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Interpretation in the Late Works of Morton Feldman

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

Music

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page........................................................................................................ iii

Table of Contents.................................................................................................. iv

List of Figures....................................................................................................... v

Abstract................................................................................................................ vi

1 Interpretation in the Late Works of Morton Feldman................................. 1
   1.1 A Single Dynamic...................................................................................... 1
   1.2 Temporal Organization........................................................................... 7
   1.3 Scale and Interpretation........................................................................ 16

References............................................................................................................. 20

Recordings on file at Mandeville Special Collections Library
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: *Bass Clarinet and Percussion* – Page 1, System 1.......................... 10

Figure 1.2: *Bass Clarinet and Percussion* – Page 1, System 1, organized in constant 3/4 meter................................................................. 10

Figure 2.1: *For Philip Guston* – Page 3, System 4, Section B......................... 11

Figure 2.2: *For Philip Guston* – Page 3, System 4, Section B, organized in a compound meter........................................................................ 11

Figure 3: *Bass Clarinet and Percussion* – Page 6, System 4, clarinet............ 11

Figure 4: *For Philip Guston* – Page 6, System 2-3........................................ 13

Figure 5: *For Philip Guston* – Page 3. System 4, Section B, organized in percussionist's meters................................................................. 14

Figure 6.1: *For Philip Guston* – Page 1, System 1, Section A....................... 14

Figure 6.2: *For Philip Guston* – Page 1, System 1, Section A, organized in percussionist's meters................................................................. 14

Figure 7: *For Philip Guston* – Page 3, System 4, Section B, organized in percussionist's meters, short-hand version.................................. 15

Figure 8: *For Philip Guston* – Page 75, System 1......................................... 16

Figure 9.1: *For Philip Guston* – Page 28, System 4, Section B.................... 18

Figure 9.2: *For Philip Guston* – Page 56, System 1..................................... 18
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Interpretation in the Late Works of Morton Feldman

by

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Master of Arts in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2011

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The following document offers an intensive study of the interpretive challenges posed by the late music of Morton Feldman, focusing on *Bass Clarinet* and *Percussion* (1981) and *For Philip Guston* (1984). A single dynamic marking, coded rhythmic organization, and extreme duration create an interpretive dilemma unprecedented in Western classical music. Indeed, the relatively simple surface of this music quickly gives way to a staggering complexity. This study stages several
interpretive explorations of this musical scenario; many interpretive perspectives are considered in order to construct a dynamic context, multiple approaches toward rhythmic organization are assessed for their musical implications, and in the face of unprecedented duration, the notion of interpretive control is reevaluated.
1.1. Interpretation in the Late Works of Morton Feldman

Presented with only a single dynamic, a single non-descriptive tempo, and comparatively few notes to play, the performer in the late works of Morton Feldman faces an arresting simplicity. Feldman's late scores have the tendency to offer information only when coerced, as if concealing some larger musical secret. Only as the performer deeply probes and examines the sparse instructions of the score, does it begin to yield clues to its intent and possible interpretation.

1.2. A Single Dynamic

It seems as though most musicians have come to know Feldman as an exclusively “quiet” composer and are often shocked and even offended by the volume at which his music is generally played (and it could be either “too loud” or “too soft”!) The composer himself is at the source of this reputation, instructing nearly every early work to be played “as soft as possible,” “extremely soft,” or that “dynamics are extremely low, but audible.” These dynamic descriptions deliberately avoid association with more conventional understandings of dynamic level by forcing the performer to focus solely on the limits of sound and audibility. Yet, these descriptions are strikingly absent from the late works, having been replaced with the enigmatic ppp indication. This difference is a subtle one, but seems to imply a shift away from the attackless, sourceless, and barely audible world that Feldman inhabits in his earlier works. This dynamic marking is far more traditional and inherently “musical” in its associations. Markings such as

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1 This study will focus on two works from what is generally known as Feldman's late period (roughly 1978-1987): Bass Clarinet and Percussion (1981) and For Philip Guston (1984).
these are typically understood as part of a closed system; to locate *forte*, one only needs to compare this level to estimated volumes for *piano*, *mezzo-forte* and *fortissimo*. Even two levels, *piano* and *forte*, are enough to constitute some kind of understanding of dynamic shape. A single marking, however, offers no context or comparative frame to infer a dynamic level; *ppp* is only known to be slightly louder than a hypothetical *pppp* and yet quieter than an imagined *pianissimo*. Given that this inherently vague dynamic defines such enormous expanses of time, it is no wonder that reactions to performance volume are often so strong. There is perhaps no other music in the Western tradition that relies as heavily on a single dynamic than that of late Feldman. This scenario has wide implications. Immediately it can be understood that there will be no sweeping climax, no dialectical drama of soft and loud, and furthermore no awareness that *loud* is even an option. All that is positively known is that the sound should be among the quietest sounds a performer can accomplish. Facing this ambiguity, rationalizing a subjectively perfect volume becomes an imperative challenge for the interpreter. Indeed, the performer in late Feldman must *construct* a context for the dynamic by weighing the interaction of several tangential musical factors.

