself called his work "...the picture or graph of a mind moving," and "A continuous fabric... within a certain time-limit, say a few hours of total attention and pleasure: to move smoothly past the reader's eyes, across his brain." This seems as good a definition of the shape of ideas as any.

Perhaps the reason we are able to think and talk about his music in such metaphoric contexts, as Feldman himself frequently did, is that, as art critic David Sylvester pointed out in discussing Picasso and Braque's cubist paintings, "The point of such pictures [or here, music] is that they consist of questions rather than answers, and that the questions are of a kind to which there is no one answer."

Art Lange, Chicago, November 2016

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Werner X. Uehlinger

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PATTERNS IN A CHROMATIC FIELD (1981)

ROHAN DE SARAM violincello
MARIANNE SCHROEDER piano

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Patterns In A Chromatic Field

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