

Tom Johnson

Mon Maître, Morton Feldman

Today most music education takes place in institutions, and often it is of very high quality, but some things can only happen in the private sector, where there is no institutional structure. Consider the young composers who went to the private studios of Max Deutsch and René Leibowitz, who were teaching the 12-tone system in Paris long before the subject part of the curriculum in the national conservatory. Consider also that studio in Fontainebleau, where Nadia Boulanger produced more fine composers than the national conservatory at that time. Or consider my experience with my master, Morton Feldman.

I first met Feldman when I was 25 years old (he was 38) in a two-week summer course in New England for young composers, the Bennington Composers Conference. I knew that he had worked with John Cage and Earle Brown, and had a reputation for making “chance” music, but I had only heard one or two of his pieces, and I wasn’t sure yet what I thought. He played some recordings, talked about his work, talked about sound, talked about his early efforts with chance systems, explained why he now wanted to have greater control of his music.

Feldman was still young himself, and hardly anyone took him seriously. No one would have believed at that time that this man would be regarded by many, half a century later, as one of the most profound composers of his generation. I certainly did not see him at this time as a great composer either, and yet I could not help being attracted to the honesty and uniqueness of this largely self-taught man. It was clear that Feldman had never read the theories of Heinrich Schenker, and didn’t know as much about medieval music as those of us who had been obliged to study in conservatories and universities, but he could tell us things about Kierkegaard and Piscator and Frank O’Hara that my professors at Yale didn’t know anything about, or perhaps just didn’t think were important. He could talk about his painter friends Philip Guston and Jackson Pollock, or about discussions he had had with Cage and Brown, or about his experiences in writing music according to the flaws he saw in the paper. He knew that in traditional Japanese esthetics the broken teacup was considered more beautiful than the unbroken one, and could make me think about that. On one occasion he might tell an unkind anecdote, in his unassuming Brooklyn accent, that would make Stravinsky seem like a genius who had unfortunately misunderstood everything. On another occasion he might play an example on the piano to show us how Chopin’s music really would be much more interesting if the composer had written more “wrong” notes and not so many “right” ones. Things like that, very funny sometimes, and all of this seemed clearly to be leading me in the direction I needed to take.

I had already enrolled to begin graduate work at the Yale School of Music the year I met Feldman (1965), but I left New Haven to make trips to New York City from time to time, because it was important for me to have the opinion of Morton Feldman, the opinion of someone I really trusted. That is the key. Trust. And that is why today I feel that this man was my master, more than any of the people I studied with in institutions. Looking back at that period, however, some other points also seem important:

During most of my student years I was too worried about writing MY music and having *my own* ideas to really admire anyone. This was a period when I was more open.

Feldman was old enough to have much more experience than I had, but not old enough that there was a real generation gap.

I was never required to work with Feldman, and our relationship was purely voluntary. I had to pay cash out of my pocket whenever I visited him, but I could stop at any time, and he could refuse to see me at any time. There were no grades, no credits, and no obligations.

There were no ulterior motives. I was not studying with Feldman because he was famous or because I thought his name would look good on my resume.

Finally, the most important elements were luck and chance, but I also like to think it was destiny. Meeting Feldman simply had to happen. I can’t imagine my life any other way.