

MORTON FELDMAN  
ATLANTIS  
RADIO-  
SINFONIE-ORCHESTER  
FRANKFURT  
CONDUCTED BY  
LUCAS VIS

### THREE STATEMENTS RELEVANT TO FORM IN MORTON FELDMAN'S ORCHESTRAL MUSIC

I. "Drawing is not form, it is the way you see form." (Edgar Degas) Form is fluid, and ever-present. It is the consequential shape of singular identity, whether one recognizes it or not. In Degas' terms, the act of drawing merely holds the image in time and space, permitting us to see *through* the technique to the characteristics of identity that are emphasized in that particular instance. Thus his drawing was an attempt to register not only the idea (as opposed to some proposed version of "reality") of pure form, but the impression which the image made on his consciousness—an impression which may vary with each viewer (thus simultaneously illuminating both interpretations: "...the way you see form" and also "...the way you see form"). As Cubist painters like Braque and Picasso attempted to represent even more of the multi-dimensional formal identity of their subjects on a flat canvas, they increased the visual and philosophical complexities of the method, the image, and the possible responses by the viewer to such a degree that art critic David Sylvester wrote, "The point of such pictures is that they consist of questions rather than answers, and that the questions are of a kind to which there is no one answer." Within a few years, and the advent of Abstract Expressionism, the nature of the questions changed completely, away from representation or impression to those of the ways in which the creative process itself (not merely technique, but the sum of idea, action, energy, engagement, and method) could determine the

formal characteristics of identity—and in so doing came closer to the conditions of music. When musicologists talk about the "sonata" form as used by, say, Beethoven, they are indicating a predetermined structure which defines the shape of the material put into it, and which may be used as received, or modified in some minor, still recognizable way. (Form is what results from the way this structure, or any, is used.) John Cage did not reject form in his music—that's not possible. But he did reject predetermined and/or recognizable structure. As did Feldman, but instead of following Cage along the path of focused activity invoking indeterminate results, he initially worked with various methods of scoring compositional/performer interaction (usually either graphic notation or open durational options) until he devised a personal *process* of composition which allowed him to work with precise notation and, like the Abstract Expressionist painters, still experience both decision and discovery. *Atlantis*, composed in 1959, is a rare recorded example of Feldman's graphic notation for chamber orchestra, in which the performers are presented with certain freedoms in selecting details of pitch or duration and the phrasing of this material. Feldman, in this case, indicated the instrumental colors and rough shapes to be used and placed them in a semi-controlled environment. This is the main reason why the music sounds so unlike the other two works on this disc. Metaphorically, he planted musical seeds in a garden, but could not control exactly how they'd

grow—and listening to the music is like watching a fast-motion film of the wild plants as they sprout and blossom in continually surprising fashion. By this point, however, Feldman was feeling an increasing dissatisfaction with the formal procedures of the graphic method—that is, the sharing of control over certain parameters of his music—even as he remained suspicious of any kind of system.

2.

“One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception.” (Charles Olson, “Projective Verse”) In much of Feldman’s refined, rarified music, motion, movement, and momentum must be gauged differently. Motion outlines (self-contained) intervallic shape. Movement implies perspective, activity within a multi-dimensional environment. Momentum is forward progress and requires a goal, a conclusion, an endgame. Motion exists in all of Feldman’s scores, graphic or conventionally notated, since any combination or succession of musical events or sounds suggests a shape. Movement, however, depends upon the context; for example, in *Piano Piece (1952)*, one hears a firm, decisive, yet seeming random progression of notes, one after the other in a sparse, drifting, yet orderly fashion—but the notes display no momentum or movement. (These seemingly contrary sentiments [decisive/drifting, random/orderly] account for the tension underneath the simple surface engagement of line [motion], color, and gesture. Translated to a visual context, this description is very close to Abstract Expressionist sensibility, especially that of late Rothko, and early Guston.)

Movement appears as a matter of course in Feldman’s pieces for multiple pianos, chamber music, and orchestral works—the guises in which it appears is another story. Famously, momentum seldom if ever occurs in Feldman’s music—which accounts for its distinctive, deceptively “static” state.

