Morton Feldman & The New York School

*How Art Created Music*

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Composers learn their craft from instruction and study of other composers, painters learn to paint through the guidance of other painters, but for a group of artist in the 1950s and ‘60s this was not the case. In the late 1940s there were three organizations of artist living in New York: The Artist School, Studio 35, and The Club. This formation of artist organizations was a cultural movement spurred by programs started in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A) under Roosevelt's New Deal. Eventually Studio 35 and the Artist School folded leaving only The Club. These organizations brought about the crucial exchange and borrowing of ideas that led to the development of Abstract Expressionism and focused the global art scene on The New York School. It was out of the New York School of Art that grew the music of composer Morton Feldman.

Abstract Expressionism is a term that critics at the time coined to identify the style, or group of styles that came about out of New York. The artists this term classified did not find it to appropriately describe their art, but over time the term gained significant currency. Robert Motherwell, an artist who considered himself a part of this school, categorized the artists as groups

“that tr[y] to find out what art is precisely through the process of making art. That is to say, one discovers, so to speak, rather than imposes a picture. What constitutes the discovery is the discovery of one's own feeling, which none of us would dare to propose before the act of painting itself.”

Abstract Expressionism is more of an over-intellectualization of the process of creating art. The focus shifted from conscious concept and ideologies to an emphasis on feelings. Critic Clement Greenberg later added,

“If the label 'Abstract Expressionism' means anything, it means painterliness: loose, rapid handling, or the look of it; masses that blotted and fused instead of shapes that stayed distinct; large and conspicuous rhythms; broken color; uneven saturation or densities of paint, exhibited brush, knife, or finger marks [...].”

Harold Rosenberg coined the more descriptive term Action Painting, which better describes Abstract Expressionism as an event. The canvas acts as a medium to preserve the in-

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teraction between the artist and the materials. The Artist no longer began to work with an image to be captured “he went up to it with materials in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.”

——— Morton Feldman ———

Morton Feldman was born in New York, January 12th 1926. He studied composition under Stefan Wolpe, a progressive composer who had fled to New York from Berlin. According to Feldman their lessons consisted of them arguing over what Wolpe called Feldman’s ‘Negation.’ Wolpe felt that Feldman did not develop his ideas and simply went from one to the next. Their lessons left Feldman disconcerted as to whether his desire to become a composer were false. In 1950 Feldman found salvation in the form of John Cage. Not only did Cage’s ideas influence Feldman, but through Cage, Feldman met the painters of New York. By this point the New York Painters and the bohemian scene that came with them were established for almost a decade. Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and William De Kooning all had held their first solo shows by 1945. The Club began to give lectures, and partake in ongoing discussion about all things pertaining to Art.

This is exactly what Feldman found so interesting about these artist, “they all searched within their own sensibilities [. . .] for everything connected with painting.” They did not speak about painting as a group of composers may have discussed rigid composition techniques, They spoke about things in a much more humanistic light. Feldman found harmony with these artists because they had no interest in their place in history, they “did not want the world to be different, [they] wanted the canvas to be the world.” Their art began to turn from the first half of the twentieth-century’s notion of modernism where the Idea was placed on a pedestal, to the artist working with the complete denial of a preconceived idea.

These are the artistic philosophies in which Feldman’s æsthetic developed. Feldman states that “the new paintings made me desirous of a sound world more direct, more immediate, more physical than anything that had existed heretofore.” He held true to what all these artist believed, that you cannot set out to create art with a preconceived idea, “the painter

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achieves mastery by allowing what he is doing to be itself.” Feldman came to a better realization of his aesthetic after buying a painting from friend and artist Robert Rauschenberg, that was similar to a collage but of a different quality. The painting consisted of a black canvas with painted black newspaper glued over. This made Feldman understand what it was to want neither life nor art, but what he called “in-betweenness.” Feldman describes, “I then began to compose a music dealing precisely with ‘in-betweenness’: creating a confusion of material and construction, and a fusion of method and application, by concentrating on how they could be directed toward ‘that which is difficult to categorize.’”

The Influence of Friends

Feldman throughout his life composed several pieces for Artists of the New York School. He attempted to realize in his music “a generalized application of the painters technique and the lessons he had learned from observing and talking to his friend in the New York School.” The first attempt came as the soundtrack for the 1951 Hans Namuth’s film “Jackson Pollock,” a collage of footage showing Pollock at work. Feldman comments that he composed the music

“as if he were writing for choreography, Pollock is doing a beautiful choreographed dance around the canvas, measuring, and as the paint falls it becomes the painting, it becomes indistinguishable [. . .] what he’s doing is in a sense what the thing is.”

