

Morton Feldman

(1926-1987)

CRIPPLED SYMMETRY

DISC A (40:41)

- 1 REGION 1 (16:29)
- 2 REGION 2 (13:04)
- 3 REGION 3 (11:06)

DISC B (46:46)

- 1 REGION 1 (13:16)
- 2 REGION 2 (12:57)
- 3 REGION 3 (20:31)

Members of the California EAR Unit

Dorothy Stone: flute, bass flute

Arthur Jarvinen: vibraphone, glockenspiel

Vicki Ray: piano, celeste

Morton Feldman (and Crippled Symmetry)

By John Rockwell

The closest I ever got to Morton Feldman personally was going out with a young woman with whom he had just previously been in love and then, twelve years later and only two years before his untimely death at 51 in 1987, interviewing him for *The New York Times*. But one of the miracles of art, even a seemingly cool and abstract art like Feldman's, is how a love for the music gives the lover a (maybe false, maybe truer than psychologically true) sense of knowing the musician. I thought and think I knew Morty Feldman; the very confidence of that statement allows me to call him Morty, just as millions called an apparently dissimilar musician Lenny. Maybe such familiarity has something to do with Jewishness and living in New York.

Morty himself was larger than life, full of raucous wit and sexual and romantic passions and sheer bodily bulk. His music, especially as it refined itself into the meditative, protracted masterpieces of

his last two decades, seemed opposed to all that. One key to the inexorably growing respect and love his music now inspires worldwide is, I think, that even listeners who know him less well than I did can sense the vitality beneath the abstraction, the abundant, irresistible force of personality not so much suppressed as charged by the hushed, formal spirituality of his music.

Feldman was a seeker, and it took him a long but fascinating time to begin to find his true path. Placed by chance into a period of musical composition in which everything was up for grabs, every tenet of tradition and musical value subject to questioning, he sought his own voice through always innovative graph and graphic notation, through contacts with other composers, through wider inspirations from the larger artistic community all around him in the New York of the 1950's and 1960's.

In particular, it was his close association with John Cage in the 50's and his friendships with and admiration for a range of important, mostly Abstract Expressionist painters during the same decade, that stimulated his thinking and prompted his mature style - a style hardly fixed but steadily evolving, an evolution cut short cruelly by his death.

Like so many composers but in closer proximity, Feldman learned from Cage to question anything and everything, like the need for a narrative or analytically perceptible line in a piece of music, like the connections between composition and other arts and philosophical traditions. Or maybe better, he didn't so much learn those things from Cage as receive encouragement from his person and his example to pursue them more tenaciously and courageously than before.

From painters like Robert Rauschenberg, Philip Guston, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, Feldman learned first that to draw inspiration and ideas solely from a narrow circle of fellow composers was a sure path to sterility. Ideas can and should come from anywhere, then be adapted into one's own craft and method of work. He drew inspiration from metaphorical extrapolation, staring at paintings on his wall or rugs on his floor, thinking hard about how they worked, and then experimenting endlessly with how such ideas might be translated into sound. Shared characteristics of his later work, of which *Crippled Symmetry* is a fine example, are: extreme length, hushed volume, precisely colored sonorities, slow tempos. "Music can achieve aspects of immobility, or the illusion of it," Feldman wrote in 1981. "The degrees of stasis, found in a Rothko or a Guston, were perhaps the most significant elements that I brought to my music from painting."

Extreme length reached its apogee in the *String Quartet No. 2*, composed in the same year as *Crippled Symmetry* (1983). Uncut and uninterrupted, it would last six hours. The Kronos Quartet played it several times in the early 80's, but in a compressed version lasting about four and one half hours. I got them to agree to do the piece at full length for a Feldman tribute I organized for the 1996 Lincoln Center Festival (during which I also got Joan La Barbara to revert to the original tempo, and hence the original 90-minute length, from the 45-minute version she had been performing of *Three Voices*). But during rehearsals they began to feel physically and psychologically daunted, and withdrew.

Length for Feldman was, I suspect, partly a matter of just liking long pieces, and maybe of challenging musicians and audiences. But he believed that writing long pieces was primarily a matter of searching for the right scale. "Form is easy - just the division of things into parts," he told me in 1985. "But scale is another matter. You have to have control of the piece - it requires a heightened kind of concentration. Before, my pieces were like objects; now, they're like evolving things."