Dynamic indications can be read in a variety of ways. Some performers approach dynamic in terms of absolutes, where *mezzo-forte* is associated with a certain decibel range or sensation of physical exertion, while others follow a relative understanding of dynamic that is determined by context. With Feldman in mind, it is easy to see why many performers approach the *ppp* marking as an absolute; there is simply no dynamic context, no *fffs* or *pps* to compare it to.
Yet, notions of “absolute ppp” quickly begin to deteriorate under further inspection. On a single instrument, any absolute dynamic is highly subjective and often directly linked to issues of tone quality. In their softest dynamics, some players might allow for some notes failing to speak, while others would qualify “as soft as possible” with “as soft as possible while maintaining a stable tone.” In either case, discussions of tone quality must be considered within the context of extreme duration. It is one thing to simply state that Feldman must be played at the limit of audibility, but it is another to do so for up to six hours. The physical demands of soft playing are extremely intense; if one accepts to play so softly that some notes may initially fail to speak, these failures will increase exponentially with the exhaustion of small muscles over the course of several hours. Similarly, those who assert an initially stable or comfortable dynamic will invariably lose some control of this stability over time. Indeed, the overwhelming physical demands imposed by the incredible duration frustrate any rationalization of a consistent tone quality.

What a performer further risks in approaching extremely soft dynamic levels is a potential deterioration of sonic identity. As instruments approach the limit of audibility, their salient features become less apparent, making it more difficult to recognize a glockenspiel as a glockenspiel and not a celeste. Feldman seems to have desired this ambiguity of sound-source in his early works, where he often insisted that the music be played “with a minimum of attack.” Yet, so often in these late works, Feldman constructs orchestrations in timbre-clusters, where the instruments employed are characteristically close in timbre. Note, for example,
the similarities of attack and resonance shared by some of the instruments in *For Philip Guston* (piano, celeste, glockenspiel, and vibraphone) and in *Bass Clarinet and Percussion* (bass clarinet, timpani, marimba, and xylophone.) In these instances, the instruments, even when played with a “characteristic sound,” become easily mistakable for one another. Any performer in these works has the opportunity to deviate from a characteristic sound (by using extremely soft mallets in the percussion, or a more percussive attack in the flute, for instance) in order to further blur the differences between instruments. With these factors in mind, the performer must consider the interpretive implications of identity distortion, choosing to either assert this inherent closeness of timbre by means of a characteristic sound, or to emphasize and even dramatize these similarities by manipulating timbre and driving the sonorities into even closer proximity.

Furthermore, it is far easier in the context of a solo instrument to define the absolute limits of one's instrument. Yet in an ensemble, issues of balance, blend, and control come to the fore. If all the performers in *For Philip Guston* played at “absolute ppp,” the situation would be incredibly unbalanced. (In a situation where a stable tone is desired, it seems likely that the flute would predominate, followed by the piano and the percussion in relatively close, but uneven, proximity.) Given this situation, the context seems to demand that all instruments sound equally. This would then require the percussionist and pianist to play noticeably louder and embrace the new relative ppp this context requires.

But the concept of equality introduces yet further complications. Tonal volume, the space-filling quality of sounds, the property by which one knows the
sound of a tuba to be larger than that of a piccolo, frustrates any understanding of dynamic equality. In *For Philip Guston*, the music often deploys extremely disproportionate instrumental forces; the psychologically-small piccolo and glockenspiel are regularly found next to the looming presence of middle-register piano. In these instances, there is a strong sensation of *empty space* generated by these variously-sized sounds. In even a well-balanced performance, it is likely that the piccolo and glockenspiel would actually be heard as slightly more present, but still *smaller* than the piano. These periods of emptiness stand in relief to portions of the music that are more physically balanced, such as those orchestrated with flute, vibraphone, and high-register piano, creating a multitude of ensemble sizes in spite of a constant dynamic. Again, it becomes a choice of the interpreters to either allow this phenomenon to occur, or to normalize these changes in ensemble size through adjustments in weight, balance, and color.

