

Epiphanies

The quixotic presence of Morton Feldman brings the edifice of modern music crashing down around Kyle Gann

I understood the youthful exhilaration of transgression. Son of a piano teacher, I grew up on classical music. As a melancholic, alienated teen in Texas's football-and-Jesus culture, I veered into the avant garde lane: Cage, Boulez, Stockhausen, Babbitt, Xenakis. My parents and peers didn't understand this music, and I found that delicious. Friends thought I was strange for playing atonal music on the piano, but they were going to think I was strange anyway, so I pre-empted them by revelling in what was beyond them. *Épater les bourgeois!* Schoenberg provided my motto: "If it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art." The more bewildering the music, the more it validated my superiority.

In 1975 I saw somewhere a notice for a new contemporary music festival: June In Buffalo, held at the State University of New York. Cage's sidekick Morton Feldman was running it, and the featured composers that first year (for the festival would continue annually for decades) were Cage, Feldman, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff. My parents paid for the airfare and modest tuition, and gave me 200 dollars to eat on for three weeks (I spent most of it on records). I had already met Cage the previous year, when he gave a lecture in Dallas. I had enough chutzpah, at 18, to hang around afterward and get myself invited to a reception for Cage at the barn of the crazy north Texas composer Jerry Hunt. Cage's patient kindness in answering my adolescent questions was astounding, in retrospect, and I only wanted to sit at his feet.

So June In Buffalo was another chance to soak up his aura. As it turned out, though, it was Feldman who blasted my conception of music wide open. I knew his early music, whose intuitive, colouristic pointillism seemed like a special case of Cage's chance procedures, but I wasn't prepared for his personality. He was oracular, a walking Talmud. Like Oscar Wilde, he could say the exact opposite of what you'd learned, and startle you with the truth of it. In a group composition lesson, he mused, "I had a student come to me with a piece, marked 'quarter note equals 60'. I said, 'Don't use 60, everybody uses 60. Make it 58.'"

In that moment, it flashed on me that *anything* could become a cliché, even a tempo marking. Morty was right: in a musical milieu in which marking off musical lengths in seconds had become common, everyone was writing

60 beats per minute in their scores because, well, everyone else was doing it. People put things in their music that they've seen other people put, which meant they aren't entirely drawing their music from themselves. My pursuit of modernism fit that mode.

In a lecture, Feldman played a recording of his *Rothko Chapel*. The now famous record hadn't been released yet. The first 20 minutes sounded much like Feldman's music I knew. Then, suddenly, a vibraphone started playing a childlike pattern, G-B-A-C, over and over as above it the viola played a simple, tonal melody. This went against every tenet of contemporary music I had absorbed, including especially the mandate of stylistic consistency. And yet – it was gorgeous. In that moment, my reverence for the modernist project crashed to the floor like shattered glass. Viscerally, I understood that my urge to propel music into the incomprehensible stratosphere was a motivation not personal, but imitative. I was following a heady elite, but I was not yet an artist, because I was not drawing a new universe from my own interiority. What Feldman was doing wasn't avant garde, nor conservative, nor shocking, nor elite, nor familiar, nor incomprehensible – it was *Feldman*.

For 48 years since, I have never put a note in a staff without the reverberations of that series of revelations pulsing through me. It may seem almost comical how carefully I select my tempo markings, gauging each one exactly without reference to the gapped

numbers on the metronome. It took a few years, but my belief in the historical fallacy that a certain time demands a certain music started disintegrating at that moment. I envision a certain kind of music, and I can not take into account either history nor the conventional wisdom of my musical peers. To take glee in flouting convention is still to define your art in terms of convention. The urge to transgress is not only self-deceptive, but accords too much importance to the outer world. Schoenberg's nose-thumbing dictum now seems juvenile.

I imagine the radical freedom I picked up from Feldman is responsible for a certain alienation I feel from the composing world, an alienation I've dealt with by writing so much of my music for performer-less instruments (Disklaviers). I don't seem to write music that sounds like what contemporary music should sound like. I enjoy listening to my own music, and I'm proud that so many of my compliments come from non-musicians. Feldman seems to have felt similarly alienated; a year before he died, he wrote, "I have no complaints about my career, but I always wondered why it really doesn't take hold." Of course, after his death, his reputation and influence exploded. As Emerson wrote, "The virtue in most demand is conformity." But to compose the way I see other composers do it would not feel to me like being an artist. I got that from Feldman. ○

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Morton Feldman (left) with Earle Brown