Motion, movement, and momentum are among the conditions of perception which Olson alludes to in his essay on the processes of composing poetry—specifically, as he writes, “...the process of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished.” Just as another poet, James Schuyler, finds in the Abstract Expressionist painting of Franz Kline, “...energy, both random energy and the energy of intention!” Feldman adheres closely to the idea of one perception immediately following another—it is the glue that holds his sounds together, the structural element that is anti-system yet results in a unified formal entity. The music—especially the later orchestral music of the ‘70s, like *Oboe and Orchestra* and *String Quartet and Orchestra*—becomes a field of energy exchange and transfer. Even if heard as a flow of sequential events, these are not dependent upon development or variation as is traditionally the measure of form, but emerge as autonomous masses of sound which hover, linger, repeat, and are replaced by the next event/perception. (Silence may also be a perception if, as in Feldman’s music, it is not passive but an active agent, engaged by its surroundings and contributing to the movement within the sound field.) In “The Anxiety of Art,” Feldman wrote of the need to continuously vary the “aural plane” of

the music. "Change is the only solution to an unchanging aural plane created by the constant element of projection, of attack." This aural plane is the equivalent of pictorial space—the environment where process becomes form. As the painter and teacher Hans Hofmann wrote, "One cannot see space / one can only sense space— / Since one cannot see space / one can also not copy space / and since one senses space only / one must invent 'the' pictorial space..." Feldman's music projects into this space as he invents it through a combination of design (primarily repeated motifs) and intuition (change).

### 3.

"How do I know what to think until I see what I say?" (E.M. Forster) Feldman's compositional methods may have rejected predetermined structure, but not strategy, since that (and intuition—i.e.: equal parts of personal taste and imagination) is what allowed him to retain control even while involved in such a non-systematic process.

Strategies need not be inflexible; in fact, Feldman's seem to have been open to spontaneous modification—as seen by his asymmetrical, unpredictable use of repetition. A trust in intuition, meanwhile, reflects the kind of courage necessary to confront and overcome the almost paralyzing complexities and ambiguities of open structure and unknown terrain.

Feldman's reliance on "random energy" may be exemplified by his forays into the speculative responses of sound masses, as he described in the music of Varèse. More to the point, perhaps, is his use of the "energy of intention," where

notes, motifs, and clusters were tested by his acute ear before being chosen. In both cases, the process determined the form.

The forms he arrived at may be an enigma to those accustomed to more conventional musical structures, as confusing as the surreal situations Alice encountered in Wonderland. But there is, as the poet and dance critic Edwin Denby commented about the painting of Willem de Kooning, "... the beauty that instinctive behavior in a complex situation can have." Though intuitive, the sounds in these later orchestral works are not haphazard, but painstakingly positioned in place to give an almost painterly semblance of light, color, and texture. (Feldman once said, "I don't compose, I assemble.") As we relate to music in an on-going condition of becoming, and not (like painting) a state of being, we're able to experience these works much as he did, as they happen, with an equal sense of wonder and delight.

*Art Lange, January 2000*

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Puisque notre relation à la musique s'opère dans un perpétuel « état de devenir », et non (comme en peinture) dans un « état d'être », nous pouvons faire l'expérience de ces œuvres à la manière de Morton Feldman, en temps réel, avec tout autant d'émerveillement et de ravissement. *Art Lange*, translated by Benjamin Mouliets

MORTON FELDMAN  
**ATLANTIS**

RADIO-SINFONIE-ORCHESTER FRANKFURT  
Conducted BY LUCAS VIS

PELLEGRINI-QUARTET (1), HAN DEVRIES oboe (2)

1 **STRING QUARTET & ORCHESTRA** (1973) 30:58

ISRC CH 130.1800837

2 **OBOE & ORCHESTRA** (1976) 16:40

ISRC CH 130.1800838

3 **ATLANTIS** (1959) 11:26

ISRC CH 130.1800839

Total Time 54:26

DDD **24**  
*Bit*

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