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MUSIC

MUSIC; Where Minimal and Maximal Meet

By KYLE GANN

MORTON FELDMAN once described his Second String Quartet as a nightmare. That has certainly seemed to be true from the standpoint of the groups that have played it. In a splendid new recording by the Ives Ensemble on Hat Art, the piece is five hours long: 293 minutes, to be exact. If you lift your right arm into the position to hold a violin bow and imagine keeping it there for five hours, you will see the problem.

The piece is a medieval torture device for string players. The otherwise adventurous Kronos Quartet used to rush through it in four hours and, after a few such trials, refused to play it, even infamously canceling a planned 1996 performance at the Lincoln Center Festival. Since then, the younger Flux Quartet has played the work in New York, and now members of the Ives Ensemble of the Netherlands have made a long-awaited first recording.

But Feldman was not thinking merely of length when he called the piece a nightmare. Born and raised in New York, Feldman was a musical revolutionary, known for his long association with John Cage, for writing superlong works with dynamics marked "as soft as possible" and, more recently, for being perhaps the most influential composer of the late 20th century.

"It's like a jigsaw puzzle that every piece you put in fits," Feldman said of the quartet, "and then when you finish it, you see that it's not the picture. That was the idea. The jigsaw puzzle, everything finishes, and it's not the picture. Then you do another version, and it's not the picture. Finally you realize that you are not going to get a picture."

The Second String Quartet, from 1983, is indeed made up of hundreds of shards, juxtaposed as in a puzzle or, perhaps more relevantly, as with the patches of color in one of the Persian rugs Feldman loved to collect. Along with Stravinsky, Messiaen and Ralph Shapey (who has never received credit for it), Feldman was one of the 20th century's great musical imagists.

There is no syntax in his music; there are no transitions, no connective tissue and certainly none of the contrapuntal rhetoric one associates with string quartet writing. Instead there are pairs of chords that recur over and over; four-note repeating melodies in pizzicato; breathy tone clusters; D sharp leading to C sharp again and again; and about every 15 minutes, an arch-shaped theme that keeps coming back like the eternal unanswered question.

It is generally easy to characterize Feldman's mature music as sustained notes gliding by at different rates in different instruments. But his music for strings tends to depart from the pattern: drier, spikier, written

more in unison ensemble rhythms. Although the Second Quartet sometimes lapses into a kind of slow atonal waltz for a few minutes, it is otherwise obsessed with four-ness. Groups of four chords echo in the silence, and four-note ostinatos follow one another, sometimes lurching into the motoric repetitions of Minimalism. If anyone wants to make the case that Feldman was, after all, a Minimalist, this piece is Exhibit A.

The case has often been made. (In a 1987 obituary of Feldman, The New York Times referred to him as both a Minimalist and an expressionist, an awkward but arguable pairing.) In an era that rejected repetition of any kind, Feldman used repetitive figures as early as his "Structures" for string quartet, of 1951, long before Terry Riley, Steve Reich and Philip Glass created a splash with tape loops and repeated phrases in the mid-60's.

Yet Feldman's repetitions were always hesitant, irregular, creeping back as ambiguously as dim memories, never propulsive and metronomic like those of Mr. Reich and Mr. Glass. When Feldman started making his music more repetitious again in the 1970's, he showed anxiety about possibly being seen as a Minimalist epigone. At one point, he pulled his composition student Peter Gena into his office, showed him a new score and asked, "Tell me, do you think it sounds too much like Steve Reich?"

Repetition notwithstanding, Feldman's music never sounds like Mr. Reich's. Momentum is no part of the Feldman vocabulary. Quite the contrary, his music sounds as if it could die away at any moment, as if it were inching through unmarked terrain and pondering whether it should turn aside or even continue at all. Like others in avant-garde musical circles of the 1950's, Feldman was intrigued by the mobiles of Alexander Calder, and he sought ways in which music could replicate the mobile's gradually metamorphosing shapes. Credit for having achieved that effect usually goes to Feldman's close colleague Earle Brown, whose "open form" pieces like "Available Forms I" allow the conductor to improvise with set passages of music.

But Feldman came up with his own brilliant solution: repeated figures in different instruments floating at different rates and recurring irregularly so that the relationship between figures keeps changing. This mobile technique appears most clearly in the long chamber works Feldman began writing in the 1970's, especially in the cycle for flute, keyboard and percussion: "Why Patterns?," "Crippled Symmetry" and "For Philip Guston" (the last, another work of five hours or so).

So while there are repeated images in a Feldman work, there is rarely literal repetition. The Second Quartet is possibly the major exception. Some passages rock with a slow pulse, others bounce in clocklike pizzicato, and a few even achieve a kind of quiet Terry Riley-ish ebullience likely to be described with that ubiquitous euphemism of Minimalist critical dialogue "hypnotic."

Rather than let that word cover the usual ground, let's examine it. Hypnosis, as the Random House Dictionary of the English language defines it, is "an artificially induced trance state resembling sleep, characterized by heightened susceptibility to suggestion." Trance is not what Feldman's music induces, at least not for me. His repetition of chromatic, dissonant motifs of two to four notes doesn't draw the mind into the music but instead pushes it away.

