

Jean-Baptiste Masson*¹

*Centre national de création musicale Césaré, France

¹jbmasson@protonmail.com

To Weave Time: The Late Music of Morton Feldman Through the Example of Violin and String Quartet

ABSTRACT

There are only few analysis of Morton Feldman's (1926–1987) music, especially for his last phase (Hanninen 2004a, 225). With his language focusing on repetition and scale, his music challenges listening and analysis and requires different approaches. We aim to show that, still, Feldman uses a formal plan, that there's a clear inspiration from rugs in his musical language, and that he plays with specific aspects of our auditory and memory systems. We will concentrate here on Violin and String Quartet (1985), but think that our conclusions extend to all the late period of Feldman.

1. INTRODUCTION

These very long durations, along the very soft dynamics and the use of a limited material, rise some questions. First about the formal organisation: how is Feldman proceeding to maintain music on such durations? What are the strategies used to organise the work? And then about the reception of such pieces: how do we listen to it? To approach this, five points will be examined. First, an investigation of the musical material; secondly, the form; thirdly, the musical language of use in the piece; fourthly, to weave time: rugs and music; fifthly, the perceptive aspects of Feldman's music.

2. INVESTIGATION OF THE MUSICAL MATERIAL: THE PATTERNS

2.1 Patterns

The composition follows a unique method: each bar is associated with a specific material. We will name this a pattern. Typically, it's based on a chord played by the quartet, joined or not by the solo violin. If this last one is not joining, it will have its own pattern, always scaled at the bar. These ones are therefore very respected, and it's only during specific sections that a note is held beyond it. There's no modification of the material inside the bar, the quaver is the unit for the construction and the variation of the patterns and silence is a pattern on its own. The piece can be reduced to 10 main patterns and a formal organisation appears through their succession (Figure 1).

Patterns are clearly identified. For example, pattern F is characterised by one or more instruments of the string quartet playing solo violin's pattern. Pattern G is characterised by notes being held beyond the measure bar. Pattern I is characterised by long silences piercing the string quartet. Pattern J is characterised by the use of pizzicati.

2.2 Solo Violin's Patterns

Along all this, the solo violin is also very identified: during nearly all the piece, he's playing only two notes: G and A, played through a swinging on a ninth G–A or on a seventh A–G. Besides this, the solo violin is also playing a key pattern,

pattern C, a genuine marker of the work's evolution. It's a pattern in double sharp and double flat, and the only moment where a fragment of melody seems to appear. This pattern marks the beginning and end of several sections, and serves as the conclusion of the piece.

3. FORM

A form appears through the evolution of the patterns: an introduction followed by 9 sections can be drawn (Figure 1). In each of them, particular patterns are repeatedly exposed, with very slight variations in the temporal organisation of each instrument at each bar. Other musical parameters follow this division in sections like the metric or the presence and absence of repeat bars. An equilibrium is visible between the sections' length: the number of measures in each one is a multiple of 27. This is due to the compositional method of Feldman, which relies on the paper used: each page has 3 systems, and each system has bars: namely 27 bars per page. Apart from variations of the same pattern, each change in the music is linked with either a system or a page change. Transition from one section to another always occur at a page change.

4. THE LATE MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF FELDMAN: VIOLIN AND STRING QUARTET

Violin and String Quartet, and generally all Feldman's music, carries no melody nor development of anything, and the musical elements bear no logical relation. The dynamics always stays *ppp*, tempo stays at 63–66, and variations of playing mode are sparse. Nonetheless, Feldman is using specific techniques to organise the material. The basic idea through all of them is the constant repetition of the same, but always different.

4.1 Duration Exchanges

Such instrument is playing such duration, and in the next measure, this duration is taken by another instrument. For example, the duration played by violin 2 will be given to the viola, the one of the viola will be given to the cello, which will give its to violin 1. The first page of the score is a very clear demonstration of that. Pitches never change when duration exchanges are used.

4.2 Pitch Exchanges

It's the exact same principle as duration exchanges, but with pitch (for example, see bars 352–405). Durations never change when pitch exchanges are used.