The single dynamic further indicates not only that the sounds should be equal, but that they should also remain at a constant volume throughout the duration of the piece. But given the extreme duration of this music, constancy of volume is an incredibly fragile concept. It is worth noting that the beginning of any late Feldman piece will almost always sound quiet. As concert-goers arrive in the hall from the clangorous sound-world of modern society, the hush that falls at the outset of a performance and the non-aggressive sounds that initiate each piece will very rarely be understood as “loud.” But as a performance progresses, the audience will unconsciously adjust their listening in order to focus on the quieter sounds at hand. This adjustment, the gradual focusing and clarification of soft sound, is
likely to be experienced as a subtle but persistent crescendo. This crescendo is reinforced as resonance accumulates in the hall and in the piano over the duration of the piece, particularly in denser sections of the music. Performers generally experience this as a positive sensation, one of filling the space and blending with the other instruments. This accumulation is something that Feldman clearly resisted, notable in his parenthetical reminder dynamics that occur with greater frequency toward the end of each late score. The latter halves of Piano and String Quartet and For John Cage are littered with reminders that the music is in fact still ppp. In For Philip Guston, he actually undermarks this parenthetical reminder to ppppp. In these moments, Feldman forces the performer to once again actively consider the volume of the music. By undermarking this reminder, Feldman seems to direct the performer's memory to the moment of quiet that overtook the hall when the piece first began, and to constantly attempt to recapture that hushed sensation. This means that maintaining a constant dynamic is not simply a function of playing the same volume throughout the duration of the piece; rather it is involves a balancing of accumulated sound with a projected density of sound in order to maintain the sensation of quietness felt at the beginning of every late Feldman piece. In this way, dynamic level becomes thoroughly entangled in the games of listening and memory.

The deceptively simple single dynamic marking in late Feldman thus becomes the threshold to a greater complexity. This seemingly vague indication demands a labyrinth of questioning and contextualization. Indeed, the dynamic in this music is shaped by a multitude of factors that do not immediately relate to
decibel level; understandings of tone quality, orchestration, ensemble balance, tonal volume, and musical memory sculpt the dynamic and inform interpretation in extremely subtle ways.

1.3. Temporal Organization

Perhaps the most enigmatic secret withheld by many late Feldman works is that of temporal organization. While many of the late works for strings are written in standard, albeit highly idiosyncratic, rhythmic notation, the works including percussion pose incredible problems for realization. Each score employs what Feldman referred to as a “grid”: a predetermined number of measures for each system and often a fixed number of systems per page. This means that each measure will be equal in proportion despite differences in duration. Each instrument’s meter is treated independently, so that the first measure of a system might contain three different meters, one for each player. These complex temporal systems then fall into one of two main categories: a scenario where all parts are given without any sense of ensemble orientation, often resulting in part-lengths of radically different durations despite their shared physical space in the score (as in Why Patterns? and Crippled Symmetry) and a second scenario where the parts maintain different meters, but eventually add up to create moments of ensemble alignment, often indicated by a bar-line that connects all three parts (as in Bass Clarinet and Percussion and For Philip Guston.) This latter situation is open-ended; there are absolutely precise rhythmic relationships contained within the score, but they are not made immediately explicit, forcing the performer to weigh a
variety of approaches, each with different practical and musical implications.

Given that the score does not immediately make clear the interaction between parts, it is a viable argument to assert that rhythmic alignment is not a high priority in late Feldman. Indeed, many ensembles approaching Bass Clarinet and Percussion and For Philip Guston give signs to indicate the approximate moment of ensemble alignment, allowing each player to continue playing his part without constantly comparing it to the rhythms of the other players. Ensemble bar-lines function as markers to organize a collective pacing of the music. This interpretation is particularly attractive in For Philip Guston, where the four-hour duration makes any attention to ensemble coordination extremely daunting. However, this approach invites a rather significant margin of error, particularly in some of the longest expanses of independence, such as the stretch of fifty-four quarter-notes beginning page fourteen of For Philip Guston, or the regular intervals of 135 quarter-notes in Bass Clarinet and Percussion. Another consequence of this approach is of audience perception: it is likely that with this approach each player will be seen as a soloist, largely unconcerned with the other performers on stage. This creates a situation very similar to that of Why Patterns? and Crippled Symmetry, where the parts are completely uncoordinated. Many interpretations in this manner emphasize this “three-soloists” approach by stationing the performers very far apart on stage.