In 1981, in an article for a Harvard journal called RES reprinted as the liner notes for the Hat Hut recording of *Crippled Symmetry* and

Why Patterns?, Feldman wrote about his search for the proper scale of each piece: "It seems that scale (this subliminal mathematics) is not given to us in Western culture, but must be arrived at individually in our own work in our own way. Like that small Turkish 'tile' rug, it is Rothko's scale that removes any argument over the proportions of one area to another, or over its degree of symmetry or asymmetry. The sum of the parts does not equal the whole; rather, scale is *discovered* and contained as an image. It is not form that floats the painting, but Rothko's finding that particular scale which suspends all proportions in equilibrium."

In other words, Feldman's later compositions *had* to be long because the same elements squeezed in or chopped off in works of lesser scale might seem simplistic or uninteresting, whereas at the scale he determined for them, they took on an inevitability and even a grandeur that defined their being.

Hushed volume, vivid but subtly muted colors and slow tempos only heightened the effect of individual sonorities. Feldman chose his colors instinctively but with fanatical precision. Every piece arose from the instruments playing it. In the case of *Crippled Symmetry*, it is the exact hues of the flute and bass flute, the piano and celesta, and the glockenspiel and vibraphone that create the

piece's sound world. The patterns, symmetrical and then subtly asymmetrical ("crippled"), were chosen with the capabilities of those three linked instrumental pairs in mind: how long a flutist could breathe, how abrupt flute notes could sound percussive, how a piano makes notes that attack, decay and sustain, how the precise delicacy of the celesta shades into the overt percussiveness of the glockenspiel and vibraphone, how the vibraphone can sing and sigh like a flute.

Parts of *Crippled Symmetry* fade into near inaudibility, the notes spare and lonely. Others, especially by contrast, seem positively lush. Feldman was capable of cogent description of the patterning devices he used to build up his formal structures. But he was equally insistent that such patterns should not be subjected to an analysis that pretended that structure could be equated with meaning. For him, form was a "paraphrase of memory,"

a device to help the listener (and the composer!) sense form by helping to recall what came before. But it was scale, the overall shape and duration of a piece, that made sense of everything else.

A distinction has sometimes been drawn between eye music and

ear music, music that makes most sense when analyzed on the page vs. music that convinces primarily through auditory experience. For Feldman, it was the performance, not the inaudible act of notation, that made ultimate sense of the music. Through his lifelong experiments with the sense and visual esthetics of notation and his often arcane descriptions of his materials, Feldman had ample credentials as an eye musician. But it was not just the instruments but the instrumentalists (and singers) who ultimately made the piece. He wrote of "notational images" and "the tumbling of sorts {that} happens in midair between their translation from the page and their execution."

For those of us who love Feldman's music, it has been gratifying to watch his swelling worldwide posthumous recognition. He told me in our interview that a "flower girl" had come up to him in the 60's, walking along Eighth Street in Manhattan, and said, "You are our Schubert." I am sure that was gratifying to him, especially coming from a pretty young woman. But in his lifetime Feldman seemed caught midtown between the polemics of the downtowners and the uptowners. As a Cageian, he seemed too weird and uncontrolled for the fiercer uptowners. As a formally trained musician with tangible classical credentials (he studied with Stefan Wolpe, after all),

he seemed severe to some downtowners.

What has happened since is that the sterner modernists, especially the Europeans, have grown to respect Feldman's seriousness, his overt sense of musical history, his non-pandering exit strategy from the thickets of post-Serialism. Yet at the same time the minimalists and their audiences have found in him a kindred spirit, too, recognizing his spareness of means and protraction of scale as an antecedent of both the motoric minimalism of Steve Reich and Philip Glass and the mystical minimalism of Arvo Pärt and Giya Kancheli. And as any composer needs musicians to champion his music, so Feldman has found willing advocates among latter-day performers - even if not all of them can yet sustain a six-hour string quartet!

Like seemingly every great American composer, beyond his personal and esthetic influences and connections, Feldman was a loner, an outsider who created from the air an utterly individual body of work. It might seem odd that a man so full of life and loves and friends could be thought of as a loner. But he was a romantic, too, as intense and impassioned a romantic as 20th-century music produced. So maybe his isolation is not so odd, after all.

