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Dossier "Morton Feldman – A quiet revolution across 100 years"

Morton Feldman @100

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Resumo: Este ensaio é uma reflexão sobre a música do compositor Morton Feldman e seu significado para os compositores da atualidade. Em particular, ele traça o desenvolvimento da estética composicional de Feldman, desde suas primeiras obras gráficas até suas composições tardias, complexas e de duração prolongada. Além disso, analisa o papel que a história desempenha no pensamento composicional tardio de Feldman e na sua reimaginação do som nas obras posteriores.

Palavras-chave: Morton Feldman, Música Nova, Música Experimental.

Abstract: This essay is a reflection on the music of composer Morton Feldman and its significance for composers today. In particular, it traces the development of Feldman's compositional aesthetic from his early graphic works to his later complex compositions of extended durational scale. It also considers the role that history plays in Feldman's late compositional thinking and his reimagining of sound in the later works.

Keywords: Morton Feldman, New Music, Experimental Music.

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It is difficult to imagine the music department of the University at Buffalo without the presence of Morton Feldman forever hovering in the background where he taught since 1973 under his self-devised title, the "Edgar Varèse" Professor of Music Composition named after one of his favorite composers. The year 1973 marks the center of his "middle period" of compositional work which began in 1970 with works such as *The Viola in My Life 1, 2*, and *3, Rothko Chapel*, and *Cello and Orchestra*. It extends through the late 70's with *For Frank O'Hara*, *Routine Investigations*, his opera *Neither*, based on a text by Samuel Beckett, and the monumental *Flute and Orchestra*. The compositions prior to this period, his extended first mature period of compositions, began around 1950 with the series of pieces titled *Projections, Intermissions, Extensions* and continued through the *Duration* series to such works as *In Search of an Orchestration*, *False Relationships and the Extended Ending*, and *Between Categories*.

What Feldman's first period of composition reveals, from his mid-twenties through his mid-forties, is a composer sensitive to sound searching for a compositional language that mirrors what Theodor Adorno once said about one of Feldman's favorite composers, Anton von Webern, "The caution with which the early Webern made use of the new sonorities derives from such a lack of violence, from the absence of the composer as sovereign subject" (Adorno, 1999, p. 101). Another way to frame Webern's orientation to composition is what Feldman himself would refer to as "not pushing the sounds around," or to not "meddle with the material but use concentration as a guide to what might transpire" (Feldman, 2000, p. 142-143). The concentration that Feldman refers to is the discipline to abstain from "composing" so that the juxtaposition of sounds can form their own connections and relations. Feldman would later describe this process as, "Don't compose, try things out. And what I tried out were problems of juxtaposition," (Feldman, 2006, p. 179) or "Do it one way, then do it another" (Feldman, 2008, p. 454) implying that the juxtaposition of materials does not require connectives to bind them together, typically referred to as "composing out" the material. The juxtaposition of materials can more easily enact sudden shifts of scale that can draw a listener into the music so that one participates in, as opposed to merely observing, its process of unfolding.

Feldman's abstention from "composing," where violence can be enacted upon the sounds through an expressive musical language, including grammatical connectives, transitions, crescendos, cadences, and flow, was realized through a graphic notation that left the choice of materials up to the

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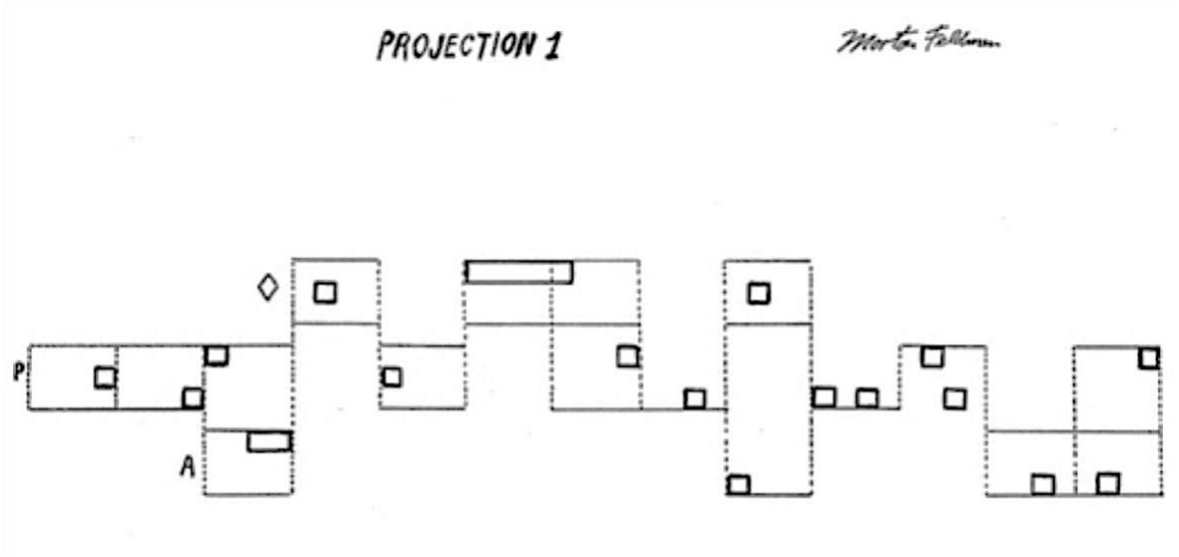
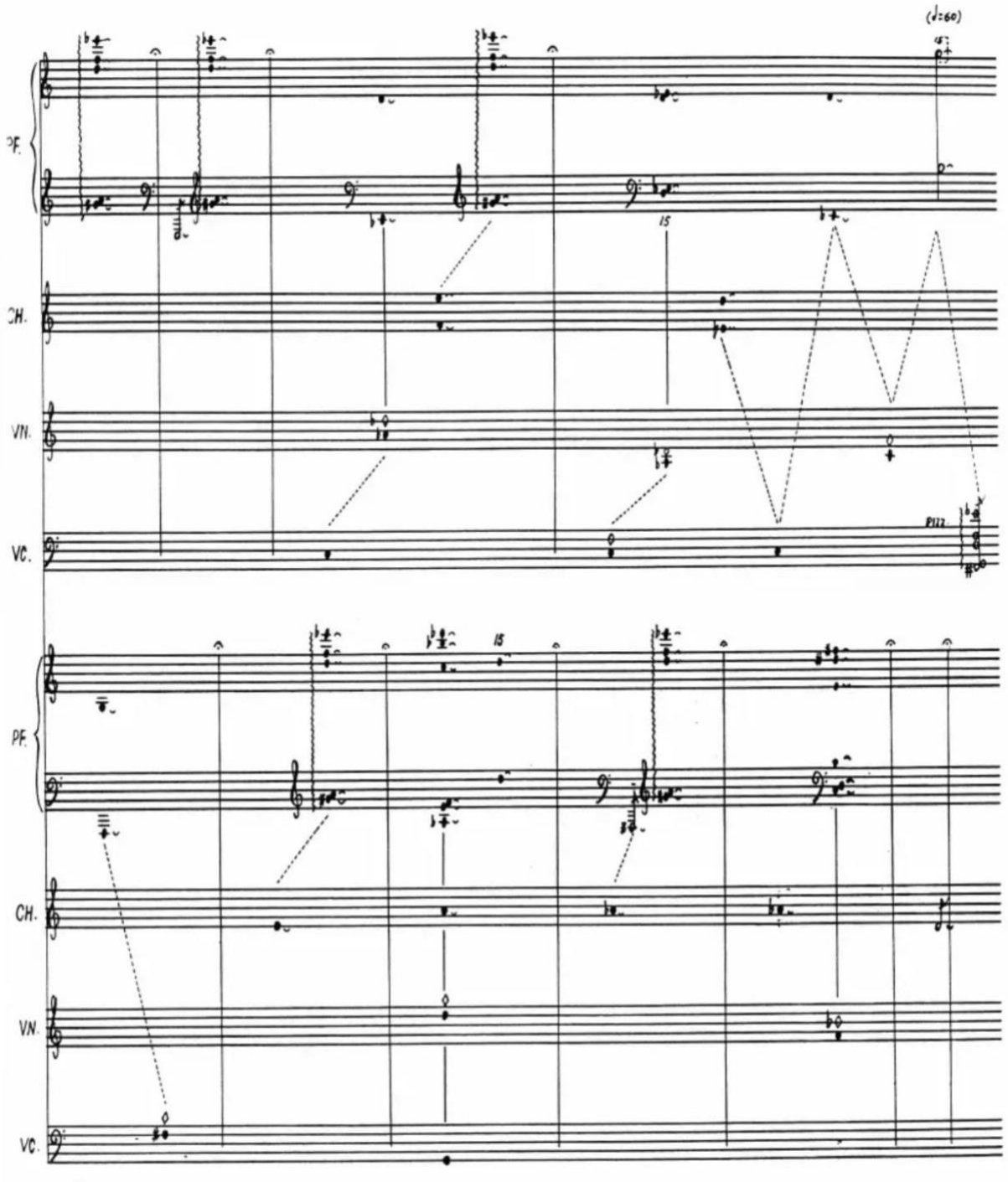
performers. Feldman would only indicate relative pitch, relative duration, attack point, and timbre whereupon the performers would choose specific pitches, durations and attack points and perform them at a soft dynamic, thus allowing the performers to search for connections between sounds. In many ways, these were cautious pieces in which everything could sound beautiful. As Feldman's compositional risks took on greater significance, his work slowly became more defined in its materials, or as he would say, the "categories hardened" (Feldman, 2008, p. 66). By the end of this early period, with works such as *Between Categories*, pitches were now defined against the still relative durations and attack points which continued to maintain a "floating" quality throughout the music.