4.3 Retrogradations

This technique occurs on different scales, from a few measures (bars 272–75 for example) to several

dozens (bars 472–520, with a centre at bar 506 for example). It's not the content of the measure that is reversed, but the measures themselves that are switched around a symmetry centre. However, Feldman always twists the symmetry, with always an instrument that doesn't fit it: it's the establishment of crippled symmetries (Crippled Symmetries is the title of a piece for flute, piano and percussion written two years before Violin and String Quartet). Crippled symmetries can occur within the quartet plus the solo violin, within the quartet alone, within the solo violin alone.

4.4 Phasing

Phasing occurs without any logical organisation, leading to a complete irregularity and an impossibility to put any landmark, then to a constant renewal. The pattern can go back in phase at any moment, without anything announcing it. It's therefore a very different use of phasing than Steve Reich, whose work was mainly based on phasing during the 1960's and 70's.

4.5 Beatings

Feldman has never written microtones, but he's very aware of them and of what they can bring. The harmonic playing, through nearly the entire piece, facilitates the hearing of the beatings phenomena thanks to the filtering of the fundamental. As the majority of the chords are clusters based around seconds, sevenths and ninths, harmonic interactions are numerous, and therefore beatings very present. On specific sections, there's a clear focus on beatings and time is given to listen to them — for example, bars 1279–87 expose the diffraction of a major second through the use of different playing modes to play the same notes and the displaced entering of the instruments.

The use of C-flat, E-sharp, F-flat, B-sharp, F-double-sharp, B-double-flat is also part of this interest in microtones and beatings like Feldman explains:

I'm not using quarter tones but different ways of writing. For example, I could have some sort of false octave, like with an E-flat and D sharp [...]. I do this [...] to obtain a greater clarity in small intervals, like a cluster. It seems to me... It's like the turpentine, like the dilution of music through turpentine. (Feldman 2008, 428.)

4.6 Modules and Modular Composition

If we look back at these different techniques, especially at durations and pitch exchanges, we see that measures are conceived as modules. The piece consists in a distribution of these modules through time. On a larger scale, with repeat bars, it's measure stacks that are conceived as modules that are repeated two or more times (up to nine). Looking at sound and silence with this module perspective in mind, we see on particular pages that there's like a visual organisation of the score, which looks much like a graphic (pp. 36–7 especially), with modules of sounds and silences distributed through space (and so, silence as a distinctive module).

5. WEAVING, RUGS AND MUSIC

As we know, Feldman was passionate about oriental rugs and has written about the inspiration he took from them (Feldman 2008, 336–7).

5.1 Rugs and Weaving

Looking more precisely at the rugs he was enthusiast of, we can see a clear inspiration in the manufacturing method itself: the weaving. Here, we see micro patterns combined to form a macro pattern, we can observe vertical and horizontal translations in the combination of the micro patterns to form different macro patterns, or the repetition of patterns that forms sections, or micro-variations in these repetitions to make ever changing patterns, or the use of span of colours to structure the rugs, etc. To look at how patterns are weaved enlightens how Feldman's music is made (Figure 2).

