

# Kaddish From Queens

By Kyle Gann

Morton Feldman

If you want evidence that the 18th and 19th centuries didn't have a thing over this grand ol' late-20th when it comes to sonic sensuousness and crystalline musical clarity, drop this newspaper, sprint to the nearest record store, and snarf up the recordings of Morton Feldman's music that have appeared in the last few weeks. The canonization is suddenly in full swing for this Queens (not Brooklyn, as has been published) composer who worked in his family's garment-district business before getting the Varèse chair at SUNY Buffalo in the early '70s. Over nine hours of Feldman's music have hit disc this season alone, far more than during his lifetime.

Get the long pieces. No other composer has ever so cried out for compact disc. His extreme quiet demands a noiseless background, and the expansiveness of his late music makes even the 78-minute limit seem tiny. Feldman, in his last decade, wrote one-movement essays of from one to five hours, partly because he envied painters: he wanted his work to impress its personality on the audience in the ongoing way a painting does on someone who hangs it in their

apartment. Such music is not to be heard "from the outside," in formal terms, but lived in. CDs immerse you in his world (press the repeat button) in a way concerts can hardly rival. None of the superlong works are recorded yet, but we do have *For Samuel Beckett* (47:59, Newport Classic); *For John Cage* (77:10, CP2); *Triadic Memories* (74:25 as played by Jean-Luc Fafchamps on Sub Rosa, or 87:34 by Roger Woodward on Etcetera); *For Bunita Marcus* (71:33, Hat Art); *Why Patterns?* (31:14, Hat Art); and the longest so far, *Crippled Symmetry*, at 91:12.

The most naked blueprint of Feldman's late thought is the *Why Patterns?/Crippled Symmetry* two-disc set, with Eberhard Blum on flutes, Nils Vigeland on piano, and Jan Williams on percussion. *Why Patterns?* still hovers in the single notes of Feldman's early style. At 6:32, Blum reiterates his lowest C-sharp over and over for six minutes, as piano and glockenspiel continue quietly. World-weary chromatic scales descend everywhere, so slowly that you rarely notice their beginning or ending. The decay of physical tones becomes a universal metaphor: the decay of autumn, old age, civilization, take your pick.

Such movement is difficult to follow moment-to-moment, but

thrilling to register globally. In *Crippled Symmetry* (1983), Feldman perfected the mobile form he had sought for years. Now, motives float in timeless suspension, modulating their shape, register, and relative position, disappearing and returning like a mysterious house guest. The flute's opening E-flat-D-flat-C-D motive turns up dozens of times in disguised configurations, inverted, sped up, transposed, scale-altered. As Feldman said about Samuel Beckett's writing, "every line is really the same thought said in another way."

Feldman was music's Beckett if anyone was, but a Jewish one; there's nothing dryly post-Catholic about his existentialism, nor any renunciation of the senses. The one large-ensemble piece, *For Samuel Beckett* with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players under Steven Mosko, is the most gorgeous music in the pile, 48 minutes of sighing, weeping, semidissonant heaven. Written in 1987, the year he died, its mysticism has the aura of kaddish, and its colors bleed into each other as in the bleakest of Rothko's canvases. Chords overlap back and forth the way they do in Schoenberg's "Summer Morning by a Lake," but endlessly, decelerating into heartbroken silence, while a web of single piano and vibraphone tones underpaints the translucent surface. Like the veil over a Holy of Holies, the music glows darkly.

Among the piano works, *Triadic Memories* (1981) is the longest and most fascinating. It is, Feldman said in his brilliantly articulate, maddeningly vague way, "an attempt to formalize the disorien-



A Jewish Beckett whose music hangs in the air like paintings.

tation of memory" through repetition of chords and figures. (When he began using repeats around 1973, he showed composer Peter Gena what he was doing, and anxiously asked, "Tell me, does it sound too much like Steve Reich?" "No, Morton, no," Gena reassured him.) Woodward's recording is pretty, but (as notated examples in his liner notes reveal) rhythmically sloppy. Aki Takashi's limpid, 60-minute reading on the Japanese ALM label has more integrity (if you can find it), but I'm most impressed with the playing of young French pianist Jean-Luc Fafchamps. His pinpoint accuracy and brooding tone (along with extra bass resonances from his Bösendorfer piano) give *Memories* a steely, ominous tension that removes the piece from the "pretty" realm altogether.

Woodward, on his two-CD set, also plays some austere, dreamlike early works and the chord-thick, staccato-dry *Piano* of 1977. You can find a more accurate, less romanticized performance of *Piano*, plus Feldman's final keyboard work, *Palis de Mari*, by Marianne

Schroeder on *Hat Art*. *For Bunita Marcus* (1985, Hildegard KleeB, pianist) is so intimate—rarely thicker than one treble raindrop note at a time—that I can't imagine hearing it with an audience. *For John Cage* (Paul Zukofsky on violin, Schroeder on piano) combines *Symmetry's* motive-suspension with the measured repetitions of *Memories* in a prickly, Persian-rug-inspired texture.

Don't overlook the four-minute tidbit *Madame Press, Died Last Week at Ninety* on John Adams's *American Elegies* disc on Nonesuch. And this fall, New Albion's releasing a splendid new *Rothko Chapel*. These discs are the summer's most exciting new-music news, for they finally give us a chance to study the formal processes Feldman invented. What do you call a group of notes that quietly reappears in a new context every half-hour or so, like a repressed memory? In these meditative motive-labyrinths that still "let the sounds be themselves," Feldman created a new, mind-expanding way to listen. And it's fantastic. ■

Sam Goody

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