FIGURE 1 – Morton Feldman, *Projection 1* (1950), where only relative pitch, duration, and attack point are given to the performer



Source: Edition Peters.

FIGURE 2 – Morton Feldman, *Between Categories* (1969), where pitch is fixed but duration and attack point are relative



Source: Edition Peters.

Feldman's materialist aesthetic resisted composition as a symbolic language of expression by using the juxtaposition of sounds to bring a listener deeper into a sound's texture and hidden energies. Toward this end, he wanted the structure of the piece "to come out of the inevitability of the cause and effect of the act, not out of the cause and effect of the thought" (Feldman, 2008, p. 254). Performance was really a means to enact sound not for self-expression but for the coordination of instrumental actions that makes pieces like *Between Categories* vibrate with energy. A running theme in Feldman's aesthetic was to find a method of composing that moves away from concepts and ideas to a more direct engagement with sound. Thus, new spaces are opened for the listener that establish the priority of the outside world and at the same time makes it accessible.

Feldman's middle period of composition, beginning with the series *The Viola in My Life*, explores ways to make the duration and attack point more precise. Yet, in so doing, musical thought becomes attached to an ongoing ictus or beat structure whether measured in actual "beats" or in seconds. As Feldman remarked, "The moment a composer notates musical thought to an ongoing ictus, a grid of sorts is already in operation, as with a ruler" (Feldman, 2000, p. 136). The "grid" suddenly gave Feldman's music a sense of scale through proportions that subdivided duration into discrete units that could be varied and repeated, to make palpable a sense of "spatial depth" in the music through the foregrounding of some materials over others. Other composers would have used phrasing to scale their music, but phrasing places music too much in the realm of language and expression. Feldman was searching for a way to express music without "pushing the sounds around" and to deny the composer as sovereign subject. Feldman's compositional ethics suggests an active engagement with materials that is both rigorous and precise but also porous and open to the outside world. With the introduction of the grid, Feldman remarked: "I discovered not the beat but a practical realistic boundary between one bar line and the next bar line as an overall duration. That's what I discovered: a boundary" (Feldman, 2008, p. 414). The boundary becomes a meaningful break in the juxtaposition of sounds, not unlike line breaks in the visual presentation of a poem where the tension across line endings can produce a rhythmic energy.

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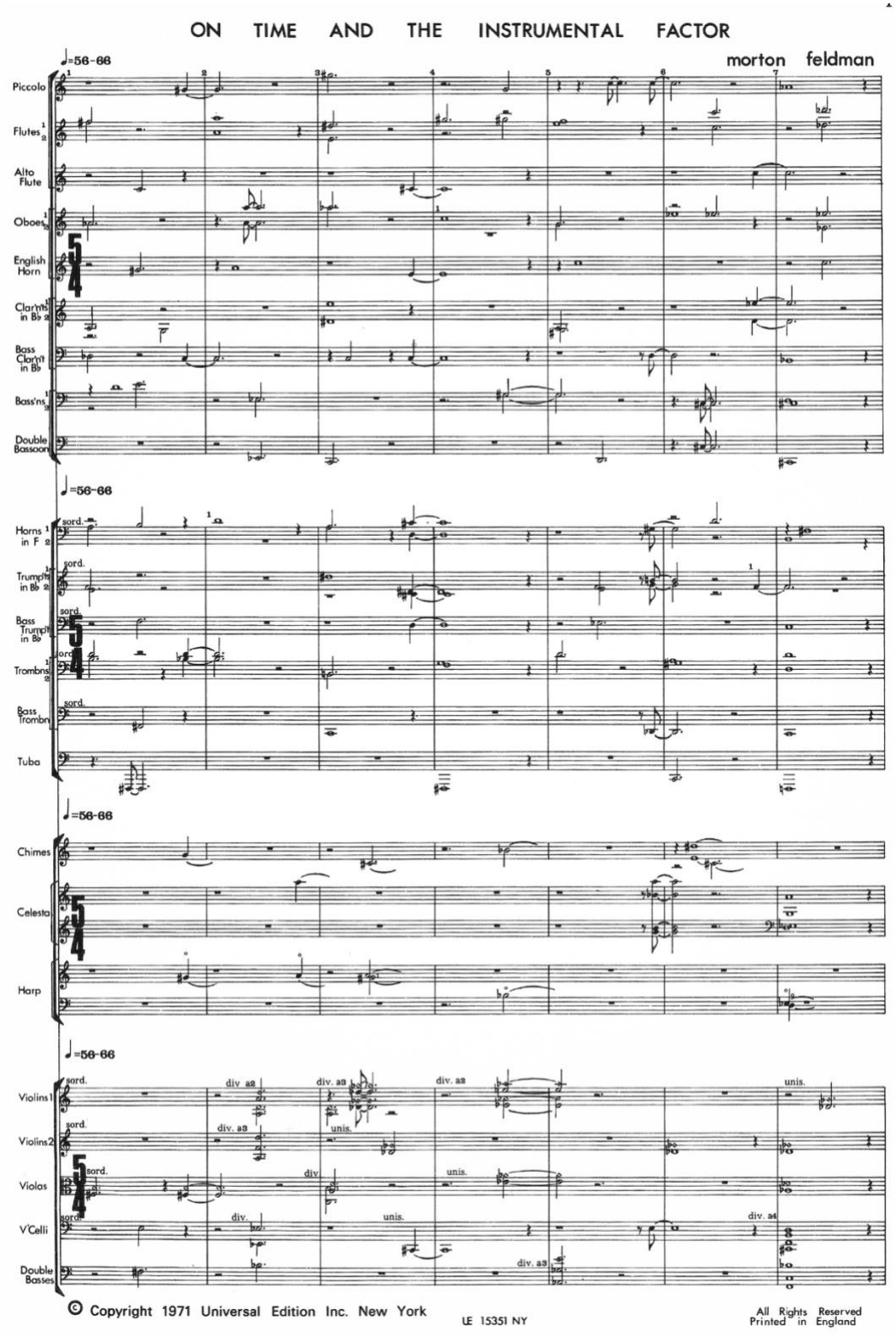
FIGURE 3 – Morton Feldman, *On Time and the Instrumental Factor* (1969), where the "grid" begins to manifest as meter with precise durations and attack points.



