

[\[Morton Feldman Page\]](#) [\[List of Texts\]](#)

Encounters with Feldman

by Chester Biscardi

I never studied formally with Morton Feldman, but I was fortunate to get to know him through the composer, Bunita Marcus, a former student of mine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who went to study with Feldman at the University of New York at Buffalo. I first met him in Buffalo in 1979 when I went to visit Russell Merritt, the Sound Recording Librarian at the University, who also knew Bunita. I wrote about that experience in the notes to my Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman), for contrabass and piano (1989): "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."

On December 20, 1980 Feldman and Marcus visited my apartment on Sixth Avenue and Fourteenth Street in New York City, which, in effect, sits on the dividing line between Greenwich Village and Chelsea, and, in a larger sense, between Downtown and Uptown composers. Feldman was amused by the fact that I lived in a walk-up tenement above the Gum Joy Chinese Restaurant, a place that he frequented when he himself lived in the City. I, too, have an "Oriental" carpet, and we all looked down at the worn-out mat, glaring holes, and faded textures of an industrial made copy. And then off to another of his favorite Chinese restaurants located somewhere in the East Village.

At the time I was writing a piece for the DaCapo Chamber Players for their 1981 Carnegie Hall season and was feeling terribly blocked by my original plan to write a work for clarinet and piano. I complained to Feldman: "It is difficult to write for two instruments." To which he responded: "Think of the piano and clarinet; add horn (then take it out); add violin, pizz. (then take it out), etc. Arrive at piano and clarinet!" His advice to me was akin to Japanese thought which suggests that one should remove everything unessential in order to strengthen the composition - which may be one of the reasons why there was such a kinship between Feldman and Takemitsu and why they became such good friends in the 70s. I finally wrote *Di Vivere*, for clarinet in A and piano with flute, violin and violoncello (1981), with an alternate version for clarinet in A and piano. I wrote about *Di Vivere*: "In a single movement it explores both the inward and outward directed music of the clarinet and piano, heightened and further exteriorized by the coloration of a trio of flute, violin and 'cello." I "added" the flute, violin and 'cello as a way of "pulling" the colors out of the clarinet and piano duo. In 1991, two years after I wrote *Companion Piece* (for Morton Feldman), for contrabass and piano, I made an alternate version for solo piano. I took out the contrabass!

I went back to Buffalo for the premiere of my Piano Concerto, for piano and orchestra (1983), on April 16, 1985, with Yvar Mikhashoff playing piano and Alan Heatherington conducting The University at Buffalo Philharmonia at that year's North American New Music Festival. After the concert and with great affection Feldman said to me: "It's a London piece. They would eat it up with a spoon. I've got to get my publisher, Universal, to push it. Except for the cliché of the timpani (will you sit down and rewrite that in 2 hours?), it

is an elegant work. The Great American Concerto."

Earlier that day Feldman came to an Encounter Seminar I gave at the University. It quickly evolved into a lively conversation about the role of education for composers - one of his deep concerns. I was touched when later he said to Bunita Marcus in front of me: "It's not so often that we get a live one!" And to me: "Takemitsu [with whom I studied briefly at Yale in 1975 and with whom I maintained a long-time friendship] loves you and your music. Very much. I know that." These affirmations and allies have had as lasting an impact on me as just about any other experience I've ever had in my life, and they continue to resonate.

Feldman was a good friend, inviting me to evenings of new music at the New York studio of Francesco Clemente, and, like Takemitsu, giving me direction in both my life and work. His music, starting with Rothko Chapel, influenced my music especially in areas of color, orchestration, and form. In Companion Piece (for Morton Feldman) I wanted to write an homage that would comment musically on his Extensions 3, written for solo piano in 1952. I was interested in that particular piece because of the poignant repeated figure in its final four measures - which in Companion Piece would express loss and lead to stillness, as well as the way soft sounds ("Soft As Possible") are interrupted by unmotivated loud sounds ("Loud As Possible").

I last saw Feldman in 1987 at a concert in New York City celebrating Brown, Cage, Feldman and Wolff. He had just married the composer, Barbara Monk, and was extremely happy and in perfect Feldman form: wry wit; and his bigger-than-life presence encapsulating those exquisite miniatures and extraordinary silences within.

[\[Morton Feldman Page\]](#) [\[List of Texts\]](#)