

Less Is Less: Morton Feldman's Minimalism by Thomas Patteson
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Feldman and minimalism? Perhaps a scandalous conjunction. But I would argue that Feldman's music represents a more systematic and uncompromising realization of the principal of minimalism than the composers who typically fall under that heading.

Of course, what I call Feldman's minimalism is something different from what is invoked by the conventional use of the term. For composers such as Steve Reich, Terry Riley, or Philip Glass, minimalism refers to the attempt to spin out a rich, immersive web of sound through the repetitive proliferation of simple musical gestures. Though built from basic units, the resulting music is meant to be more than the sum of its parts: for these composers, this act of elemental reduction made possible a new, lush sound that was, in sensual terms, anything but "minimalist."

For Feldman, however, the quest for the musical "minimum" was all-consuming, nothing short of an absolute spiritual discipline. The spare motives from which his music is constructed are indeed repeated, but in a way that serves to highlight their fragility, rather than create the illusion of fullness. Beyond the reduction of gestures, Feldman pursued the ideal of sonic asceticism in other compositional parameters as well, limiting variations in volume and timbre until his music reached a terminal state of virtually unbroken monochromatic quietude.

Though far removed from the hyperactive "maximalism" typical of composers such as Iannis Xenakis or Brian Ferneyhough, Feldman's music presents no less of a challenge to the listener. In a world of immanent information overload, Feldman confronts us with the one thing we cannot handle: austerity, reduction, dearth. If, as Feldman stated, it is the duty of art to seek out anxiety, what better way to frustrate contemporary consciousness and its manic teleological obsessions than by writing music that is always slowly going nowhere?

This is why I think the closest intermedia analogue to Feldman's work is not the painting of Pollock or Rothko but the writing of Samuel Beckett. An image cannot do justice to the anguished confrontation with time that haunts Beckett's work as an existential *idée fixe*. The sense of circling round, withdrawing and returning, swallowing despair and beginning again, animates both men's work with a spirit of unflinching sincerity, black humor, and even--sometimes--genuine hope. Beckett's lines in *Worstward Ho* could serve as a motto for Feldman's music: "All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

All music can be understood as a kind of commentary on the passage of time. Most music constructs time in ways analogous to our everyday experience: from the clockwork regularity of the Baroque orchestra to the thumping heartbeat of dancefloor electronica, music builds on and reinforces our natural perception of time. Feldman's music seems to negate this. In its non-metric, floating quality, it challenges our comfortable sense of chronological proportion. And yet, the unfolding of musical events is not random. There is a "flow" to Feldman's music, as undeniable as it is impossible to pin down.

Listen, for example, to the first movement of *Three Pieces for String Quartet* (1956). This composition belongs to Feldman's early phase, and shows his debt to the laconic late works of the Viennese composer Anton Webern, but I think it illustrates a quality in Feldman's music that is more or less constant. The

music is riddled with chasms of silence, but their placement is not quite accidental: Feldman seems to put longest, most quizzical pauses at the moments where the music is almost about to reach a state of continuity. Eventually, we adjust to this curious temporal logic, but it leaves us altered, sensitized, perceptually askew.

Now listen to Feldman's 1981 piano composition *Triadic Memories*. The music is possessed by an almost supernatural sense of equilibrium. But this is not the tidy balance of symmetrical form; Feldman's equilibrium is always just a little bit off—a condition poetically described by one of his titles, *Crippled Symmetry*. Compared to the *Three Pieces for String Quartet*, this music is fluid, sensual. (The acoustic fullness of *Triadic Memories* is created by the constant use of the sustain pedal, allowing all the piano's tones to ring out and creating a gentle halo of sound. It even seems as if the pace of the music is regulated by the decay of the piano's tones, each sonority being allowed to fade away before the next can sound.) Hovering on the brink of immobility, the music is driven forward by a subtle yet inexorable force, approaching the paradoxical condition that Feldman called "vibrating stasis." If we can learn to inhabit this intensely meditative sonic space, we can perhaps perceive the musical illustration of Plato's dictum that "time is the moving image of eternity."