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Yet if one examines Feldman's handwritten scores, the grid became associated less with a durational space and more with the physical page of notation. Feldman's orientation to sound ultimately became a materialist engagement with notation in which the graphic shape – or "image" – of a sound becomes part of its texture. The difficulty with his middle period compositions, extending through *Flute and Orchestra*, is that the grid necessitated a "hardening of the categories" by fixing not only pitch but duration and attack points as well, so that precise musical events have a predetermined unfolding. With such an unfolding, the desire for expression begins to manifest through the appearance of crescendos, flow, and a sense of dramaturgy that give the compositions a memorable shape and the composing voice slips in as sovereign subject. The danger for these pieces, which Feldman himself sensed, is that they begin to sound like "new music." The ambiguous, floating quality of the early experimental works is gradually shaped, in these middle period works, into a music more expressive and powerful at the expense of a music that would be difficult to categorize. Sensing this drift of his compositions into something more recognizable as "music," Feldman searched for ways in which this music could become more elastic and flexible to achieve that ambiguous, floating quality of his earlier music. One approach was to play with the notated image itself with such indications as the "augmentation dot" which he would often permute across the repetition of a notated image.

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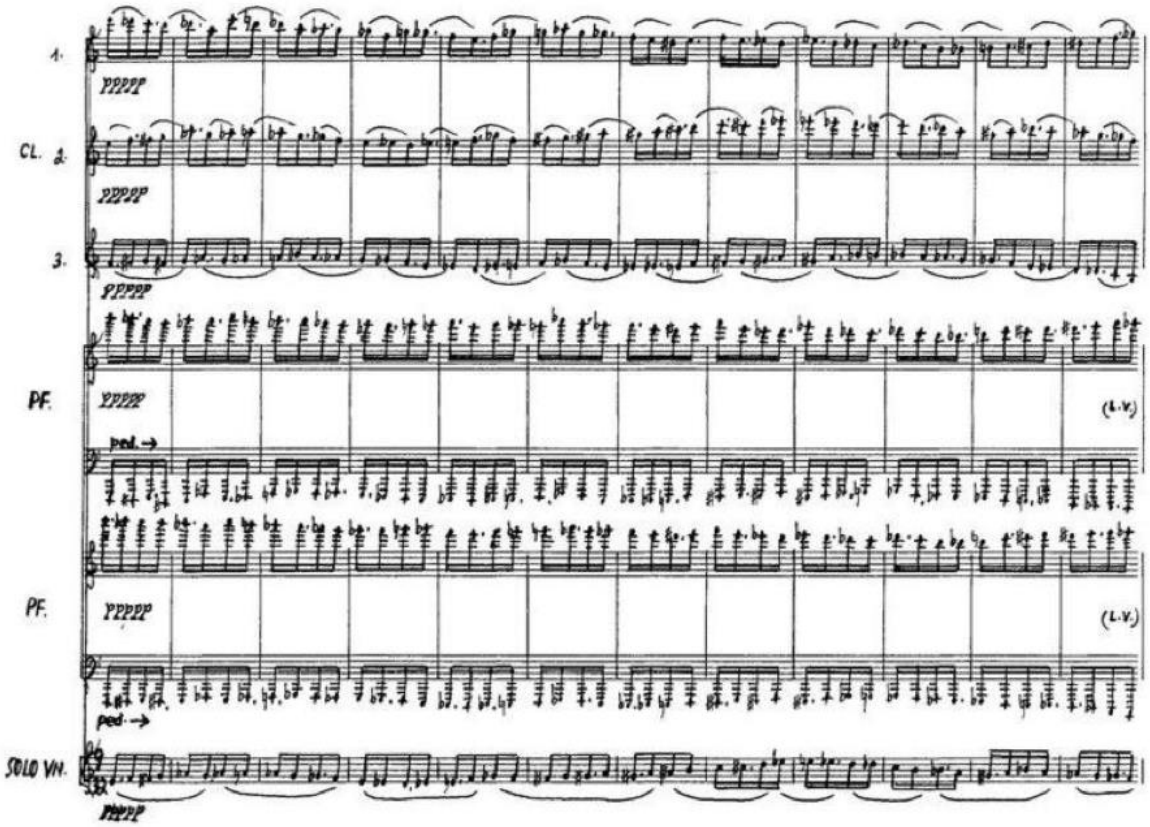
FIGURE 4 – Morton Feldman, *Violin and Orchestra* (1979), where the augmentation dot in the solo violin part at the bottom continually shifts throughout the figure giving the figure a plasticity.



Source: Universal Edition.

It is important to note that Feldman's augmentation dot does not function as it would in an Oliver Messian piece. Messian's interest was in Medieval music and the use of the augmentation dot to create non-retrogradable rhythms by slightly altering a duration so that its value in a serial sequence of rhythms would be unique. Feldman's approach is non-conceptual and approaches the augmentation dot more as a graphic mark that can be moved around a notational image akin to drawing. Its presence is tactile, which carries over into the music by giving a malleable, elastic quality to the sounds (Feldman, 2008, p. 406).