Founded in March 1981, the California EAR Unit has brought unparalleled versatility, virtuosity and dedication to its performances and is recognized today as one of America's finest contemporary chamber ensembles. The group has garnered awards locally and nationally ranging from the LA Weekly's *Outstanding Classical Artist of 1999* to the American Music Center's *1999 Letter of Distinction*.

The EAR Unit has toured throughout the United States and Europe and has been featured on many major festivals and series for contemporary music. Among numerous others, these venues include: the Tanglewood Festival; the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival; the Aspen Festival; the Bang on a Can Festival; the Ojai Festival; the Fromm Series at Harvard University; the Eastman School of Music; the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; the Wittener Tage für Neue Kammermusik in Germany; the Ars Musica Festival in Belgium; the Ijsbreker in Amsterdam; New Music America, the Kennedy Center (sponsored by the Library of Congress) Kiev Fest '95 (Ukraine), Weil Hall, a six concert tour of England sponsored by the Contemporary Music Network and a series of concerts for the Danish Radio at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art near Copenhagen.

The California EAR Unit has recorded for Bridge, Nonesuch, Crystal, New Albion, New World, Tzadik, O.O. Discs, and Cambria labels and has the distinction of being one of the first contemporary music groups to be featured on CD-ROM: Morton Subotnick's *All My Hummingbirds have Alibis* on the Voyager label. The ensemble has been featured in documentaries for the BBC and Japanese television and many of their concerts have been broadcast by American and National Public Radio, WGBH's "Art of the States" Program, Danish Radio and the International Rostrum of Composers.

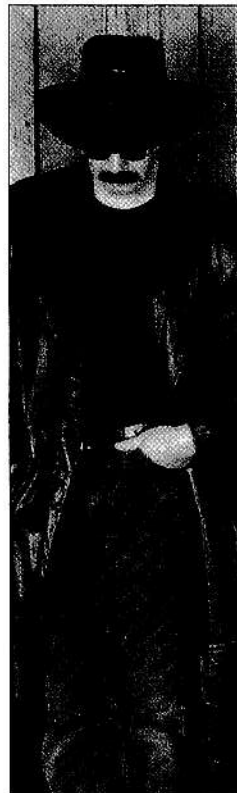


Dorothy Stone, flutist, composer and conductor has been active on the vanguard of the international contemporary music scene for over fifteen years and has been consistently hailed for her virtuosic and persuasive interpretations of the latest literature. She is a founding member of the highly acclaimed California EAR Unit, Ensemble in Residence at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and is also a founding member of California's most active chamber music ensemble, the Southwest Chamber Music Society. Ms. Stone has built a custom live electronic system for her solo flute composition, *Wizard Ball*, which has received prizes from the International

League of Women Composers, the Freeman Composition Contest, and the Ars Electronica Festival. Her solo album for New World Records entitled *None but the Lonely Flute* includes works by Milton Babbitt, Stephen L. Mosko (both written especially for her), John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Kathryn Alexander.

Arthur Jarvinen is well-known as a new music performer and composer, having been featured in prominent concerts and festivals throughout the U.S. and abroad for the past two decades. He is a founding and continuing member of the California EAR Unit, the percussion trio, The Antenna Repairmen, and his own ensemble, Some Over History. He also collaborates with guitarist/composer/programmer Ryan Francesconi in the duo Kam Fong As Chin Ho, performing on electronics, harmonica, and voice.

Jarvinen's music is released on O.O. Discs (*Edible Black Ink*, recorded by the California Ear Unit, and *Erase the Fake*, with Some Over History), M.A. Recordings (*Ghatam*, with the Antenna Repairmen), and the CRI, New Albion, and Artifact labels. His percussion work can be heard on recordings of music by Wadada Leo Smith, Morton Subotnick, Morton Feldman, Stephen L. Mosko, Joan La Barbara, Virko Baley, and others.





Vicki Ray performs widely as soloist and collaborative artist. A long-time champion of new music, her experience has ranged from premiering John Adams' *Road Movies* at the Kennedy Center to serving as the Chef du Chant on Peter Sellar's production of Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* at the Salzburg Festival and the Theatre Chatelet. As a founding member of PianoSpheres, an acclaimed solo series devoted to exploring the

less familiar realms of the piano repertoire, her playing has been hailed by the Los Angeles Times for "displaying that kind of musical thoroughness and technical panache that puts a composers' thoughts directly before the listener." Vicki is a member of the award-winning California EAR Unit and Xtet and head of the piano department at the California Institute of the Arts.

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