Yet, Bass Clarinet and Percussion and For Philip Guston are dramatically different scores than Why Patterns? or Crippled Symmetry. The players align with great frequency and in very small intervals (the opening four measures of For
Philip Guston, for instance, align after only twenty-nine thirty-second notes, or 3.625 quarter-notes.) These very small intervals create another strata of meter made up of complex compound meters. While the meters are almost always different for each player, the composite rhythm is still easily knowable. The understanding of these relationships can be undertaken in a variety of ways. A common method for realizing these rhythmic relationships is by configuring all of the meters so that all parts are felt in the same meter. This approach is demonstrated in Figures 1.1 and 1.2. Figure 1.1 shows the opening system of Bass Clarinet and Percussion, and in Figure 1.2, the clarinet part has been renotated to fit into the percussionists' regular 3/4 meter. This new context is not a comfortable one; the clarinetist's task becomes immediately more complex, though all of the rhythmic relationships are made clear. This method of organization is notably less effective in For Philip Guston, where the meters often add up to extremely irregular numbers of sixteenth- or thirty-second-notes. An example of this compound metering is seen in Figures 2.1 and 2.2.

The most glaring fault in this reorganization, however, is the complete distortion of metrical orientation. Many of Feldman's rhythms are constructed to fit or work against meter in dramatic ways, such as those shown in Figure 3.
Figure 1.1: *Bass Clarinet and Percussion* – Page 1, System 1.

Figure 1.2: *Bass Clarinet and Percussion* – Page 1, System 1, organized in constant 3/4 meter.
Figure 2.1: *For Philip Guston* - Page 3, System 4, Section B.

Figure 2.2: *For Philip Guston* - Page 3, System 4, Section B, organized in a compound meter.

Figure 3: *Bass Clarinet and Percussion* - Page 6, System 4, clarinet.

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2 Passages in *For Philip Guston* are identified by page, system, and “section,” where “section” refers to portions of a system divided by ensemble barlines.
In this example, each clarinet figure seems to be generated by the meter it resides in. Furthermore, whereas all of the notes in Figure 2.1 were originally experienced as downbeats in traditional meters for each performer, they are now subsumed into strange groupings within a single, unconventional meter. Feldman's fascination with meter as a frame and context is indeed lost in this reconfiguration.

This loss is not one to be accepted lightly. Meter in Feldman is often the source of a great deal of interpretive information. See, for example, Figure 4: here in a solo flute passage, 2/2 meter is directly juxtaposed against 8/8, and similarly 3/4 sits awkwardly adjacent to 6/8. From this, one can clearly see Feldman's sensitivity to metrics; he knew well not only that the metrical hierarchy of 2/2 is completely different from that of 8/8, but that feeling nine in the space of eight is experientially much different than feeling nine in the space of two. Indeed, so much richness in this late music comes from these nuances of weight and meter. The mixing of meters independently between players is a highly nuanced mode of expression: mixtures of downbeats, anacruses, polyrhythmic figures, and subdivisions greatly diversify the temporal sensation of these works. In a music devoid of expressive indications and rhetorical drama, metrical hierarchy becomes a critical means of inflection.

It thus becomes clear that some method of maintaining metric independence while still revealing rhythmic relation is needed. A possibility is that each player rewrite the score in order to hear the other's rhythms in terms of their own meter. An example of this re-working in For Philip Guston is shown in Figure 5, which renotates Figure 2.1 so that the flute and piano rhythms are described in
terms of the percussionist's meters. The flutist and pianist would each need to apply similar operations in order to hear the ensemble in relation to their individual meters. In this method, metric independence is preserved and coordination is rendered very clear. This method thusly creates a rich and complex web of inflection as each musician hears the ensemble music in radically different metric orientations. Complex passages, however, still cause great difficulty for ensemble coordination, such as the enigmatic opening phrase seen in Figure 6.1 and renotated in Figure 6.2.

Figure 4: For Philip Guston – Page 6, Systems 2-3.
Figure 5: *For Philip Guston* – Page 3, System 4, Section B, organized in percussionist's meters.

Figure 6.1: *For Philip Guston* – Page 1, System 1, Section A.