But Feldman also needed a way to enact the tension that was so palpable in his earlier works resulting from the coordination of instrumental actions mediated through an imprecise graphic notation. Toward this goal, Feldman decoupled the notational image from the learned habits of its performance through enharmonic respellings (Feldman, 2008, p. 614). In the example below from *Violin and Orchestra*, a performer would have to renegotiate the 7/8 measure to see that the

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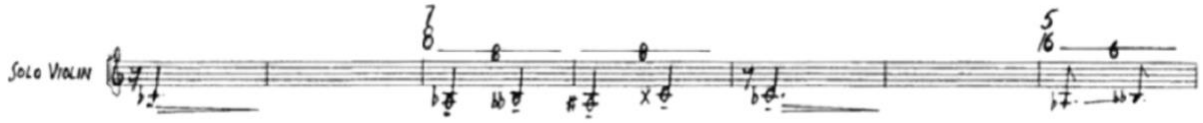
movement from B-double-flat to A# is rising and not descending as the habit of performance practice would suggest from a quick scan of the figure. This is what Feldman refers to as "notational images that do not make a direct impact on the ear as we listen. A tumbling of sorts happens in midair between their translation from the page and their execution" (Feldman, 2000, p. 143). The "tumbling of sorts" is a way to draw a performer into the immediacy of performance and away from a habituated response to musical notation. Loosening up the perception of musical notation brings Feldman back to the sounds themselves in which an interval such as a minor second is never hardened and can appear to varying widths, depending upon the physical and psychological demands of the musical context. Feldman never intended for his enharmonic respellings to be interpreted as microtonal deviations, which would have been too conceptual, but rather to suggest an ambiguous quality to the musical notation that was inherently more precise than his earlier graphic scores.

FIGURE 5 – Morton Feldman, *Violin and Orchestra* (1979), where the A-flat, B-double-flat, A#, Cx, C-flat in the 7/8 measure requires a "tumbling of sorts" to execute the notated figure on the violin.



Source: Universal Edition.

Feldman likens these enharmonic respellings to perception, "how quickly or slowly that note is coming at you, like [tennis player] John McEnroe. I'm sure that he sees that ball coming in slow-motion. And that's the way I hear pitch. It's coming to me very slowly, and there's a lot of stuff in there. But I don't use it conceptually" (Feldman, 2006, p. 198). Feldman's music draws a listener and performer just not into the material aspect of sound, but notated sound and the role that notation plays in composition. Notation never becomes symbolic and abstract but always carries a tactile and sensual quality, perhaps influenced by the many abstract expressionist painters that Feldman befriended. Feldman later remarked, "The degree to which a music's notation is responsible for much of the composition itself, is one of history's best kept secrets" (Feldman, 2000, p. 144).

As Feldman began to use notation to engage with sound, the grid itself became flexible by changing the scale of measurement yielding constant shifts within the meter scheme. "It's as if one

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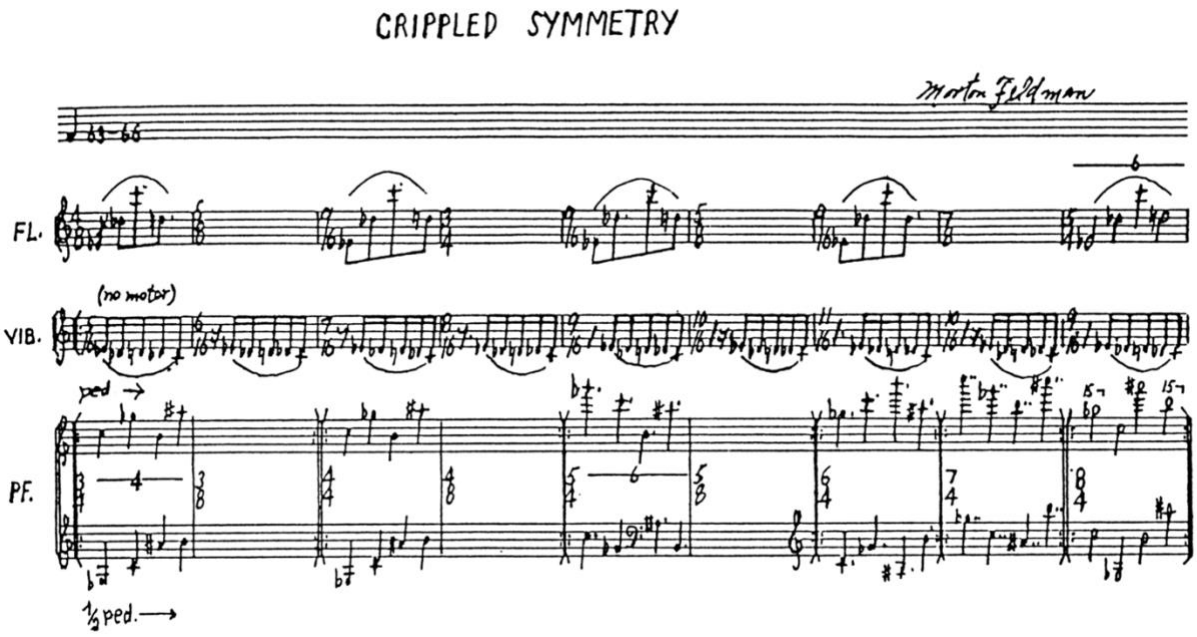
minute I'm working in inches, and the next minute I'm working in centimeters, and the next minute I'm working in millimeters. And then I put them all together, and then I just use two, and then I just use one, and then I just go into inches for example, and I use that very much as a kind of rhythmic energy" (Feldman, 2006, p. 200). The continually shifting meter was a way in which Feldman could change the aperture of the frame to magnify the sounds, demanding a constant alertness on the part of the performer. It was a means to wake the performers up through a required focus that the more approximate rhythmic notation in *Between Categories* could only maintain through specific moments of coordination. This required focus brought about a tension in the act of performance which would help to energize the production of sounds.

FIGURE 6 – Morton Feldman, *Crippled Symmetry* (1983), the "grid" is made flexible through a constantly shifting meter.



Source: Universal Edition.

Towards the end of Feldman's middle period of compositions with works such as *Violin and Orchestra*, it became clear that he was searching to resituate his music into unknown territory by "formalizing" the disorientation of a listener's memory that was only informally achieved in his earlier works (Feldman, 2000, p. 137). The grid and its quality of boundaries suggested a design that had much in common with Anatolian rugs, a growing passion of Feldman's, which contained "a checkerboard format with no apparent systematic color design except for a free use of the rug's colors

reiterating its simple pattern" (Feldman, 2000, p. 138). The color-scale of most handmade rugs appears more extensive than it is, due to the great variation of shades of the same color (termed *abrash*) – a result of the yarn having been dyed in small batches. As Feldman notes, "As a composer, I responded to this most singular aspect affecting a rug's coloration and its creation of a micro-chromatic overall hue. My music has been influenced mainly by the methods in which color is used on essentially simple devices. What could be best used to accommodate, by equally simple means, musical color? Patterns" (Feldman, 2000, p. 138-139).