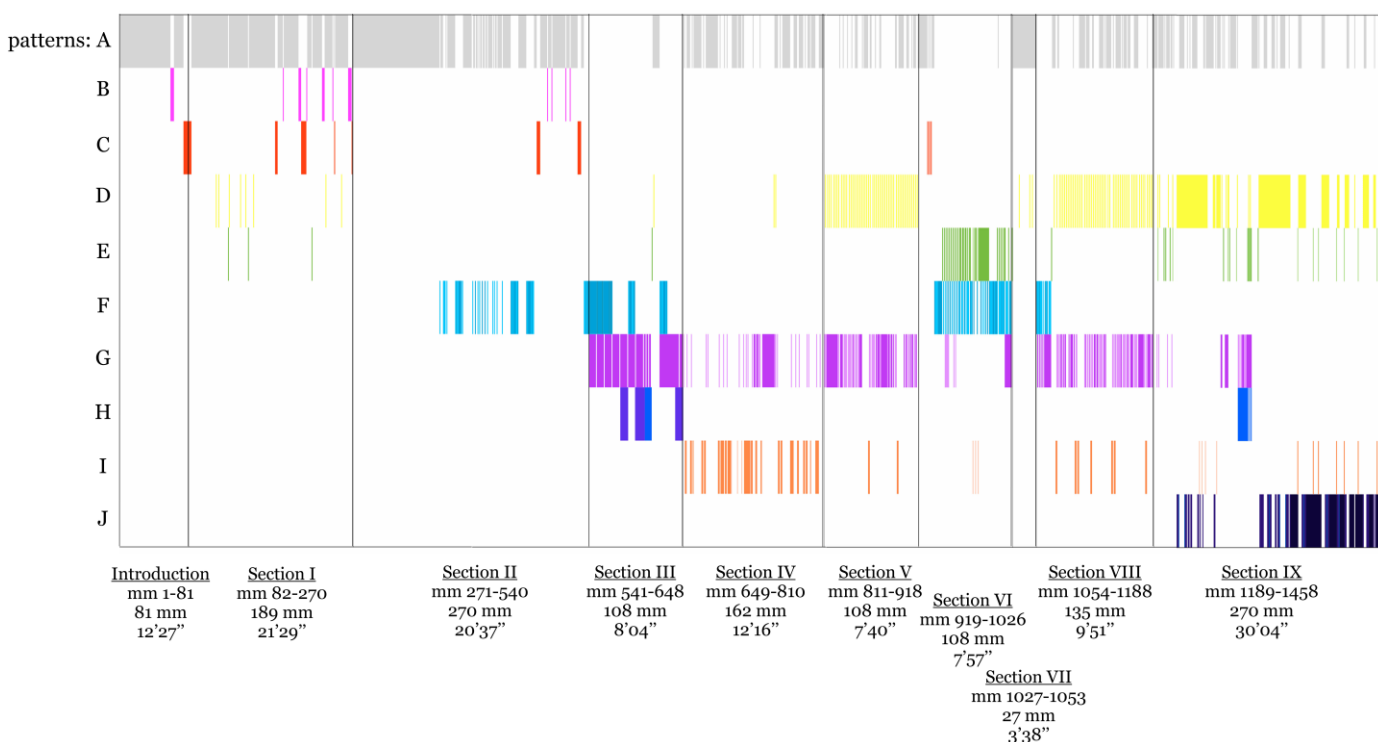


Fig. 1. Violin and String Quartet: The evolution of the patterns draws the form.

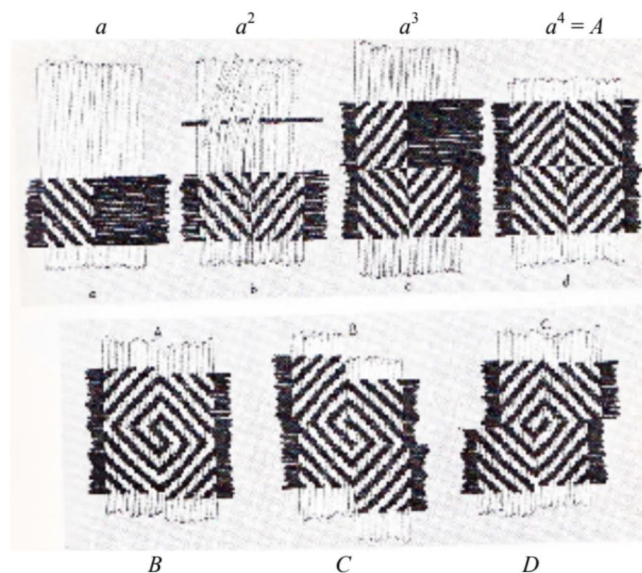


Fig. 2. The repetition of the same micro pattern *a* gives birth to the macro pattern *A* (up). To apply a shift on the position of the same micro patterns *a* gives birth to three different macro pattern (down) (from Huyghe 1985, I, 25).

As we note with Figure 2, the same produces the different. As an analogy with the weaving of patterns that finally form a rug, we can see the music of Feldman as the patient weaving of time through the use of patterns. A look at the first two pages of the score gives a very clear image of that idea that the same produces the different: nearly the first ten minutes of the piece consist of the repetition of the very first measure, with just duration exchanges at each bar: we are immersed in the ever changing micro pattern of measure 1 that progressively builds the macro pattern of the introduction. To go back to Figure 1 with this in mind, it has become clear that a scale could be drawn from micro to macro: from the measure, to the system, to the page, to the section; and that sections could be seen as macro patterns formed from micro patterns.

