

John Tilbury - Piano

John Tilbury has given concerts and broadcasts of new music, including first performances, in many countries around the world. His solo recordings include Cage's Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano, from the seventies, and more recently the music of Cornelius Cardew, Howard Skempton, Christian Wolff and the complete solo piano works of Morton Feldman. He is also well known as an improvising musician, through his membership of AMM, one of the most distinguished and influential free improvisation groups to have emerged in the sixties.

In preparation for a talk I was to give on Feldman and Skempton, I wrote down the following notes as a kind of aide-mémoire.
John Tilbury 1996

On Softness

Softness – also length, and brevity. But 'not for its own sake'.
'Virtuosity of restraint' (Skempton). Alice (in Wonderland) had to accustom herself to new dimensions.
Soft 'as possible'. Relative. Degree and quality of softness depends on the acoustical and the psychological. Awareness of this dynamic quality within softness creates an extraordinary variety.
Softness draws the audience into the music - it encourages attentiveness and alertness. It also demands a 'transcendental' listening in its search for a revelatory experience. Softness heightens consciousness; also enhances the consciousness, for example, of the idiosyncrasies of the instrument at which one sits.

On the unintended

This respect for the unintended embodies the notion for the interpreter of nowness, of uniqueness.
Accidentalness is an active component, to be convincingly contextualized. The music responds to the contingencies of venue, of temperature, etc. etc. This, together with an emphasis on the sensual and physical qualities of the art of performance, creates an indivisibility of musician and instrument and at best of music and audience; an at-one-ness.
Accidentalness need not cause embarrassment; rather the accidental (unintended sounds) is to be enjoyed, nourished, sometimes indulged. The 'accidental' is a corollary of the extreme softness which Feldman demands and which necessarily involves risk. The player is playing on the edge, on the frontier between sound and no sound.
The dialectic of the extreme fingertip sensitivity and control - intention - and the recognition of the impossibility, the undesirability of control, the vulnerability of intention and the inevitability of failure. This gives the music its unique quality.

On interpretation

Thus it is a foolhardy and naive interpreter who attempts to predetermine and structure his interpretation of this music, for it unfolds organically, responding to the idiosyncrasies of the instrument, the shape and acoustic of the room, the general ambience. All are active components in the music-making. The music takes on a quasi-autonomous nature as if the musician is 'tracking' rather than consciously, 'professionally', producing the sounds; he/she steers a hazardous course in which phrasing and articulation, pedalling, are 'situational'.
Rather than expressing a 'form' Skempton's pieces express 'a state of being', and in this he resembles Morton Feldman. The music creates space and release for both performer and listener, providing an antidote to the congestion that blights our lives; and thereby satisfying a contemporary need.

On notation

In Feldman, as in Skempton, that which is given in the notation is essential; no rhetoric, nothing superfluous, the unity of pitch and register strikes me as a key characteristic and feature of the thinking of both composers.
Skempton's language is more prosaic, more down-to-earth, referential; this makes his music more accessible, on one level, but for Skempton, in terms of what his music is really about, it is more difficult - for him, and for his audience.
In Skempton's notations what is left unsaid is what he means but does not, cannot, write. What he means is precisely a lack of explicit intention; rather, his intention is 'blurred'. So the performer misses the point if he tries to figure out what Skempton 'means' by this 'lack of information'. The player is engaged in the act of interpreting; the material given him is no more and no less than he needs.

General

At its best Feldman's music can take our breath away, providing a revelatory experience, a transparency which has no need of argument. Feldman seems to occupy a metaphysical space and encroaches on the domain of spirituality normally associated with religion. Thus art wrests spirituality from religion; spirituality is not the private property of religion. Blake regarded human imagination as the essential divine quality by which God manifested himself in Man. This was tantamount to equating man with God and art with religion.
Perhaps with Feldman one can make a case for a kind of musical utopianism. He embraces all sounds; what he does is to focus on certain sounds so that there are different shades, varying degrees of focus.
"If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is - Infinite." Blake - Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

Howard Skempton

"Notti stellate a Vaghi" is a companion to Triadic Memories and a homage to Morton Feldman. It is nocturnal in tone and stellar in texture. In place of memories, we have an image of Tuscany.