FIGURE 7 – Anatolian rugs: although the patterns are symmetrical, every area of the rug is slightly different through subtle shifts of color, signaling authentic, hand-spun wool and natural dyes (referred to as *abrash*).

The use of an ever-shifting grid to illuminate ever changing patterns of musical figures was the means by Feldman entered his late style of composing. Gone were the single–note events of his first period of composition, perhaps viewed now as too primitive to enact his continuing search for a more complex musical experience. Gone were the tepid incursions into an expressive musical language that

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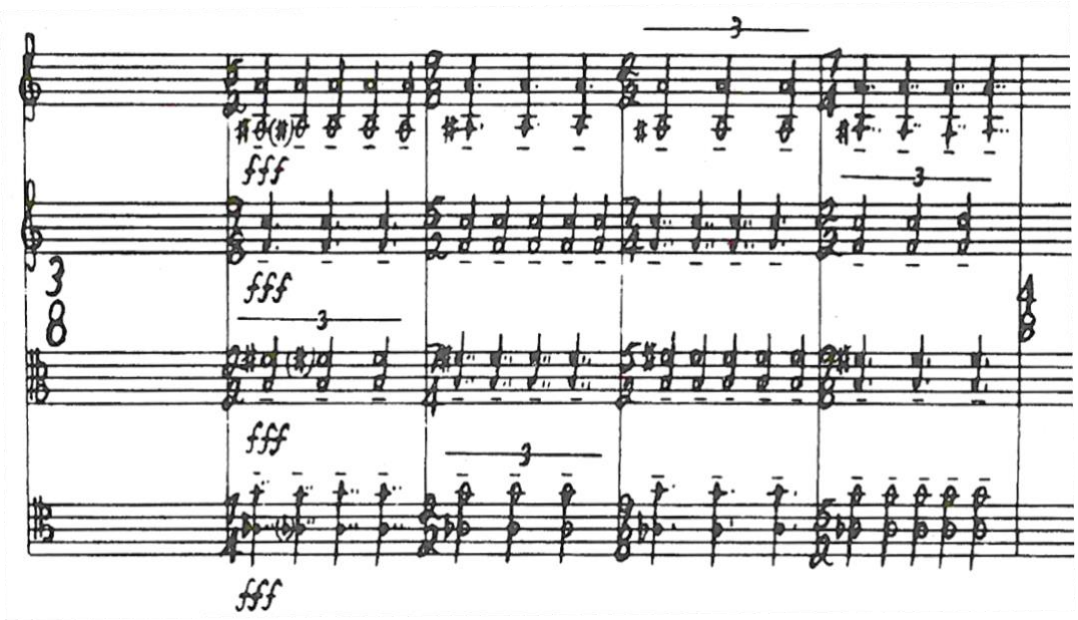
began to appear in his middle period works as his musical notation became more decisive. As Feldman states, "For me patterns are really self-contained sound-groupings that enable me to break off without preparation into something else" (Feldman, 2000, p. 141). It is with a complex juxtaposition of patterns that Feldman begins his late style of compositions with such works as *Why Patterns?, String Quartet, Trio for violin, cello, and piano, Patterns in a Chromatic Field, Triadic Memories, For John Cage, Crippled Symmetry, String Quartet II, For Philip Guston, Piano and String Quartet, Copic Light, For Christian Wolff, and For Samuel Beckett*. The risks become far greater in these later works as the exploration of stasis coupled with the repetition and subtle variation of patterns redefines the idea of compositional scale. Many of the late works, such as *String Quartet II, For Philip Guston*, and *For Christian Wolff*, exceed many hours in duration and a listener's experience becomes something radically different than anything previously known due to the composition's length. Musical patterns, framed through an ever-changing grid, allowed the pattern to vary each measure slowly over time, as well as independently in each instrument, creating a complex juxtaposition of patterns that produces a "charged stasis."

FIGURE 8 – Morton Feldman, *String Quartet* (1979), where patterns are juxtaposed from one measure to the next as well as independently in each instrument.



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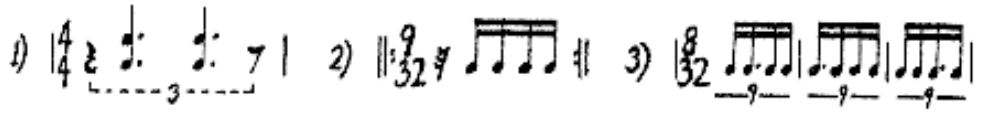
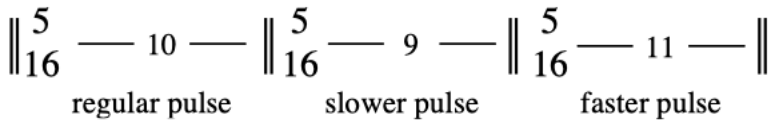
The measure in a grid frames a pattern and, to give the measure a more "tactile" quality, Feldman cripples the symmetry of the metrical framing by making durations slightly uneven with the use of augmentation dots, polyrhythms, and unequal rests to asymmetrically frame the pattern or, in Feldman's words, to "cripple" the symmetry of each pattern slightly to make manifest material imperfections in the figure.

FIGURE 9 – Examples of a metrical framing and crippling of symmetrical rhythmic figures.



Source: Morton Feldman, Give my Regards to Eighth Street, pg. 140

FIGURE 10 – The use of polyrhythms creates a plasticity in the speed of a pattern.



Source: Bunita Marcus, "Feldman's Rubato Notation and the Long Piece," unpublished manuscript.

The incorporation of polyrhythms allows for slight changes in speed within the pattern as a subtle form of variation. Polyrhythms, in Feldman's music, do not function as they would in a Brian Ferneyhough composition. Ferneyhough uses polyrhythmic groupings to fundamentally disfigure the gesture – inherited from a late Romantic language of musical expression – to delve deeper into the nature of expression itself. Rather, Feldman's polyrhythms alter the pattern, not for expressive purposes, but by embedding imperfections in a pattern's repetition to "formalize" the disorientation of a listener's memory. This disorientation occurs through a combination of literal and varied repetitions that work against a listener's ability to retain patterns as musical objects to be transformed and developed in a more traditional listening. The repetition of patterns and length of the compositions make it difficult for a listener to build expectations and, instead, forces one to continually be present in the music's unfolding.

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FIGURE 11 – Morton Feldman, *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* (1981) for cello and piano. The pattern remains the same, but the attack point continually varies.