At that point, if we think about time and form, we notice that the micro path at measure scale is hard to follow and seems unpredictable. But if we compare snapshots from two different sections, we see that each one is easily identifiable, and thus that the macro path on section scale is readable.

These principles of use of patterns are used throughout the late period of Feldman and directly derive from his interest in time and memory in music, as we are now going to see.

6. PERCEPTIVE ASPECTS OF FELDMAN'S MUSIC

Feldman uses particularities of human perception in his composition method. We think that Feldman was very aware of the theories of auditory cognition, as they appear at the same time when he starts to considerably lengthen his pieces. We listen through temporal windows: the echoic memory. The general consensus in musical cognition is that this echoic memory lasts between 2 and 6 seconds (Chevalier, Platel, Eustache 2007, 175). If we look at the *Violin and String Quartet*, and more generally to all late music of Feldman, we see that the tempo is 63–6: combined with the 8/8 metric that occupies

most of the piece, each measure (= each pattern) lasts between 3.6 and 3.8 seconds. It means that each pattern fills the echoic memory. As the patterns are repeated many times with constant variation in the temporal alignment of its elements, while the pitches remain the same, it means that during each section the memory is filled with the same material. We understand then more clearly the words of Feldman about his wish to disorientate the memory of the listener (Feldman 2008, 335): the micro path — the one we follow in real-time while listening to the piece — is diluted in a temporal experience. The long durations of the sections are a necessity for the loss of a local point of reference, and time is given to immerse in each pattern. It's a justification of the frequent silence at the beginning and end of the patterns: they are isolated from each other, time is given to listen to them. But at the same time, their perpetual variations maintain the attention, and attention is not overloaded through time thanks to the simplicity of the material, its invariability inside the measure, and the slow pace. It allows the macro path (at section scale) to be readable. This is also a justification of the *ppp* nuance used throughout the piece, and of the harmonic playing: an effort is asked to the listener to concentrate on what he's listening, to put him in the right conditions to receive the music.

7. CONCLUSION

In the end, we see that the *Violin and String Quartet* follows a formal structure, which is organised according to a modular method of composition that uses different scales, from micro to macro, from the measure up to the section.

We also note that from its concept to its musical realisation, Feldman's music is very coherent.

All this is diluted in a temporal experience that goes far beyond the regular settings of listening and concert.

And this temporal experience is linked to the way our auditory and memory systems work.

The other key consists in understanding what is imagination, not what is interesting.¹

KEYWORDS

Form, Musical Language, Contemporary Music, Musical Time, Perception.

REFERENCES

- Brelet, Gisèle, 1949. *Le temps musical : essai d'une esthétique nouvelle de la musique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Feldman, Morton, 2008. *Écrits et paroles*. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.
- Hanninen, Dora, 2004a. 'Feldman, Analysis, Experience', *Twentieth-century music* 1/2: 225–51.
- , 2004b, 'Associative Sets, Categories and Music Analysis', *Journal of Music Theory* 48/2: 147–218.
- Huyghe, René, 1985. *Sens et destin de l'art*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Lechevalier, Bernard, Platel, Hervé, and Eustache, Francis, 2007. *Le cerveau musicien: neuropsychologie cognitive de la perception musicale*. Bruxelles: De Boeck.
- Majmon, Magnus Olsen, 1983. *En diskurs om 'det sublimе' og Morton Feldman's String Quartet n° 2*. Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen.
- Reed, Stanley, 1976. *Les plus beaux tapis d'Orient*. Paris: Robert Laffont.

¹ Feldman 2008, 426.

- Rundel, Peter, and Pellegrini, Quartet, 2002. *Violin and String Quartet*. CD, Basel (Switzerland): HatHut Records, hat[now]ART 2-137.
- Sani, Frank. 'Why patterns? An analysis of Morton Feldman's Piano and String Quartet', <<https://www.cnvill.net/mfsani2.htm>>, accessed 26/06/2023.
- Stern, Daniel, 1997. *La constellation maternelle*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Zimmermann, Walter, 1986. 'Entretien avec Morton Feldman', *Contrechamps* 6: 11–23.