Howard Skempton 18 April 2008

Howard Skempton was born in Chester in 1947, and has worked as a composer, accordionist, and music publisher. He studied in London with Cornelius Cardew from 1967 and Cardew helped him to discover a musical language of great simplicity. Since then he has continued to write undeflected by compositional trends, producing a corpus of more than 300 works - many pieces being miniatures for solo piano or accordion. Skempton calls these pieces "the central nervous system" of his work.

Over recent years, Skempton has concentrated increasingly on vocal and choral music. Of the major pieces, *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven* was written for the Belfast Philharmonic Society and first performed in the Waterfront Hall in 2000; *The Voice of the Spirits* was written in 1999 for the 750th anniversary of University College, Oxford and premiered in St John's, Smith Square in 1999. *The Bridge of Fire*, a setting of James Elroy Flecker, was first performed by the BBC Singers in May 2001, and *Lamentations*, for bass and theorbo, was premiered by Paul Hillier and Nigel North in July of that year.

Skempton's catalogue of chamber works is also as diverse as it is long, ranging from pieces for solo cello (*Six Figures*, 1998) and guitar (*Five Préludes*, 1999), to the Chamber Concerto for fifteen players, and the Concerto for Hurdy-Gurdy and Percussion which received its German première in 2003. 2003 also saw the Argentinian première of his string quartet, *Catch*, and the first performance of *That Music Always Round Me* given by the University of Manchester Chorus and Symphony Orchestra.

In 2004, the Wakeford Ensemble toured a specially commissioned work, *Eternity's Sunrise*, to nine venues around the UK, the Apollo Saxophone Quartet and Goldberg Ensemble performed *Ballade* around the north of England, and Ensemble Sentieri Selvaggi gave the Italian première of *Gemini Dances* at a sell-out concert at La Scala, Milan. Tendris for string quartet received its world première at the 2004 Huddersfield Festival of Contemporary Music, performed by the Smith Quartet. This piece went on to win the prize for 'best chamber-scale composition' at the annual Royal Philharmonic Society awards in May 2005, and the chamber prize at the BACS 'British Composer Awards' in December 2005.

Ben Somewhen, a commissioned piece from the BCMG for solo double bass and ensemble was premiered in April 2005. Inspired by the matchstick drawings of Ben Hartley depicting rural life, a "rural tour" of Ben Somewhen followed the first performance. Major performances in 2006 included *Lento* by the BBC Concert Orchestra in October at the QEH, and the Bozzini Quartet gave performances of Skempton's string quartets in Sweden and Canada.

2007 saw many concerts celebrating Skempton's 60th birthday, including performances by the Gemini Ensemble, the Schubert Ensemble of London, Tom Kerstens and his G+ Ensemble and Leamington Music. He was also a featured composer at the Vale of Glamorgan Festival and the Exon Singers summer festival.

Many of his compositions have been recorded, including the hugely successful *Lento* for orchestra on the NMC label by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the piano works performed by John Tilbury on the Sony Classical label and *Shiftwork* by Ensemble Bash, also on Sony Classical. 2001 saw the release of *Guild of the Flight of Song*, an acclaimed choral collection performed by the choir of Queens' College Cambridge under James Weeks. Vocal group Exaudi released a disc of his choral music in September 2007, again on the NMC label. The recording, entitled *Ben Somewhen*, also featured chamber works performed by the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group. A recording of Skempton's choral music by the Exon Singers will be released on Delphin Records in June 2008.