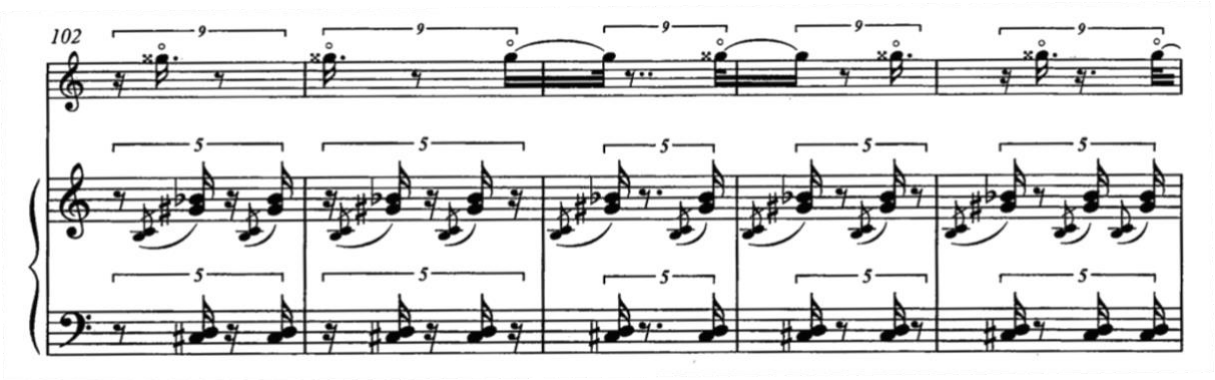

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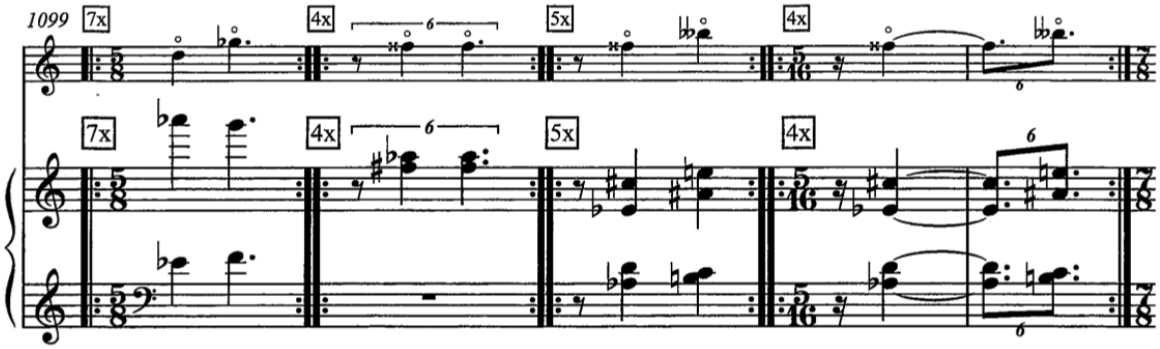
FIGURE 12 – Morton Feldman, *Patterns in a Chromatic Field*. Literal repetitions estrange patterns that are subtly reframed by the measure in various ways.



Source: Universal Edition.

The use of crippled symmetries in the metrical framing of patterns, literal repetitions, the augmentation dot, and polyrhythms are means to give the measure a sensual, tactile quality. A sensation of depth is achieved by using a series of measures to pattern material in subtle ways. This is why Feldman was influenced by Cézanne who achieved the effects of distance and depth entirely in terms of patterning through regions of color relief and brush stroke, just as the way Feldman would achieve the effects of depth through the repetition and variation of musical patterns (Feldman, 2000, p. 84).

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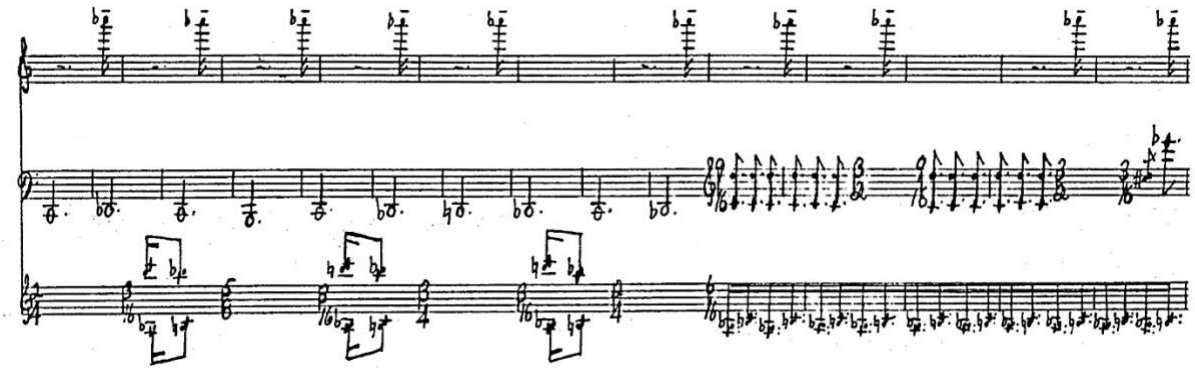
FIGURE 13 – "Quality and color-patch" in the paintings of Paul Cezanne

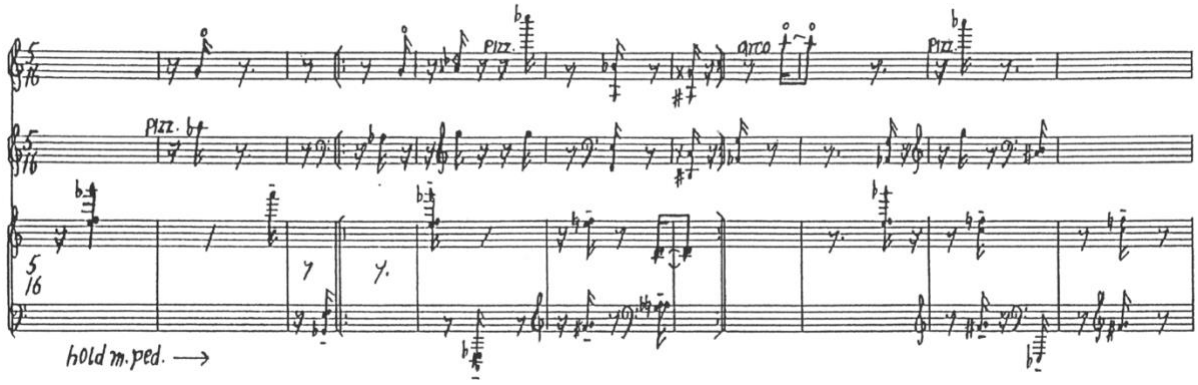
FIGURE 14 – Morton Feldman, *Why Patterns?* (1978), where the grid manifests in various regions of color relief independently in each of the three instruments which is why the meter is different in each musical stave.



Source: Universal Edition.

Feldman's *Trio* marks the beginning of his late works and is exemplary in the way that it repositions "beauty" in the listening experience. Perhaps *Trio* contains a critique of his earlier music where the idea of beauty can often become dogmatic, like an image that is entranced by its own reflection. Rather, in *Trio* it is dialectical in the sense that new listening spaces are continually opened, and the idea of beauty is rediscovered anew. Never static, the sense of beauty is ever changing and charged with energy. In *Trio*, beauty is something to work towards, never a given, and it is what makes this a singular work.

FIGURE 15 – Morton Feldman, *Trio* (1980), where the idea of beauty is continually rediscovered in the listening experience.



Source: Universal Edition.

