

The music on this recording illustrates the essential integrity of the work of **Morton Feldman** (1926–1987) and one of its fundamental strengths—its continuously unfolding unanimity of purpose. There are few composers of his generation whose first and last published work (in Feldman’s case *Journey to the End of Night* of 1949 and *Piano and String Quartet* of 1986) span youth and final years with such a concentrated viewpoint.

There are, however, landmarks in the music of Feldman that are largely technical and notational. There are the graphic pieces, the first from 1950 and the last from 1964, in which some parameter of composition is not specified (often pitch). There are the “free duration pieces,” both solo and ensemble, in which there is instruction either for sections of the piece or for its entirety. *False Relationships and the Extended Ending* (1968) is a late example of this kind, although *Why Patterns?* (1978) is a variant of the principle. There are also the conventionally notated works in his oeuvre, one of which is *The Viola in My Life*.

Feldman wrote *Why Patterns?* for himself to play with Eberhard Blum, flute, and Jan Williams, glockenspiel. The score consists of three completely notated but metrically unaligned parts. Theoretically one could say the notation is thus fixed, but in playing the piece many times one discovers a fair degree of latitude concerning vertical coincidence. The musical material consists largely of differentiated, overlapping ostinatos—hence the title. Originally the piece concluded when the last player completed his part. This player was always Feldman, not only because the piano part is the longest but also because he invariably played the slowest. The present ending (the vertically aligned pulsing with the glockenspiel playing a descending chromatic scale) was added after the first performance.

One of the mysteries of *Why Patterns?* and *False Relationships and the Extended Ending*, pieces in which two groups of instruments (violin-trombone-piano and cello-two pianos-chimes) go their separate ways, is how Feldman manages to maintain his sense of harmonic control given the flexibility of alignment. I can only begin to suggest an answer to this question by pointing out two characteristic solutions. One is to reiterate a tone in a fixed register for the entire duration of the piece. Though the tone is constantly recombined in many formations, it achieves primacy by virtue of its constancy. In *False Relationships and the Extended Ending* this tone is E-flat/D-sharp, a minor tenth above middle C. Another way is to stratify the instruments throughout different registers so as to make clear the independence of their voice-leading. This technique reduces intervallic tension, and such stratification is handled with great virtuosity in *Why Patterns?*

If I regard *The Viola in My Life* as the exceptional work on this recording, it is because it (along with the same-titled piece for viola and orchestra, and *Rothko Chapel* of 1971) is the only composition where Feldman equivocates for his oeuvre’s absence of the traditional concepts of contrast and development.

There is in this music a ‘melos’ unusual for Feldman—groups of notes that are quite rhapsodic. In *Rothko Chapel*, the viola concludes the piece with a melody written when the composer was fifteen, a modal cantilena that would not be out of place in the music of Ernest Bloch. The end of *The Viola in My Life 2* also shares this quality. There is a decidedly tonal, even diatonic nature to this melodic writing. It would take a whole book to discuss Feldman’s pitch relations, but suffice it to say that there is certainly no other composer of his prominence in the post-war avant-garde who had such an imperial unconcern for the quick rotation of the twelve tones. I think Feldman retained some vestige of the diatonic-chromatic division of older music that would make sense when discussing, for example, the last movement of Brahms’s First Symphony and Wagner’s Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*. I would go further to say that the diatonic, tonal passages in his music are associated with expressions of loss that are highly personal in character. Feldman himself tells us that the soprano melody toward the end of *Rothko Chapel* (E, D, A, C) was written the day of Stravinsky’s funeral. Then there is the opening and closing of the four-hour-long *For Philip Guston* (1984), which is the most autobiographical music of Feldman’s life.

Feldman often spoke of his intention to create in music the sonorous equivalent of the “flat surface” present in the work of contemporary American painters whom he admired and knew so well; in particular, Mark Rothko and Philip Guston. Throughout his music, there is an awareness instrumentally and texturally of composite sound. The role of instruments is to contribute unique timbres for the sake of unity. Seldom is Schoenberg’s concern for ‘hauptstimme/nebenstimme’ (primary voice/secondary voice) evident. For this reason, the viola’s relief against other instruments in *The Viola in My Life* is remarkable.

The search for a musical flat surface led Feldman to explore very subtle differentiations in the speech and interaction of instruments. This is one reason why most of his music is quite soft; it is only at low dynamics that seemingly contradictory timbres (as in *False Relationships and the Extended Ending*) can achieve a union. He was fond of the expression “room noise,” which are the ambient sounds made by and during musical performance, when describing his orchestration. Feldman’s percussion writing in particular, like the drum and timpani sounds in *The Viola in My Life I*, is a form of room noise not unlike Ives’s concept of “shadow counterpoint.”

