

Chester Biscardi: Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman) for contrabass and piano (1989) and in a version for piano solo (1989/91)

The following notes by the composer combine introductory remarks originally written to accompany the publication of this work by Edition Peters - No. 67493B (contrabass and piano) and No. 67493A (piano solo) - with a more detailed "theoretical" analysis written in 1999.

I first met Morton Feldman in Buffalo in 1979. His apartment was neat, sparse: a Steinway, a work table, a Rauschenberg on one wall, the now-famous Brown/Feldman cover from TIME records on another, and many ancient Oriental, Turkish and Iroquois carpets. He talked about his music and compositional techniques which had as lasting an impact on me as did his intense passion for those carpets. He encouraged me to get close to the floor and look at their textures, reliefs, orchestration, what he called "symmetry even through imperfection," and explained how he was translating these impressions into the musical notes of the string quartet which he was writing.

In this duet, I am commenting musically on Morton Feldman's Extensions 3, written for solo piano in 1952. My piece is really about using material in subtly different ways. So, it's looking at ideas from different perspectives. I borrow two things from Feldman's Extensions 3:

1) the quick juxtaposition of pp and ff which occurs in the piano, the way soft sounds ("Soft As Possible") are interrupted by unmotivated loud sounds ("Loud As Possible"), for instance, at mm. 25-28; and

2) the last four bars of his piece (a poignant repeated figure which in Companion Piece expresses loss and leads to stillness), transposed, which become the repetitive idea that occurs in the piano at mm. 32-36; at m. 90; and then the last five measures of the piece.

Feldman's notes are "drier" than mine; I put the pedal down in order to flesh out the notes with a different kind of harmony. I suggest that the piano lid be kept up in order to reflect the rich overtones which the bass creates.

The major areas of the piece are as follows:

mm. 1-36 (mm. 25-29 and 30-36 are extensions of the material borrowed from Feldman);

mm. 37-60 (mm. 45-49 and 50-60 extend the material);

mm. 61-92 (mm. 69-81, 82-85 and 86-92 extend the material) [mm. 61-91 (mm. 69-80, 81-84 and 85-91 extend the material in the solo piano version)];

mm. 93-95 form an "interlude" [there is no "interlude" in the solo piano version];

mm. 96-107 [mm. 92-103];

mm. 108-136 [mm. 104-132];

mm. 137-145; 146-157; 158-end (this last part being a diminished version of mm. 25-36) [mm. 133-141; 142-153; 154-end (this last part being a diminished version of mm. 25-36)].

Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman) was written for Robert Black and Anthony de Mare who first performed it at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in England on November 20, 1989. There is also a solo piano version - premiered by Anthony de Mare at Sarah Lawrence College on November 21, 1991 - based on the original duet. The solo piano version has been recorded by Anthony de Mare on the CD "Chester Biscardi: 'At the Still Point' " Composer Recordings Inc (CRI CD686). The following note is excerpted from Robert Carl's review of that recording in Fanfare (Vol 19 No 1, September/October 1995):

"Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman) (1989-91) [...] strikes me as an unqualified success. Written as a homage to Morton Feldman, it is a trope of sorts on Feldman's 1952 Extensions 3, also for solo piano. Something magical happens here, when the template of Feldman's soft, spacey gestures intersects with Biscardi's lush harmony. The Romantic gestures don't sound forced here, there's nothing kitsch about these beautiful chords, still more functional than Feldman would have ever made them but also less directed than American mid-century neo-Romanticism would normally allow. In short, very much of this time."

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