As Feldman's late compositions became increasingly more ambitious through a sense of compositional scale, they begin to extend their reach into history. The abstention from "composing" through a refusal of a compositional syntax that binds a work's materials through abstract connections and relationships, possibly taking a listener away from a material engagement of listening, is replaced by forming connections to the music of the past. "Sound," as Feldman discovered, is not just a coupling of its instrumental production with its notated image but includes its inevitable aura of historical associations as well. As Feldman would remark about his later pieces, "History, in my own music, rather than taking away from me, I felt helped me because, you see, I'm always talking with historical references. I'm always involved with history. I felt it helped my music a lot" (Feldman, 2008, p. 862).

It was late in his life when Feldman described his music as "mourning something that has to do with Schubert leaving me" (Feldman, Brown, Metzger, 1972). Understanding Feldman's later music requires an understanding of those qualities of Schubert's music that so fascinated Feldman. As Feldman would describe in his lectures, what captivated him was "an atmosphere of Schubert. That kind of hovering, as if you're in a register you've never heard before. That's one of the magics of Schubert. To give you something in a register you all tinkle with, and it sounds terrific, and you hit that register, you'll make an image of that register, you'll focus into that register; you hear the notes in that register, and it's some place. Where is it? You go to the piano and you can't find it. That sense

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of place" (Feldman, 2006, p. 197). "It's within our reach but it's someplace no one else would put the melody, in terms of registration. And it makes the difference, all the difference. There is a lot to learn in Schubert, just where to put things. He is so effortless" (Feldman, 2000, p. 190-191).

It is this "effortlessness" that connects the music of Feldman to that of Schubert's, "effortlessness" coupled with sudden changes of atmosphere and the repetition of small differences. In both Feldman's and Schubert's music, time becomes space for a listener. Like a Schubertian theme, Feldman treats repetitions and their subtle transformations equally slowly and cautiously. The relationship between transformation and repetition leans very much toward repetition although this repetition is enlivened by means of minimalized transformations and a crippling of symmetric relationships. This spatial quality, which allows listeners to feel the plasmatic mobility and sense of depth in the musical materials, and above all the hovering quality derived from the rhythmic structure, conveys the ethereal aspect of Feldman's atmospheres. The feeling for a sensitivity of musical space, its depth and inner dynamics, are qualities that Feldman sensed particularly in Schubert's *Fantasie in F minor*. As Feldman remarked, "Offhand, I think of Schubert's *Fantasie in F minor*. The weight of the melody here is such that you can't place where it is, or what it's coming from. It's going along and even though I know what key it is and even though I know where it is on the piano, it is as if he discovered a place, and I'm saying, 'Where the hell is that?' And where it is, is creating that atmosphere" (Feldman, 2000, p. 26).

This atmosphere, for Schubert, is the landscape (Adorno, 2009, p. 20). We see landscape specifically at a remove from ourselves. Landscape marks distance, extreme otherness. It is not whatever we take into our line of vision when we are outdoors; landscape is something special that we choose to see as such. Landscape is like Feldman's music to the extent that it is at once material and ethereal. Neither can really be grasped; both are invariably just out of reach. What matters is the instant of their realization which can be retained by repeating the gaze, that is, by replaying the sonic image whether it is Schubert's themes or Feldman's patterns (Leppert, 2005, p. 58). Landscape, for Schubert, is that "sense of place" that Feldman describes. Schubert does not "compose" his music, in Feldman's sense of composing. As Adorno writes about Schubert's music, "Instead of developmental transitions, there are harmonic shocks, like changes in lighting, that lead us into a new realm, a new landscape, one that knows as little evolution as the one that preceded it" (Burnham, 2005, p. 32).

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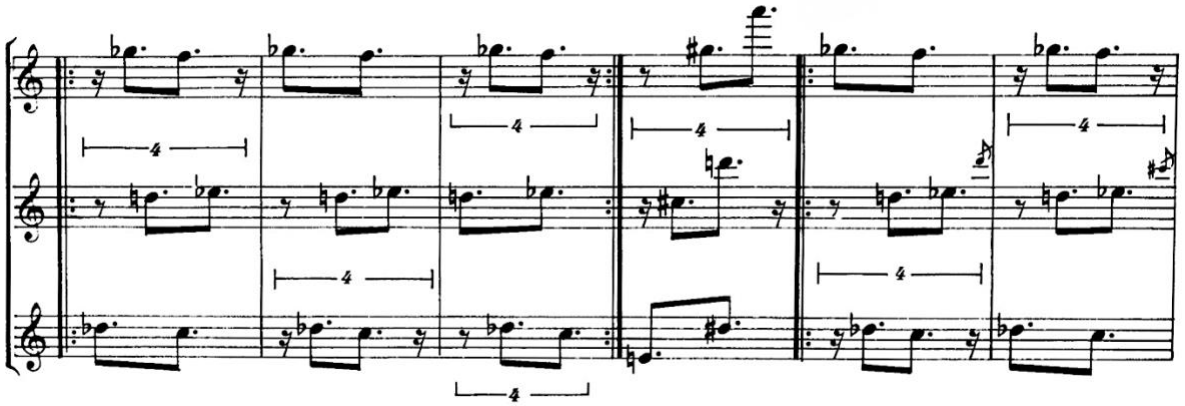
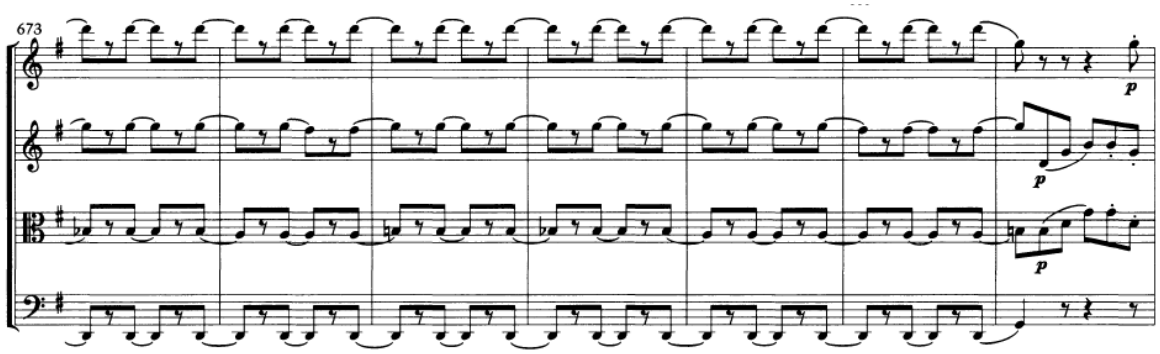
This is very similar to Feldman's changing harmonic fields as the patterns are continually repeated and varied. As the pattern changes, it can suggest an "harmonic shock" that opens into a new field or listening space. Through repetition, Schubert's themes create, as does Feldman's patterns, a rare and beautiful kind of charged stasis.

FIGURE 16 – Morton Feldman: *Triadic Memories* (1981).



Source: Universal Edition.

