music we'd like to hear

Friday 1 November 2019

Piano Music by Morton Feldman

Last Pieces (1959)

In contrast to Feldman's piano pieces of the mid-1950s, the *Last Pieces* stipulate no durations at all. It would appear that the fixed metre and rhythms of the earlier pieces were of limited value for Feldman, and his attention turned to music of no duration, or, more specifically, 'free' durations. Each of the four pieces is characterised by its general tempo indications – slow or fast (or very slow and very fast) – and its density. For example, the third movement, which is marked very slow as distinct from the mere 'slow' of the first movement, is also less thick harmonically. The fourth movement features a technical device unique amongst Feldman's music in which 'durations are free for each hand'. Quite how this is worked out in practice is unclear from the notation and instructions, but the instruction clearly subverts the spatial layout of the score, which positions right and left hand in vertical alignment throughout. My approach here is to allow for each hand to move through its line independently, using pauses as occasional 'catch-up' points, much like a solo version of the recently composed Piece for 4 Pianos, which demands all performers to read from the same single-page score independently. Thus sometimes the hands are in relationship similar to their spatial layout, but other times one hand might be considerably further down the line than the other. Each performance is different, and this realisation presents just one spontaneous iteration of many possible arrangements.

Piano (1977)

Feldman's *Piano* features notational challenges of a very different kind. Across a metric grid of changing time signatures, material is notated with a high degree of rhythmic complexity and detail, similar to the ensemble pieces contemporary with and subsequent to it. When listening only, the range of durations and irregularity of continuity are in many ways no greater than in other Feldman piano pieces such as *Intermission 6* or *Piano Piece 1963 (for Philip Guston)*, but now the durations are fixed and measured, ensuring a degree of temporal irregularity that those earlier pieces do not guarantee. Combined with the extreme range of register and the variety of articulations resulting from the rhythmic notation and changes in texture and register, the piece is undoubtedly the most varied and detailed of all the works recorded for this release. These complexities are increased when Feldman superimposes lines from earlier pages, first two, then three (over six staves), without compromising anything for ease of performance. Some impossibilities result as complex chords from different lines collide to create simultaneities which would require additional hands, or – as has been my preference – some changes to the exact rhythmic detail. Such impossibilities, however, only go to suggest that, here and in the three subsequent 'late' pieces, Feldman's desire is less for an exactitude of rhythmic detail (though attention to such detail is surely warranted to avoid curtailing the irregularities of duration) as for employing a notation which serves to encourage the performer to focus upon detail and idiosyncrasies of touch and timing. Thus it is that comparatively simple rhythms are notated in ways more complicated than necessary, reflecting again Feldman's problematising of music notation – 'If notated exactly, they are too stiff; if given the slightest notational leeway, they are too loose' he once wrote, concerning the kinds of complex arrangements found in *Piano* and other pieces from this period. Sometimes he chose to notate the same rhythm – or, more precisely, notes of the same duration – in two different ways, such as two dotted crotchets in one bar and the same notes but arranged as two minims with the metric ratio 4:3 covering them; these have the same literal duration but they feel distinct, in terms of articulation, propulsion, and consequently touch, leading Kevin Volans to suggest that Feldman 'is the first composer in Western music (that I know of) to compose 'touch' into the score'.

[interval]

Extensions 3 (1952)

Extensions 3 is an exercise in repetition, foreshadowing the patterns of the late works, with an emphasis upon the highest registers, thin textures and quiet dynamics, which makes the shock of the near-final moments all the more vivid. The lack of bass keeps the music floating and almost static and indeed Feldman wrote of the 'Extensions' series of pieces 'I had the feeling of a bridge where you don't see the beginning or the end, where what you see seems transfixed in space.'

Palais de Mari (1986)

Palais de Mari is Feldman's last composition for solo piano and is the simplest, most transparent of these late pieces. Like the slightly earlier piano piece *For Bunita Marcus*, it centres around a limited set of material, a gentle pattern and alternating chords. Yet its understated charm can mask both the compositional rigour and playfulness of the piece; Tom Hall has described in detail the relationships between the spatial grid of bars typical of Feldman's music, as noted above, and the symmetrical patterns of intervals and inversions that reveal the composer displacing events in careful relationships across the page. This geometric play is perhaps an acknowledgement of the architectural inspiration which gave rise to the title, the ruins of an ancient Mesopotamian palace in modern day Syria, a photo of which Feldman saw at the Louvre in Paris. However, against this formal backdrop Feldman plays with material which is remarkable for its fifth-based consonance, and the feeling of tonal resolution, particularly during the final descending figure, is poignant in the extreme.