Once you realize that two chords are going to alternate unchanged for a while, it becomes hard to keep focusing. Then the pattern changes, and your attention revives. You gradually realize that the music has

changed, or you suddenly recognize something you heard earlier, you think, but the pieces of that puzzle never make a picture. It's a pleasantly loose mode of listening, better attuned than the linear narrative of the 19th-century symphony to the late 20th century, an era of aural overstimulation and conflicting sound bites.

Feldman called his compositional method one of "negation." This operates on many levels. On the most minute level, each pitch tends to be canceled out by another. Over and over in this quartet, the upper strings wave back and forth between C sharp and D sharp, this minimal melody ever contradicted by a dissenting, low pizzicato D natural in the cello.

On a larger scale, Feldman quietly fakes out the listener with the discontinuity of his repetitions. A motif will repeat in different registers for three or four minutes, pause for a couple of chords, then start right back up again. "That was just to see if you were still listening," the music seems to be saying. Mr. Reich once wrote of his own music that "obviously everyone within hearing distance should be put into ecstasy." Feldman could have written that everyone within hearing distance of his music should be compelled to stop and think twice.

The continual negation in Feldman links him to Samuel Beckett, the playwright he most resembles, just as Calder is the sculptor he most resembles; Mark Rothko, the painter; and Kafka, the novelist. Feldman once hounded Beckett for an opera libretto, and the playwright finally handed him a few lines that Feldman turned into his opera "Neither," of 1977. What he shares with Beckett is a situation in which drama is still possible yet absent, or at least very subdued. (In true Minimalist music, one might say, drama is precluded.)

"In my new string quartet," Feldman said in 1984, "in the third hour I start to take away material rather than bring in, [rather than] make it more interesting, and for about an hour I have a very placid world. I don't use the drama, essentially."

That's what is most obvious about the Second Quartet and what will most put off lovers of classical music: climax, progression and crescendo are nonexistent. The one observable concession to the concert frame is that in the final measures, the rests between phrases get longer and longer. But as a result, the changes of atmosphere become all the more powerful.

There are no extreme gestures of the kind to be found in "For Philip Guston," where the players obsess for 25 minutes on a tiny chromatic segment, then burst across the entire range of the keyboard in pianissimo C major. Yet there are still changes from chromaticism to tonality and back as subtly compelling as a series of ominous clouds passing on a sunny winter day.

For all this to unfold, the piece must be enormously long. Feldman's early works were brief. Around 1970 he quit working in his uncle's dry-cleaning plant and took his first university position, and in 1973 he moved to the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he would spend the last 15 years of his life. It was also around that time that he began vastly expanding his canvas to works of one, three, five hours. He felt that the 20-minute piece had become a modernist cliché, and scorning any kind of cliché, he expanded from what he called the level of "form" to the level of "scale."

There had always been, in classical music, an assumption that the longer a piece was, the more carefully its structure needed to be worked out and the more it required certain kinds of drama and variety. With

works like the Second Quartet, Feldman exploded these assumptions. The music world is still trying to figure out how to react.

In a recording, of course, the length issue is not so daunting. There are enough rests in the Second Quartet to make planning the breaks between CD's pretty easy.

The Ives Ensemble members -- Josje Ter Haar and Janneke van Prooijen, violinists; Ruben Sanderse, violist; and Job Ter Haar, cellist -- offer an elegantly atmospheric and perfectly paced performance (Hat Art 4-144; four CD's). They have played the piece in concert several times and are scheduled to do so again next month in Geneva. One imagines that the last hour of the work sounds fresher on disc than it could at the end of a five-hour performance, but that depends on stamina.

The Flux Quartet is to release its own recording of the Second Quartet on Mode in coming months, and one controversy not likely to die soon is the final word on the work's length. The Ives Ensemble claims that it arrived at a five-hour length by following Feldman's metronome markings meticulously. Mode argues that Feldman specified the length as six hours, which the Flux recording will apparently approximate. Both statements may be correct, as far as they go. If you want to compare the recordings, set aside 11 hours.

It is not for sheer length that Feldman became the most influential composer of the last 20 years, although 90-minute pieces by young composers have, sadly, become more common as a result. It is also because his music retains the chromatic pitch language of modernism yet offers a broad road out of modernism's macho one-upsmanship, making him a pivotal figure between two eras.

His radical reliance on intuition after a period in which intuition had been misguidedly despised has caught the imagination of young composers all over the world. Less than five vinyl records' worth of his music appeared during his lifetime; since his death there have been more than 50 CD's, including 24 so far in Hat Art's monumental attempt at his complete output. The Ives Ensemble's superb recording of the Second Quartet is an essential piece of the Feldman puzzle. No music had ever before sounded like Feldman's, and even within his output, no other piece ever sounded like this.

Photos: Morton Feldman in 1974; after brief early works, he vastly expanded his canvas, suggesting that the 20-minute work had become a modernist cliché. (Jan Williams/Music Library, State University of New York at Buffalo)(pg. 36); John Snijders, center foreground, the founder of the Ives Ensemble, with the players of Feldman's Second Quartet, from left, Josje Ter Haar, Job Ter Haar, Janneke van Prooijen and Ruben Sanderse. (Ilse Schrama)(pg 39)