FIGURE 17 – Franz Schubert *String Quartet in G major, Finale* (1815). The visual look of this section almost resembles the visual look of a Feldman score.



Late in Feldman's life, he developed a friendship with the composer Iannis Xenakis. They would joke together that they were searching for similar things but at the opposite ends of the dynamic spectrum (*ppp* for Feldman and *fff* for Xenakis) (Feldman, 2008, p. 324). Both composers discussed discovering a sense of freedom in the listening experience as fundamental to composition (Feldman, 2008, p. 320). There is an interesting relationship between how each composer approached the idea of "sound". For Xenakis, sound was something to be captured by mathematical

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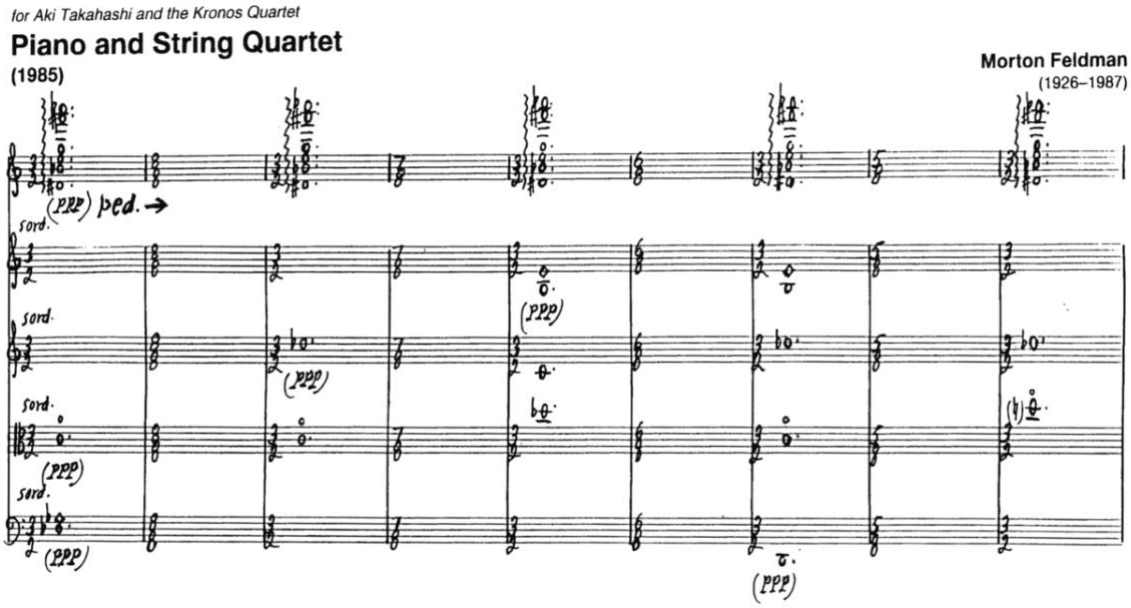
methods, akin to elaborate and intricate traps. For Feldman, sound required duration and repetition to fully appreciate its depth, like staring into a glistening lake for several hours. Sound, for both composers, represented something to be appreciated on its own terms and not through the fantasies or lens of a particular composer's mind. There is an austerity with both composers that respected the phenomenon of sound as something greater than any individual composer's ideas about music.

With Xenakis' elaborate mathematical traps, there was always something of a "let's see what we get" orientation, whereas with Feldman's charged stasis through varied repetitions it was always more of a "let's not push the sounds around" approach. Both composers refused traditional ideas of "composing" in favor of methodologies that brought their music closer to the realities of the world we inhabit: Feldman through intuitive processes that juxtaposed and repeated patterns that were minimally varied, drawing a listener into the material fabric of sound, and Xenakis through mathematical methods that would somehow sonically represent the processes of physical reality.

FIGURE 18 – Morton Feldman, *Piano and String Quartet* (1985).



Source: Universal Edition.

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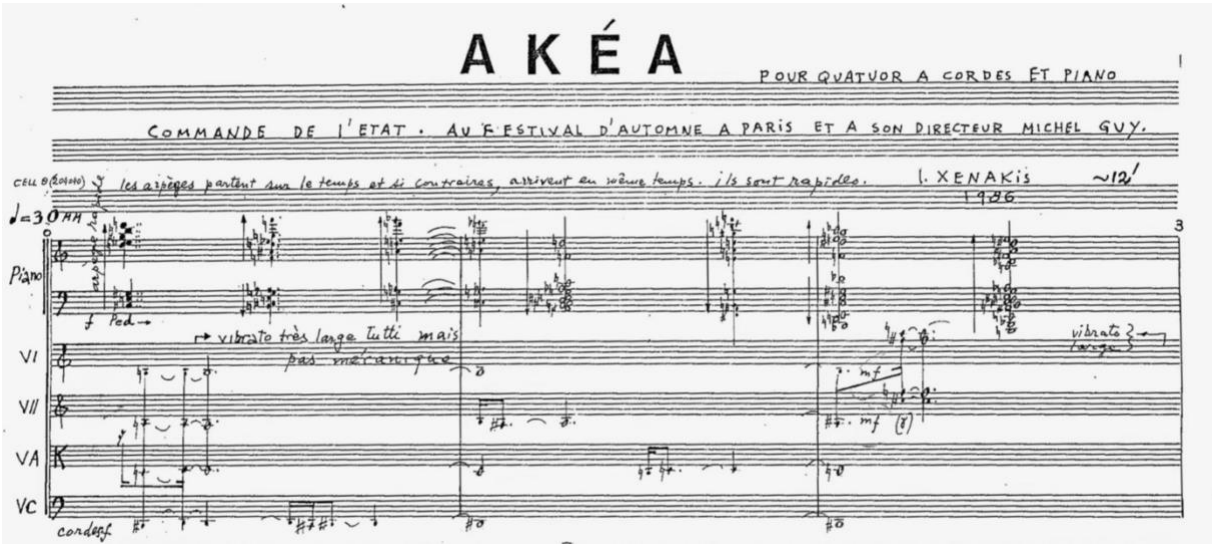
FIGURE 19 – Iannis Xenakis, *Akéa* (1986), where the opening, arpeggiated chords appear almost as a tribute to the opening of Feldman's *Piano and String Quartet*.



Source: Editions Salabert.

When so much of our current life is captured by distraction, we need experiences to remind us of how special – the composer Helmut Lachenmann would say, "magical" – our existence really is. Powerful artistic experiences can be a testament to the human condition with its utopian ambitions coupled with a deep sense of fragility. Feldman's music speaks to this condition, which is why experiencing Feldman's music, particularly the longer pieces he composed in later life, never leaves a listener unchanged. It engraves a sensitivity and feeling upon the listener with the hope that they carry this feeling into the world around them.

Feldman registered what is perhaps the greatest purpose in music today, its possibility to stay with us as listeners long after its performance has concluded, to embed itself in our memory as substance that confronts our own subjectivity and possibly reshapes it, to reinforce the idea that music can establish meaning for our lives.

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RESEARCH DATA AVAILABILITY

- Data use not reported; no research data generated or used.