

On performing *For Christian Wolff*

"As I was writing the piece I found that for the first time in my life I consciously decided to write a piece that was austere....And then when I got back, for whatever reason, I titled it *For Christian Wolff*."

We may balk at Feldman's description here. For our contemporary sensibilities the word 'austere', (e.g. the scourge of 'austerity'), does not sit easily with a work of such pristine beauty.

Feldman talks about his 'monolithic' music of the sixties where, as in the later work, *Palais de Mari* and for Christian Wolff, for example, he avoids fragmentation. 'You can have a lot of detail', he says, 'and it is not noticeable....' The moves are within the monolith, keeping it going, but they are discreet. Feldman calls for Christian Wolff a 'rondo of everything'. Everything is recycled and comes back but modulated in some way so that the listener hears them differently. In relation to for Christian Wolff the question of form arises and a 'rondo of everything' sums it up succinctly. ('Form', someone once waspishly stated, is what musicologists use to keep themselves in business.)

It might be said, by those who are concerned with such matters, that Feldman's compositional strategies serve to dissolve form. Perhaps it is the organicity of the morphology of Feldman's music which makes formal analysis irrelevant? The trajectory of a Feldman performance may be influenced by the very first bar, by the unintended emphasis of a note, an idiosyncratic blurring of the rhythmic profile, a dynamic which is not quite what one had intended, or, simply, by a mistake. All this is a million miles away from 'form'.

'Scale' is something else; scale is about range and scope. One can feel or anticipate the potency of scale as a performer, as one sits at the piano, or with the flute, waiting to begin for Christian Wolff. This awareness of scale (rather than form) is what can profoundly influence the role of the performer, which is to present the work in all its richness and potentiality; its multi-meanings.

Formal concerns do not easily escape accusations of superficiality. Feldman said: "the form is easy - just a division of things into parts. But scale is another matter." So can one find different musical strategies for going 'beyond' form in Feldman's later music? Rather than expressing a 'form' this 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. The form is dissolved; and there is no blueprint.

There are many bittersweet moments in *For Christian Wolff* and during our extensive rehearsals Carla Rees and I became intensely aware of this. And there are long stretches of stasis, the 'frozen moment' of stasis (It was Pollock who helped Feldman to understand and incorporate the notion and practice of 'stasis' in his music). But an awareness of stasis also presupposes an alertness, a readiness to act, to respond to the unexpected. So it's a kind of paradoxical situation; enjoying, living the present, but being ready for a future fraught with uncertainty, in which stasis can be ruptured. To negotiate these changes is a challenge to the interpreter.

At the beginning of *For Christian Wolff* Feldman prescribes, as he often does, the tempo 63-66. And the dynamic marking is ppp, with sustained pedal throughout. In a discussion with Greek composer, Iannis Xenakis, Feldman remarked that a performance of his music had been, in his opinion, "a little stiff...I wanted them to breathe with each other more naturally. Breathe rather than count...They counted correctly. Maybe that was it, that it was a little too mechanical in the counting."

Bearing this in mind, Carla and I determine the 'same' pulse in different ways, so the pulse fluctuates; our individual pulses interact. We prefer not to count; we feel the pulse. The music floats above the pulse. And the die is cast in the opening minutes. We are feeling our way forward together. This means, in practice, that sometimes the tones collide, or, for example, what should be a quaver sounds more like a grace note.

To achieve a balance, particularly between piano and celeste, makes demands both technically and artistically because the relationship between the three instruments is a shifting one. Right at the start, with the little chromatic motif, the celeste tones are masked by the piano and flute - they seem to live in the shadow of the music - with the celeste faintly echoing the piano tone (This is of course mainly because of the low dynamic I have chosen to set the volume control on this recording). In fact, the celeste tones are variously inaudible, but I know they are there!

During the (recorded) performance there are places when the flute dynamic involuntarily drops, which hadn't happened in rehearsal. I have to make an instant decision in respect of the piano/celeste relationship to the flute. Elsewhere in the piece the intensity of the flute sound diminishes. This necessarily elicits a response from me because the sound is 'one' (not 'three') . And, in return, Carla has to deal with my idiosyncratic moments/decisions/mistakes. In general the celeste volume seems to be subdued. I try to make a virtue of this; it provides another dimension. (Occasionally, embarrassingly, in the heat of the moment I get the piano and celeste the wrong way round.)

Within this togetherness; something of significance is happening. Genuine spontaneity (unpredictability) is something which is absolutely crucial. It is at the heart of Feldman's music: the idea that every sound has a unique quality. There can be nothing routine in Feldman performance. There are so many contingencies, so many things that can happen which can alter the way you play a particular chord, make a particular sound, in relation to any previous performance. Playing Feldman is about living your life. And it is known for people to weep when they hear it.

Like nature, Feldman's music has an indestructible quality, for all its surface fragility. As a personality Feldman was abrasive but brittle; he could be insensitive to the feelings of others but one sensed in him a vulnerability. "The real for me is how I can leap into this thing which I call life. Music must have sensuous dimension", he once said. The sensuality of touching the instrument. Often, before I start playing the piano I gently caress the instrument. Comparable to love-making, you approach your lover with a degree of trepidation; there is no clear objective. Then, the first touch.

These notes may be read in conjunction with those of the two previous Feldman releases: *Triadic Memories* and *For Philip Guston*. Each contains material germane to the other two.

Osterfestival Tirol (Galerie St. Barbara)

This festival was founded in 1989 in Hall in Tyrol and Innsbruck. It is part the Galerie St. Barbara (association existing since 1968) that since it's beginnings focuses on contemporary art forms and expressions. The link and relation between the different arts is the main topic of the festival: from music (ancient, contemporary, classical non-european) to art, from dance and performance to theatre,... During the years, Hall in Tyrol has become – due to this private institution – a meeting point for Avantgarde and a centre for contemporary thoughts with a high international value. Private friendships arose from this work and invitations to composers like György Ligeti, John Cage, Dieter Schnebel, Christian Wolff, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Steve Reich, Conlon Nancarrow, Georg Fr. Haas and many more. Since the contact with John Tilbury – one of the most important interpreters for Feldman's music – in the 70s, the festival and the association is dedicated to the music of Morton Feldman and has produced the CD "All piano" with Feldman's complete solo piano works, interpreted by John Tilbury.



John Tilbury

For John Tilbury bio and more information, please Google: John Tilbury pianist.



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