

Feldman CD notes for another timbre website

The music featured on these two discs testifies to the intensity of Feldman's experimentation with notation and sound during the 1950s and 60s. Considering the works chronologically one senses the composer trying out, teasing and developing means of notation to get close to his desired elasticity of time and duration. His experiments with indeterminacy of pitch – whereby Feldman specified only the register (high, middle, low) of sound rather than the exact notes themselves – do not feature here; after trying this method in a series of works in the early 1950s he abandoned the technique, with a few notable exceptions straying into the 1960s, because he was too 'attached' to the pitches he wanted. All notes are specified exactly in the pieces on these discs – the experiments are instead with duration and time. Durations of sounds are variously free, dependent upon the decay of the sound, worked out in coordination with other players, as well as at times exactly and complexly notated within a specific tempo. Sometimes the freedoms of notating time are worked through in combination with listening closely to the sounds of other players, allowing patterns to emerge without forcing the situation, whilst at other times different ways of notating time are combined, creating false alignments in the score and thus placing greater emphasis upon the individual performer's journey.

The piano is an inherently indeterminate instrument - any given note will have a very different afterlife dependent upon the touch of the performer, the register of the note, the type and size of the piano, the acoustic of the space in which the piano is situated, and so forth. Put six or seven of these notes together as a chord and the situation becomes complex. In all these pieces Feldman specifies the dynamics to be quiet, or as quiet as possible, or very quiet. However the notion that Feldman's music is 'about' quiet-ness is a misconception: the subject is sound, and in order for that subject to be properly attended to those sounds are quiet. The range of pieces presented here depict a very many different types of quietness – from the delicate sounds of *Piano Three Hands* and *Piano Four Hands* to the massed complexities of *Two Pieces for Three Pianos*. Quietness in Feldman's piano music is a performance instruction which is everything to do with touch and the desire to really *hear* the instrument. As such these recordings are a celebration of the piano (its tone and its decay) and piano playing, for all its frustrations and challenges – an instrument which is at the heart of Feldman's music.

The earliest work recorded here is *Intermission 6* (1953), for one or two pianos. The score consists of a single page of music across which are scattered fragments: single notes, chords, the occasional 'grace' note, using the range of the keyboard, all redolent of Feldman's harmonic and pitch sensibility. The performers move through these in any order, a rare freedom within Feldman's music, and one which he was not to make use of again.

Piece for 4 pianos (1957) introduces a notational and formal procedure which proved to be considerably more fruitful, influencing works composed even twenty years later. All four pianists read from the same single page of score but move through it at their own pace. Thus the sequence of sounds remains constant but the duration of each sound is entirely free (within the parameter of 'slow'). The resultant shimmering effect, as the four pianists variously play the same chord, sometimes with reiterations, pre-empts aspects of later minimalism, and indeed the performance process is not entirely dissimilar from that of Terry Riley's *In C* composed a mere seven years later.

Two Pianos (1957) and *Piano Four Hands* (1958) were composed within eighteen months of *Piece for 4 pianos*. The former follows exactly the same procedure as *Piece for 4 pianos* whilst *Piano Four Hands* assigns different material to each pianist, but maintains the principle of moving through the material independently. *Piano Three Hands*, also composed in 1957, is distinct, consisting of regular, albeit slow, moving events, recalling an earlier work for solo piano *Piano Piece 1952*.

A group of five works, each with the title *Durations*, composed during 1960-61, explore this compositional device further and to great effect. Yet at the same time Feldman was exploring other ways of dealing with duration and time, perhaps the result of unsatisfactory performances of these other works. In solo works he investigated options for making use of stemless noteheads, combined with pauses, to obtain a music free of metred time, though in some works combining this technique with more strictly notated music, as if to compare resultant performances of both notations.

In ensemble works he combined the stemless noteheads with a means of notating sequences of sounds in relation to other instruments, so that the end of one instrument's sound cues the beginning of another instrument's sound. It is quite possible that Feldman was in this way influenced by the new 'cue-ing' notations of his friend Christian Wolff, in pieces such as *Duet II* (1961) and *For Five or Ten People* (1962). Works featured on these recordings notated in this way are *De Koening* (1963), *Vertical Thoughts I* (1963) and *Four Instruments* (1965), each of which are characterised by a sparseness of sound due to the predominance of sounds played in sequence rather than as vertical masses.

Two Pieces for Three Pianos (1966) is a transitional and quite remarkable work. The first piece combines two different notation types: the first and second pianos read only stemless noteheads, with the instruction to play each event once the decay of the previous event has begun; the third piano part is fully notated with very precise durations, metre and ever-changing tempi. Each player follows their own part dogmatically – there is very little room for listening and responding to the other players. The texture is extremely dense, consisting of predominantly thick chromatic chords in all three pianos which gradually thin out toward the end of the piece. There is no coordination and the piece thus ends sparsely as the pianos 'drop out' and the first two pianists play high and delicate events. The second piece is more coordinated, mostly using the form of notation and sequence used in *Vertical Thoughts I*, combining stemless noteheads with occasional metred and rhythmically precise notation.

False Relationships and the Extended Ending (1968) and *Between Categories* (1969) are perhaps the two most extraordinary works featured here if considering the notational characteristics alone. Feldman divides the ensemble into two smaller ensembles: violin/trombone/piano and cello/chimes/2 pianos (toward the end subdivided further as chimes/piano and cello/piano) in *False Relationships...*; and two equal ensembles of violin/cello/chimes/piano in *Between Categories*. The two ensembles in both pieces follow a mixture of notations, variously strictly notated, with changing tempi, and stemless noteheads, played in sequence and as simultaneities. Whilst the ensembles are notated synchronously on the page, one above the other, at any point in time one ensemble may actually be reading from one, two or possibly three pages apart from the other. Even when both ensembles look on the page as if they are notated similarly, with matching bar lines, on closer look the read will notice that the time signatures and tempi markings of one ensemble are entirely different from the other. It is as if Feldman is playing some kind of visual game which bears no

relation to the aural result. However, the music is very carefully thought out and where one ensemble appears to be significantly adrift from the other in terms of the notated score it is more than likely that the gap will close at some later point and the ensembles become more aligned aurally. Whilst none of this is apparent to the listener, at the same time it is clear that there are very definite periods of harmonic synchronicity and other times where the ensembles feel to be quite separate. Likewise, certain ideas and pitches are tossed between ensembles, giving the impression of precisely coordinated events when in actuality the detail of such imitative patterns is the result of performance-based chance, albeit one which occurs within a meticulously planned framework.

Feldman was not to return to these techniques. The works which followed, in the early 1970s, are more traditionally and simply notated, serving different compositional aims and agendas. The complexity of these late 1960s works is echoed in the extraordinary and bafflingly notated works of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Feldman's experiments with notation, decay, duration and ensemble continued until the end of his life, but always with an attentive ear and technical mastery which heightens the ungraspable and transitory qualities of sound.