Feldman was after something that had never before been attempted in music: the utilization of the widest possible vocabulary of tonal and instrumental combinations unconfused by polyphonic, dynamic, or sequential alternation/interruption. Not for him the fabulous interplay of parts in Boulez. Not for him the gnomic succession of sound and silence in Cage. Not for him the architectural cathedrals of Ligeti. Feldman’s music is exceedingly straightforward in its procedure. Choose a sound, then another, and follow this example without recourse to events that would imply an opposition. By and large, this was Feldman’s technique throughout his life.

It may be that Feldman’s music will always strike a certain kind of listener as idiosyncratic—a denial of the time-honored ways in which music articulates itself. I think that Feldman was deeply offended by this response, by this notion that his music was singular because it was, as some might say, “missing something.” Though it is true that his values of gradation can be exceedingly fine, when one enters this scale and comprehends it, something truly new and wonderful opens up in the art of music—a world in which the relative and the absolute become engaged with themselves.

—Nils Vigeland

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- Complete Music for Violin and Piano. Marc Sabat, violin; Stephen Clarke, piano. Mode 82.
Composing by Numbers: The Graphic Scores 1950–67. The Barton Workshop. Mode 146.
Coptic Light. New World Symphony, Michael Tilson Thomas conducting. Argo 448513-2.
Crippled Symmetry. California EAR Unit. Bridge 9092 A/B.
For Christian Wolff. Eberhard Blum, flute; Nils Vigeland, piano and celesta. hat ART CD 3-6120.
For Philip Guston. California EAR Unit. Bridge 9078 A/D.
For Samuel Beckett. Klangforum Wien, Sylvain Cambreling conducting. Kairos 1201.
For Stefan Wolpe. Choir of St. Ignatius of Antioch, Harold Chaney conducting. New World Records 80550-2.
Late Works with Clarinet. Carol Robinson, clarinet and bass clarinet; Quatour Diotima. Mode 119.
Neither. Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Kwame Ryan conducting. Col Legno 20081.
Patterns in a Chromatic Field. Charles Curtis, cello; Aleck Karis, piano. Tzadik 8002.
Piano Works. Aki Takahashi. Mode 54.
Piano and String Quartet. Kronos Quartet, Aki Takahashi, piano. Nonesuch 79320.
Rothko Chapel. California EAR Unit, Berkeley Chamber Chorus, Philip Brett conducting. New Albion NA 39.
String Quartet. Group for Contemporary Music. Naxos 8559190.
String Quartet No. 2. Flux Quartet. Mode 112.

Three Voices. Joan La Barbara. New Albion NA 18.

Triadic Memories. Marilyn Nonken, piano. Mode 136.

Violin and Orchestra. Isabelle Faust, violin; Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Peter Rundel conducting. Col Legno 20089.

Violin and String Quartet. Christina Fong, violin; Rangzen Quartet. OGREOGRESS 690.

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For a comprehensive bibliography, visit <http://www.cnvill.demon.co.uk/mfhome.htm>.

The Viola in My Life

Producer: Carter Harman. Recorded by David Hancock at CAMI Hall, New York City, on December 7, 1970. Published by C.F. Peters (BMI).

False Relationships and the Extended Ending

Producer: Carter Harman. Recorded by David Hancock at Judson Hall, New York City, on June 8, 1970. Published by Universal Editions, London (BMI). Original recordings were made possible by an annual award of the American Academy–National Institute of Arts & Letters, which Mr. Feldman won in 1970.

Why Patterns?

Producer: Carter Thomas. Recorded by Thomas Swift at the State University College, Fredonia, New York, on December 17, 1978. Published by Universal Editions, London (BMI).

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MORTON FELDMAN (1926–1987)

THE VIOLA IN MY LIFE

80657-2

The Viola in My Life (1970) 28:12

1. Part I 12:08

2. Part II 9:49

3. Part III 6:01

Karen Phillips, viola; Anahid Ajemian, violin; Seymour Barab, cello; David Tudor, piano; Paula Robison, flute; Arthur Bloom, clarinet; Raymond DesRoches, percussion; Morton Feldman, conductor

4. *False Relationships and the Extended Ending* (1968) 16:02

Matthew Raimondi, violin; Seymour Barab, cello; Paul Jacobs, Yuji Takahashi, pianos; Arnold Fromme, trombone; Richard Fitz, percussion; Morton Feldman, conductor

5. *Why Patterns?* (1978) 30:27

Eberhard Blum, flute; Jan Williams, percussion; Morton Feldman, piano

Total time 74:58

This recording was originally issued as CRI CD 620.

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