Works have been commissioned and performed by other leading artists including the BBC, Ensemble Bash, OKEANOS, and New Noise, and a chamber work for the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's 'Ensemble 10/10' was premiered in May 2007. Skempton recently completed a large scale orchestral work for the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and James Gilchrist, which was premiered at the Vale of Glamorgan Festival on 6th September 2007 and broadcast on BBC Radio 3, and a setting of John Drinkwater's poetry to celebrate 30 years of the Coull Quartet's residency at Warwick University, which was performed by the Coull Quartet and the University of Warwick Chamber Choir in March 2008. Upcoming commissions include a large-scale ensemble piece for BCMG.

Morton Feldman

*"Triadic Memories" [is] probably the largest butterfly in captivity [and] the work appears to have more to do with shape - the shape of a leaf and not the tree.
The tree is there of course but next to other trees obscured in the jungle of historical expectations. The only "technical" remark I could make is that the grace note is never crisp, somewhat delayed with its own isolated tender ring.*

Morton Feldman 4 October 1981

Morton Feldman was born in New York on January 12th 1926. At the age of twelve he studied piano with Madame Maurina-Press, who had been a pupil of Busoni, and it was she who instilled in Feldman a vibrant musicality. At the time he was composing short Scriabin-esque pieces, until in 1941 he began to study composition with Wallingford Riegger. Three years later Stefan Wolpe became his teacher, though they spent much of their time together simply arguing about music. Then in 1949 the most significant meeting up to that time took place – Feldman met John Cage, commencing an artistic association of crucial importance to music in America in the 1950s. Cage was instrumental in encouraging Feldman to have confidence in his instincts, which resulted in totally intuitive compositions. He never worked with any systems that anyone has been able to identify, working from moment to moment, from one sound to the next. His friends during the 1950s in New York included the composers Earle Brown and Christian Wolff; painters Mark Rothko, Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg; and pianist David Tudor. The painters in particular influenced Feldman to search for his own sound world, one that was more immediate and more physical than had existed before. This resulted in his experimentation with graph notation, "Projection 2" being one of his earliest scores in this idiom. In these scores the players select their notes from within a given register and time structure. Because these works relied so heavily on improvisation Feldman was not happy with the freedom permitted to the performer, and so abandoned graph notation between 1953 and 1958. However, the precise notation he used instead during this period he found too one dimensional and so returned to the graph with two orchestral works: "Atlantis" (1958) and "Out of last pieces" (1960). Soon after these appeared a series of instrumental works called "Durations", in which the notes to be played are precisely written but the performers, beginning simultaneously, are free to choose their own durations within a given general tempo.

1967 saw the start of Feldman's association with Universal Edition with the publication of his last graphically notated score, "In search of an orchestration". Then followed "On time and the instrumental factor" (1969) in which he once more returned to precise notation, and from then on, with only the exception of two works in the early 1970s, he maintained control over pitch, rhythm, dynamics and duration.

In 1973 the university of New York of Buffalo asked Feldman to become the Edgard Varèse Professor, a post he held for the rest of his life.

From the late 1970s his compositions expanded in length to such a degree that the second string quartet can last for up to five and a half hours. The scale of these works in particular has often been the cause for the controversy surrounding his works, but he would always be happy to attempt to explain his reasoning behind them:

"My whole generation was hung up on the 20 to 25 minute piece. It was our clock. We all got to know it, and how to handle it. As soon as you leave the 20 to 25 minute piece behind, in a one-movement work, different problems arise. Up to one hour you think about form, but after an hour and a half it's scale. Form is easy – just the division of things into parts. 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."

Nine one-movement compositions by Feldman last for over one and a half hours each.

One of his last works, "Palais de Mari" from 1986, is unusual for a late composition in that it is only twenty minutes long. This came about from a request from Bunita Marcus, for whom it was written, for Feldman to sum up everything he was doing in the very long pieces and to condense that into a smaller piece. Knowing his sense of time, she asked for a ten minute work, knowing that it would probably be twice that length.

In June 1987 Morton Feldman married the composer Barbara Monk. On September 3rd 1987 he died at his home in Buffalo aged 61.