Figure 6.2: *For Philip Guston* – Page 1, System 1, Section A, organized in percussionist's meters.
This organization has a directly musical impact: the ensemble bar-lines now become audible moments of ensemble unity and serve as a means of demarcating phrase units in the ensemble. In this approach, it is likely that the piece will be perceived clearly as chamber music, rather than a consort of soloists, and the interactions of patterns in the music will be rendered in a much more rigid and direct manner. The central disadvantage of this method is that the amount of study and rehearsal required is extremely daunting, particularly when bearing in mind that the vast majority of the 102 pages of *For Philip Guston* would need to be decoded in this fashion (although some degree of relief can found by employing the kind of short-hand notation seen in Figure 7.)

![Figure 7: For Philip Guston – Page 3, System 4, Section B, organized in percussionist's meters, short-hand version.](image)

Each of these methods is in some way offered by the score; Feldman seems to invite the performer to know the rhythmic relationships only as thoroughly as desired. The score in no way *forces* the performer to decode the rhythmic notation. A good performance could be either a very flexible one, where cues are given to direct pacing, or a very rigid one, where the ensemble relationship becomes a high priority and is thoroughly decoded and rehearsed. Indeed, with a number of possible methods, these pieces in many ways resist a typical virtuosity. Each
performance will invariably differ from any other in temporal organization. Even in an extremely rigid interpretation of *For Philip Guston*, certain rhythmic patterns, such as the passage seen in Figure 8, become impossible to coordinate with precision. Indeed, all of these methods are as suitable as they are flawed, emphasizing the fact that this music is somehow always beyond the grasp of the interpreter.

![Figure 8: For Philip Guston – Page 75, System 1.](image)

1.4. Scale and Interpretation

Looming behind all interpretive decisions is the unavoidable impact of extreme duration. The enormity of these works affects all parameters of interpretation. The above discussion has observed how the incredible length of these works directly impacts decisions of balance, tone quality, and rhythmic organization. The duration is, in the end, the central factor in making these pieces appear so monolithic and unattainable. Even in the most thoroughly rehearsed performances of *For Philip Guston* and *String Quartet II*, at some point, to some degree, the performers must rely on their response to the page itself; they must
sight-read. Indeed, if traditional virtuosity prizes the memorized performance, the late works of Feldman represent a complete departure. It is not humanly possible to memorize these enormous works, but perhaps more importantly, it is certainly not the point that they ever be memorized. So much of the music arises only out of the performer’s confrontation with the score and so much of the material plays upon distorted musical memories that it seems entirely antithetical to imagine a memorized performance of late Feldman. This notion places Feldman in relief against the whole tradition of Western classical music performance; it is difficult to imagine any other music in the Western canon that would be as negatively affected by a memorized performance than that of late Feldman.

In any performance of this music, the clear sense of location demanded by memory is unobtainable (and more to the point: undesirable.) Certainly it is possible, in For Philip Guston, to recognize large structural markers, such as the notable C-A-G-E figure seen in Figure 6.1, but likely not possible to remember one iteration of this figure as distinct from any other. To note one instance, this figure appears on page 28 as seen in Figure 9.1, and is not heard again until page 56 as seen in Figure 9.2. The interval between the two appearances of this figure is just over an hour in performance. It is indeed impossible, after over an hour of music, to recognize the subtle recomposition of the rhythmic values, phrase duration, pitch level, pitch order, and harmony between instruments. The performer or listener simply senses that something is different, yet is unable to make definitive comparisons.

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Figure 9.1 begins at 01:25:28 on the accompanying audio recording. Figure 9.2 begins at 02:33:30.
The performer could perhaps hope to find a sense of location in page numbers as well, yet the differences in page duration can be extreme and often belie the actual rate of progression through the music. As one example, pages 93-97 contain 943 eighth notes, while pages 98-102 contain 3,128, the latter section lasting around eighteen minutes longer than the former.\footnote{Page 93 begins at 04:01:05 on the accompanying audio recording. Page 98 begins at 04:09:18 and page 102 ends at 04:35:39.}

A well-rehearsed performance becomes more akin to navigating a familiar city; landmarks, road maps, and hidden regions are always being discovered and redrawn, but never with a sense of ownership, definitiveness or authority. It thus
becomes clear that a conventional understanding of interpretive control has no place here. Even the simplest indications (such as the single ppp) give way to labyrinths of decision-making. Temporal organization of this music can be attempted in any number of ways, and even in thoroughly rehearsed performances, rhythms are often beyond command. Formal understanding is undermined by the sheer scale of the music and musical memory is deliberately frustrated at every turn. Upon the provocation of the interpreter, the deceptively simple surface of these late works gives way to a staggering complexity; indeed, this presumed simplicity only masks an overwhelming musical scenario beyond interpretive control.
References
