

The Future of Listening

By Kyle Gann

Morton Feldman

Music is too brief. A painting on your wall, Morton Feldman liked to point out, exerts an unconscious influence. You glance at it often, occasionally stare at a detail you hadn't noticed, and read a magazine as its colors mold your mood via peripheral vision. By comparison, a piece of music flits by, its theme to be wiped clean from your mind by the next TV commercial. That's why, in his last decade, Feldman wrote works over four hours long. He didn't want your *undivided* attention. He knew that music sinks in deeply through the peripheral ear.

By now you're braced for my annual Feldman homage, though I'm finding the bandwagon a little crowded. Feldman may soon be as widely accepted in the repertoire as, oh, maybe Rimsky-Korsakov, a succès d'estime unparalleled by any American since Copland. Tower Records has stocked optimistic piles of Feldman's CD *For Philip Guston* (hat ART), and the stacks are shrinking. Spread across four CDs, *Guston* lasts four hours and 25 minutes, and is performed by devoted Feldman associates, Eberhard Blum on flutes, Nils Vigeland on piano and celesta, and Jan Williams on melodic

percussion. The recording, the first of one of Feldman's megaworks, makes history: it places a radical new concept in the public's hands. If you're one of the intrepid souls who bought *Guston*, or who might, here's a quick tour through what could otherwise seem shapeless on first hearing.

The entire piece is soft, meditative, mostly slow. The first 90 seconds consist of a four-note motive (C, G, A-flat, E-flat) played by all three players, then polytonally transposed. That motive is a landmark: you'll run across it again, every 25 minutes on the average. Listening to *Guston* feels like wandering through a bizarre house, in which secret and circuitous passages bring you unexpectedly back where you've been before. Sometimes you're given a glimpse of a new room hours before you get to enter. At several points (CD one, band three, for example), all three instruments strip down to a few chromatically adjacent pitches, as though the music has to squeeze through a tiny crevice to get to the next chamber.

For much of *Guston's* length, notes cancel each other out, working against memory through intense chromaticism and large, dissonant intervals. The flute, for example, repeats A's while the vibraphone rocks between A-flat



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and B-flat. To keep you thinking the music is moving, Feldman plays with permutations. Picture Calder's mobiles as you listen: they were a big influence on Feldman's generation, and only he solved the mobile problem in music, by keeping the same intervals floating for half-hours in constantly changing mutual position. Once an hour or so, the floating momentum is enlivened by little dancelike, five-beat ostinatos (such as the opening of disc four, which I call the "Dance of the One-Legged Sugar-Plum Fairy").

La Monte Young's *Well-Tuned Piano* asks you to pay attention for five hours, but Feldman is less idealistic. I defy anyone to listen closely to the second half of *Guston's* disc two; the repetition is too austere. The attempt to push you out of the piece is a test, for the payoff appears 82 seconds into disc three: the chromaticism suddenly evaporates into restful C-

major with a comforting scale-ostinato in the glockenspiel. You only get a two-minute glimpse here, but then, an hour later, C-major returns to dominate the final 25 minutes. Funny thing is, all the intervals you hear in this relaxing C-major passage have been present throughout, fighting their way through a web of dissonance. After you've tried for hours to make sense of this hazy contrapuntal image, it quietly slides into focus.

The late-arriving, comforting ostinato is a Feldman *modus operandi*. It'll remind you of the naively Ravel-like viola melody at the end of *Rothko Chapel*, or the end of *Three Voices* where, after a half-hour of eerie sliding tones, Joan La Barbara finally opens up and sings over and over, "Who'd have thought that snow falls?" Feldman likes to force your ear through a tunnel that keeps narrowing long after you thought it

couldn't get any narrower, then suddenly bursts into something resplendent, the more so because your sense of tonality has been so compressed. *Guston's* final five minutes are chilling. The calm glockenspiel ostinato (A, G, F, E, C, B) continues, but now hemmed in by dense piano chords and the old dissonant intervals. It's gorgeous; you can *hear* the light vanish as the gloom shuts it out for good. It dies the way the light died in Mark Rothko's last, black canvases.

In a *TriQuarterly* interview with Peter Gena, Feldman claimed that Cage's music pressed the question "Is music an art form?" That was a projection; it was really Feldman who asked the question, and his long works answered resoundingly in the affirmative. Besides being Feldman's most ornate labyrinth, *Guston* is the future of listening. It's not "wallpaper music," but aural architecture, made not to sit in front of, but to live during. By switching from a literary paradigm to a visual one, Feldman invented an audience mode that will become more prevalent in the 21st century, as concert listening declines, as new generations continue to grow up without the experience of sitting out music in rows of chairs, as *public* presentation of music (like movies) becomes less and less viable. He's provided a formal model for a quasi-permanent music. (Unfortunately, it means we'll soon hear a lot more five-hour chamber pieces by ambitious young composers who lack Feldman's ear. Now's the time to buy stock in a company that makes music paper.) When you take this disc home, don't just stare at the speakers; live with it. ■