(these notes slightly adapted from PT's text for the boxset)

Philip Thomas, piano

Morton Feldman was born in New York on January 12th 1926. At the age of twelve he studied piano with Madame Maurina-Press, who had been a pupil of Busoni, and it was her who instilled in Feldman a vibrant musicality. At the time he was composing short Scriabin-esque pieces, until in 1941 he began to study composition with Wallingford Riegger. Three years later Stefan Wolpe became his teacher, though they spent much of their time together simply arguing about music. Then in 1949 the most significant meeting up to that time took place - Feldman met John Cage, commencing an artistic association of crucial importance to music in America in the 1950s. Cage was instrumental in encouraging Feldman to have confidence in his instincts, which resulted in totally intuitive compositions. He never worked with any systems that anyone has been able to identify, working from moment to moment, from one sound to the next. His friends during the 1950s in New York included the composers Earle Brown and Christian Wolff; painters Mark Rothko, Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg; and pianist David Tudor. The painters in particular influenced Feldman to search for his own sound world, one that was more immediate and more physical than had existed before. This resulted in his experimentation with graph notation, *Projection 2* being one of his earliest scores in this idiom. In these scores the players select their notes from within a given register and time structure. Because these works relied so heavily on improvisation Feldman was not happy with the freedom permitted to the performer, and so abandoned graph notation between 1953 and 1958. However, the precise notation he used instead during this period he found too one dimensional and so returned to the graph with two orchestral works: *Atlantis* (1958) and *Out of Last Pieces* (1969). Soon after these, appeared a series of instrumental works called *Durations*, in which the notes to be played are precisely written but the performers, beginning simultaneously, are free to choose their own durations within a given general tempo.

1967 saw the start of Feldman's association with Universal Edition with the publication of his last graphically notated score, *In Search of an Orchestration*. Then followed *On Time and the Instrumental Factor* (1969) in which he once more returned to precise notation, and from then on, with only the exception of two works in the early 1970s, he maintained control over pitch, rhythm, dynamics and duration.

In 1973 the University of New York at Buffalo asked Feldman to become the Edgard Varèse Professor, a post he held for the rest of his life.

From the late 1970s his compositions expanded in length to such a degree that the second string quartet can last for up to five and a half hours. The scale of these works in particular has often been the cause for the controversy surrounding his works, but he would always be happy to attempt to explain his reasoning behind them:

"My whole generation was hung up on the 20 to 25 minute piece. It was our clock. We all got to know it, and how to handle it. As soon as you leave the 20–25 minute piece behind, in a one-movement work, different problems arise. Up to one hour you think about form, but after an hour and a half 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 - it requires a heightened kind of concentration. Before, my pieces were like objects; now, they're like evolving things."

Nine one-movement compositions by Feldman last for over one and a half hours each.

One of his last works, *Palais de Mari*, from 1986, is unusual for a late composition in that it is only twenty minutes long. This came about from a request from Bunita Marcus, for whom it was written, for Feldman to sum up everything he was doing in the very long pieces and to condense that into a smaller piece. Knowing his sense of time, she asked for a ten minute work, knowing that it would probably be twice that length.

In June 1987 Morton Feldman married the composer Barbara Monk. On September 3rd 1987 he died at his home in Buffalo aged 61.

from cnvill.net, a site with many Feldman resources, maintained by Chris Villars

Philip Thomas (b.1972, North Devon) specialises in performing new and experimental music, including both notated and improvised music. He is particularly drawn to the experimental music of John Cage, Morton Feldman and Christian Wolff, and composers who broadly work within a post-Cageian aesthetic. In recent years he has been particularly associated with the music of Christian Wolff, giving the world premiere of his Sailing By in 2014 and Small Preludes in 2009, the UK premiere of Long Piano (Peace March 11), having co-edited and contributed to the first major study of Wolff's music, Changing the System: the Music of Christian Wolff, in 2010, and currently recording all of Wolff's solo piano music for sub rosa. He is an experienced performer of John Cage's music, having performed the Concert for piano and orchestra with both Apartment House and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as well as most of the solo piano and prepared piano music, including a unique 12-hour performance of Electronic Music for piano He has commissioned new works from a number of British composers whose ideas, language and aesthetic have been informed in some ways by the aforementioned American composers, such as Stephen Chase, Laurence Crane, Richard Emsley, Michael Finnissy, Christopher Fox, Bryn Harrison, John Lely, Tim Parkinson, Michael Parsons, and James Saunders. After significant encounters with the music of AMM and Sheffield-based musicians Martin Archer, Mick Beck and John Jasnoch, Philip has worked with improvisers in a variety of contexts and in 2005 devised a programme of composed music by musicians more normally known as improvisers as well as others who have been influenced by improvisation in some form. This led to his first CD release, *Comprovisation*, which featured newly commissioned works by Mick Beck, Chris Burn and Simon H Fell. Since then he has released many more CDs, including music by Martin Arnold, John Cage, Laurence Crane, Christopher Fox, Jürg Frey, Bryn Harrison, Tim Parkinson, Michael Pisaro, James Saunders, Linda Smith, Christian Wolff, as well as with improvisers Chris Burn and Simon H Fell. Philip is a regular pianist with leading experimental music group Apartment House, with whom he has performed in festivals across the UK and Europe. In recent years he has performed and recorded with Quatuor Bozzini, Ensemble Grizzana, and pianist Mark Knoop. He has also performed with pianists Catherine Laws, Ian Pace and John Tilbury, as a trio with flutist Richard Craig and percussionist Damien Harron, and with composer James Saunders (electronics). He performed with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company during their farewell tour in 2010-11. In 1998 Philip was awarded a PhD from Sheffield University in the performance practice of contemporary piano music. Between 2000 and 2005, he was Head of the Sheffield Music School whilst pursuing an active performing and teaching career. He joined the staff team at the University of Huddersfield in 2005, and became Professor of Performance in 2015. Philip is one of the Directors of CeReNeM, the University's Centre for Research in New Music. In 2016 he was awarded an AHRC grant to fund research about John Cage's *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. He lives in Sheffield, where he premieres the majority of his programmes, with his wife Tiffany and children Naomi and Jack.

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