It is possible that other aspect of Pollock’s style and technique influenced Feldman by means of what tools he used. Pollock in the late 1940’s began to mix other materials in his paintings and use new means of application, Pollock states,

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"I continue to get further away from the usual painter’s tools, such as easel, palette, brushes, etc. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives, and dripping fluid paint or heavy impasto with sand, broken glass, and other foreign material added."11

Feldman, in the instrumentation of Marginal Intersections (1951), uses a large orchestra with piano, xylophone, vibraphone, amplified guitar, two oscillators (one for high frequencies, the other for low), a sound-effects recording of riveting, at least six percussionists with a large selection of wood, glass (or less breakable substitutes), and metal objects (aluminum pots, etc. etc.). In this case Feldman began to get further away from the usual composer’s tools.

Feldman (1950s to ’60s) found himself constantly reworking, abandoning, and revisiting his notational techniques. This struggled developed into his use of a graphic notation language. Feldman divided his graphs horizontally to represent time and duration, and vertically to represent pitch and instrument. When asked in an interview about his graphic notation Feldman had this to say, "It came about because my music was becoming more complicated [. . . ] and I wasn’t interested in organizing everything,"12 but what Feldman really liked about this new system of notation was how it allowed him to work as Pollock worked.

"Pollock placed his canvas on the ground and painted as he walked around it. I put sheets of graph paper on the wall; each sheet framed the same time duration and was in effect, a visual rhythmic structure. What resembled Pollock was my ‘all-over’ approach to the time canvas."13

Feldman later discovered that he possessed little interest in freeing the performers, as the graphic notation’s lack of specificity of pitch and rhythm had done, but found more interest in freeing the sounds themselves. During the years 1953-1958 he attempted to rekindle his uses of traditional notation but found it to be “too one-dimensional [it was] like painting a picture where at some place there is always a horizon [. . . ] one always had to ‘generate’ the movement - there was still not enough plasticity”14


Feldman’s career obsessed over this idea of the sounds as the sounds themselves. He strove to remove all distraction from the sounds, all musical elements seemed to only serve as intrusions. The influence of Franz Kline’s work brought about this idea of intrusions.

“Franz Kline once told [Feldman] that it was only rarely that color did not act as an intrusion into his paintings. [. . .] In music it is the instruments that produce the color. And for [Feldman], that instrumental color robs the sound of its immediacy. The instrument has become for [him] a stencil, the deceptive likeness of a sound. For the most part it exaggerates the sound, blurs it, makes it larger than life, gives it a meaning, an emphasis it does not have in [Feldman’s] ear.”

Feldman attempts to realize this erasure of instrumental color in the 1962 composition for; soprano, horn, chimes, piano, violin, and cello, titled For Franz Kline, through a homogenization of instrumental characteristics. The most concrete of the instruments are the piano and the chimes due to their percussive attacks, and non-vibrato sustaining qualities. Thus Feldman limits the other instruments to only posses these qualities. This technique of instrumentation allows for the ear to hear past the deceptive likeness of sound and hear the immediacy of the sound.

In 1963 he composed another piece for friend and artist William De Kooning. This also demonstrated a parallel to the stylistic interest that De Kooning was expressing of simplification. As critic Thomas Hess puts it, De Kooning’s “forms became fewer, [. . .] larger, more simple [and colors] more concentrated on primary contrasts.” The music and score reflect this simplification. The score shows the succession of events via a dotted line which make the score more reminiscent of a drawing than a musical score. The music itself it dramatically sparse, beginning with a single note on crotales, it continues much the same, small, quiet, and direct.

Morton Feldman went on to write compositions for Philip Guston and New York School poet Frank O’Hara, each of them trying to express the influence of these artist upon his work and aesthetical ideas. The largest of these works, was a 1971 commission to compose a piece in memory of Mark Rothko, who had committed suicide the year before. This work is written with the focus not only on a particular Artist’s work and influence, but also with the location of Rothko Chapel as a strong contributing factor to Feldman’s composition.

Rothko Chapel is a non-denomination chapel, located in Huston, Texas. The interior is a space designed and amplified by Mark Rothko’s spacial and artistic ideals. The walls of the chapel are filled with fourteen black paintings by Rothko.


“To a large degree, [Feldman’s] choice of instruments (in terms of forces used, balance and timbre) was affected by the space of the chapel as well as the paintings. Rothko’s imagery goes right to the edge of his canvas and [Feldman] wanted the same effect with the music — that it should permeate the whole octagonal-shaped room and not be heard from a certain distance. The result is very much what you have in a recording — the sound is closer, more physically with you than in a concert hall.”17

Feldman and Rothko both shared a profound interest in the transportive powers of minor gradations in hues.18 The combination of both Feldman’s and Rothko’s work create an experience by means of a slow decent through the surface of the paintings, and the gradual passing from one shade or value to the next, through this each work becomes understood as a gateway.

Of all the artists that Feldman chose to compose music for, Rothko seems to be the closest visual representation of how Feldman felt about the creation of his music. Morton Feldman said that “the composer’s surface is an illusion into which he puts something real - sound. The painter’s surface is something real from which he then creates an illusion.”19 Perhaps this is why Feldman’s “Rothko Chapel” brings to life Rothko’s paintings, Rothko created illusions and Feldman gave these illusions reality.

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