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ary pages set on fire. Naess is a 24-year-old British-York City. Her music draws on folk and rock, and y tape loops. Her voice has an evanescent grace that, in contrast, often have the confessional bluntness of Attack.

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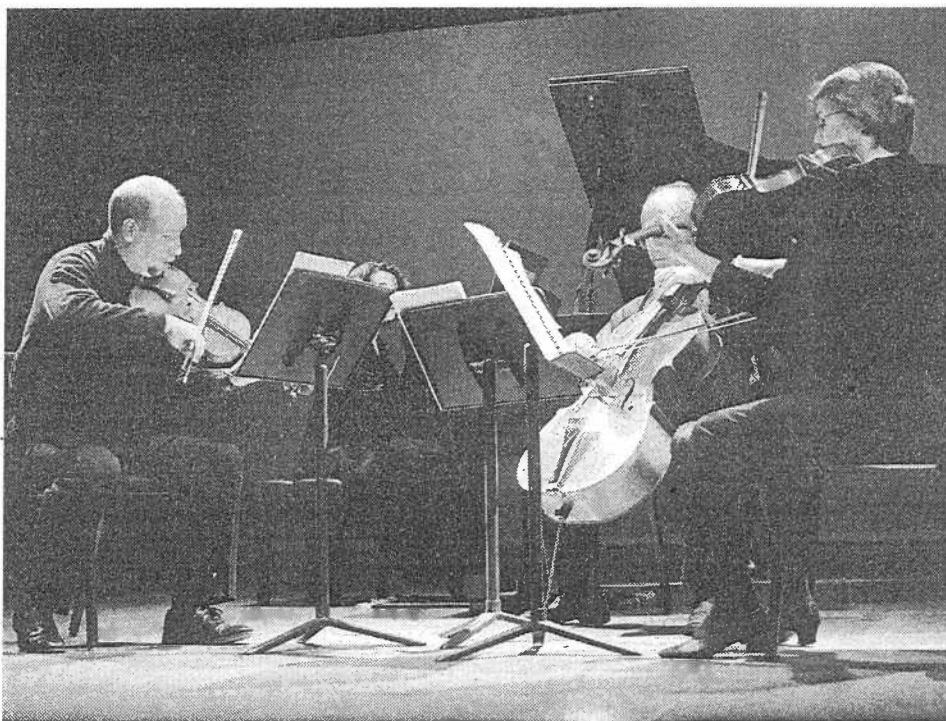
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MUSIC

Morton Feldman's Last Work Achieved Mysticism Through Simplicity

THE KEY TO LETTING GO

BY KYLE GANN



GARLA GARR

ENSEMBLE 21 EXPLORES THE LUXURIOUS PACING OF FELDMAN'S 85-MINUTE PIECE.

"In the right key, one can say anything, in the wrong key, nothing," wrote Bernard Shaw. "The only delicate part of the job is the establishment of the key." It was the signal achievement of Morton Feldman's life that he established an astonishingly precise and fertile key. The last piece written in that key was *Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello*, and the program notes for Ensemble 21's 85-minute performance of it quoted his views on long pieces: "Up to one hour, you think about form, but after an hour, it's scale. Form is easy—just the division of things into parts. But scale is another matter. You have to have control of the piece. . . ."

I suspect Feldman was more self-aggrandizing here than correct. When Mahler wrote an 85-minute symphony, he had to have control, for the gradual pacing of every crescendo, every climax, every denouement, had to be expertly timed, perfectly shaped to the human orgasm, to be convincing. But when Feldman wrote a "quiet as possible" 85-minute, or three-hour, or five-hour work, he opened up a space in which events could disappear and reappear, not in just any old order, but without order being terribly crucial. The luxurious pacing of Feldman's long, long works seemed to allow him to relinquish control, not demand more of it.

This is not at all to belittle Feldman's gorgeous music. If 85 minutes of Mahler is like a raving evangelist waving his finger in your face, 85 minutes of Feldman is more like listening to an enigmatic little Zen roshi talking off the top of his head, and often choosing to keep quiet—a less intense, but by no means inferior pleasure.

I had never heard *Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello*, and was eager to do so. The piece is scored, not for harmonica and two flügelhorns as you might infer from its title, but for piano and string trio. Feldman completed the work in May of 1987, just as he learned that he had pancreatic cancer, and he died four months later. It is the only work that follows his incredible, one-of-a-kind orchestra piece *For Samuel Beckett*. While that orchestra work reached a pinnacle

of mysticism through the opacity of its thickly echoing and virtually unfollowable score, *PVVC* aimed at a similar austerity with far simpler means. The piano was listed first for a reason, for Marilyn Nonken's cloudy, dissonance-tinged chords were the piece's subjective ground. The string trio—Calvin Wiersma, Lois Martin, and Christopher Finckel—moved most often in rhythmic unison, slowly bouncing clean chords off the piano's initiatives.

The piece began at 8:11, and for 20 minutes those chromatic chords, dense with half steps to keep the sound cloudy and unlocatable, were about all we heard. At 8:30 the piano was silent a moment and then began playing a small, chromatic, two-note motive; this would reappear again at 8:50 and 9:25. At 8:53 an audience member, obviously angered by what she perceived as monotony, stormed out, tripped in the dark, and muttered, "Shit!" but most of us were transfixed. At 8:55 the strings began quietly repeating one chord over and over, and at 9:12, the piano ran through a little chromatic motive, four notes rising, then the first three repeated; the third appearance of this motive, in silence, would close the piece. And at 9:30, we heard the first of a handful of pizzicato chords.

The noncausal placing of these few gestures took, certainly, sensitivity and intuition; but did it take control—or rather, a willingness to let go, to trust in the moment, which Feldman had achieved in his music long before he achieved it in life? Every measure of the piece was permeated by the color of the half step, every D negated by a C-sharp or E-flat, lest we fix our ears on it, although an occasional consonant chord would comfort us like a sunbeam through the fog. For those who know the more varied landscapes of his String Quartet No. 2 and *For Philip Guston*, the sketchiness of the above timetable may suggest how purified his vision had become by the end, how suited this limpid, almost objectless sound-pool was for the sanctity of *The Last Work*. And Ensemble 21's performance, flawlessly reverent and unflagging in its polish, elicited the deathlike stillness we needed to hear it. ▣