

**ENSEMBLE SOSPESO**  
**MORTON FELDMAN'S FOR CHRISTIAN WOLFF**

Morton Feldman  
Dec. 01, 1926—March 09, 1987  
New York City

If there is magic in Feldman, I think it is hiding somewhere in his peculiar, instantly recognizable notation, and in the decoding process this notation forces the performers to undertake. Learning the three-hour monolith is as much a learning of the sounds and gestures as it is learning to manage his notation. This management process continues throughout the three-hour performance.

And while the experience of the piece may be similarly transcendental for performers and audience, their mutual experiences are ultimately separated by the chasm of his notation and the simple – yet for me sometimes hard to understand – fact that the audience has no interaction whatsoever with this notation...

*...because for the performer...*

His enormous late works were never type set; the performer has to cope with Feldman's consistently erratic notational practices; measures that are evenly spaced on the page but may represent three-quarters of a beat of music or nine beats of music; rhythms that are not-aligned vertically; thick clusters of notes that resemble fountain pen explosions or squashed bugs and are virtually impossible to actually read, as well as wildly irregular and non-intuitive rhythmic divisions, etc.

And it is in the engagement with the notation that Amelia and I have found profoundly different understandings of this music. Whereas I see crystalline precision peeking out from beneath Feldman's sloppy handwriting, bizarrely perfect little syncopations and hockets sitting in patterns of nearly endless variation, that is invisible to the eye but revealed to the ear, Amelia takes the long view, contemplates the long walk, does not lose the forest for the trees, dallies amidst monumental proportions.

Monumental is the wrong word. Despite being more than twice as long as anything Mahler or Bruckner or Beethoven wrote, it is never monumental.

Our roles in the piece are naturally of opposite natures. I engage in the act of continuous striking: tricking the audience into believing in the sustained tone. Amelia engages in three hours of focused breathing, exhaling nothing but sustained tones; there is no artifice in her part, just melodic artistry. In Christian Wolff, she is the song, and I am the silly little dance.

Let me take this opportunity to provoke in your mind the image of the hulking, horn-rimmed bespectacled New York Jew that was Morton Feldman, taking a long meandering walk – a three hour walk – through Manhattan's East Side, whistling a single note as he goes, and suddenly breaking into a dainty little two-step. This, for me, is somehow key to the essence of Christian Wolff.

For all of the solemnity with which his performances can be imbued, his actual music still sometimes makes me giggle.

I think the phenomenon of the divided experience between audience and performer may be more peculiar to Feldman's music than to the music of any other composer.

*...this is what a Feldman performance amounts to: ...*

Further, I know of no other composer who can say so little over such enormous lengths of time and have it mean so much. And don't get me wrong, I am sure that he spent years perfecting the craft (the notation) that allowed him to do this.

I first performed *For Christian Wolff* in 2007 with flutist Kathleen Gallagher. It was a major piece in the first festival I ever produced, at the Zhou B Art Center in Chicago, and despite (or because of) the six truly intrepid audience members (eight if you count my parents) it remains the most indescribable performing experience I have ever had. I felt that I had gained, while we performed, a new long-view understanding of the piece that I had never had while we rehearsed.

It is next to impossible to talk about Feldman. Even Feldman could not talk about Feldman. In one of his pre-concert talks before his four-hour *For Philip Guston* he said something to the effect that, "In order to give you a sense of this piece I would need to talk about it for four hours." And I think he may have been on to something. I once tried to write an in-depth analysis of his one-act opera, *Neither*. After months of study all that I could figure out to say was that Feldman had a very classically "literal" (and unabashed) notion of text painting, which is either sincere (and perhaps even a touch naïve) or overtly tongue-in-cheek, as though he was mocking his own Schubertian inclinations.

As it turns out, the performance with Kathleen, some seven hundred ninety miles away as the Google flies, was almost exactly one month before the last concert of Sospeso's first life, which was a month before Amelia Lukas and I first began to blossom a friendship. There is nothing meaningful in these chronological relationships except for my singular perspective of them, but I could not help but think that there was some kind of very Feldman-esque unfolding of long-time and repetition of pointillistic elements going on here, and that the re-birth of Ensemble Sospeso was the perfect opportunity to once again haul out Feldman's massive score and squint at his scraggly handwriting for three hours.

For further evidence of the difficulty of talking about Feldman, try reading his essays. They are little more than a string of pithy remarks and quirky observations of the artists around him (in a way, not unlike his music?). These are not the polemics of Boulez ("Schoenberg is dead! Burn down the opera houses!") or theories of Stockhausen (Feldman was fond of referring to himself as a kind of anti-Stockhausen).

I have heard other late Feldman pieces performed (notably the infamous six-hour Second String Quartet at the inauguration of Issue Project Room's 110 Livingston Street space), but I have never heard *Christian Wolff* as an audience member. My understanding is that even Christian Wolff has not heard *Christian Wolff* more than twice. It is not played very often.

And I'm not entirely sure why that is. Is it simply because it is three hours long? The four-hour *For Philip Guston* sees the light of day much more often. Is it because of the relative simplicity of instrumentation (which is not to imply that the orchestration is somehow simple) and austerity of sound? No *Crippled Symmetry* this *Christian Wolff*.

I imagine the space for hearing this piece to be quite beautiful, or at least, I hope the space is quite beautiful – certainly unique in the way that it is (might be?) fragmented and disorienting despite involving a continuous act of sitting in the same place for three hours.

And for that matter, Feldman is never monumental (even when he writes opera).

Feldman whispers in your ear while tossing a blade of grass onto the surface of a still pond. He is elegant, contemplative, precise, crafty, and even sometimes... dare I say...jocular.

A large man with large glasses doing a dainty two-step, whistling as he goes.

Feldman is a master of crafting time. Because every measure occupies the same quantity of real estate on the page, but the quantity of notes within the bounding box of the measure can take less than a second or more than nine seconds, (and involve rhythms that are not vertically aligned, thick chunks of notes that look like squashed bugs or fountain pen explosions, as well as irregular and non-intuitive rhythmic divisions etc.), and not forgetting his flagrantly whimsical use of repetition, an entire page can last anywhere from two to seven minutes. (Or more? I have never actually timed out any individual pages.) I have always had the sense that the last ten pages of this piece take as long as the previous fifty, although I know this cannot be true. The score is like a map that is not drawn to scale...which, frankly, is utterly mystifying to me considering that scale was exactly what Morty was about. And for me that is one of his brilliant exercisings of raw craft: he manages to make the last sixth of a quiet three-hour duo feel as significant as the first five-sixths without bombastic gesture, without major demarcating points, without shifts in instrumentation, without narrative beats, and even without a relatively scaled visual representation. This is truly remarkable. This is what leads the performers to imbue the performance with a sense of solemnity. If you just play the notes, Feldman's proportions will be there; his notation will work its mercurial magic. But of course, the notes of the last ten pages must be rendered as precisely and quietly as the notes of the first ten pages.

*...a very long time to sit and contemplate Feldman's notation and to allow that notation to provoke you into making a very long series of very quiet sounds.*

Word on the street is that nothing was ever quiet enough for Morty.

*We will do our best to be very...*

As the concert approaches, it seems an imperative: Feldman. All artistic undertakings are fragile, and to release Sospeso from its state of suspension remains a particularly delicate operation.

We cannot answer the glorious noise of the New York Renaissance with the trumpets of Stockhausen.

We need instead a blade of grass and a still pond, and a chance to whisper in an ear.

*...very quiet.*