

Love at First C-Sharp

by Zahra Partovi

The remarks below were made by Zahra Partovi in response to questions from the audience after a screening of her film about Morton Feldman, “Softly – A GIANT STEP”. The screening took place as part of a Feldman event, “Music & Image”, conceived and organised by Chester Biscardi at Sarah Lawrence College, New York, on 2 October 2018.

What was your process in deciding what moment of the image should be completely black and white and which moment colour?

Well, this film was supposed to be in black and white completely. But when my cinematographer and I went to Far Rockaway to shoot that sunset, this *glorious, glorious* red sunset was there! So, I had made my mind up that this was going to be a black and white film. But when I went to edit with my editor, we turned it into black and white and I said, “No, this is just not right! It’s a *sin* to turn this into black and white!” So, I decided to keep the whole film in black and white and then the glorious sunset had to be that red colour, and that’s what you see.

I wanted to make one comment, because this question always comes up: “What do we see, where do we go, what is that staircase that we walk down, where is that staircase that we walk up?” I mean, some of it you recognise; the Washington Square Park with the Arch. Every single place that you see in this film was related to Morton Feldman’s life. This is where he walked, this is where he lived, this is where he was born, this is where he died. Every single image in “Softly - A GIANT STEP” is related to his life.

The film structure is very sympathetic both to the music and to the words. Were you thinking of this as a film structure that was going to reflect the ideas about which he was speaking, or about what it felt like in the music he wrote based on those ideas?

Deciding to make a film and being a filmmaker is a huge responsibility, and often people have asked me what is more important, because filmmakers want to have their images come out

powerfully. This was my tenth film. In my other films, called short experimental films, I took a lot of liberty and decided what I wanted to do. In this film, it is the *music* that is the most important thing. His music comes first, and all the other things are actually serving the music. So I would say, music first, his words second, and what I do is absolutely the servant.

When I first saw the film, months ago now, I felt there's a real progression here about him. I mean, it really felt like it moved from idea, to the relationship to nature, then finally, towards the end, to the idea of time and the perception of time, which is kinda the way his own music progressed. Because those long, long works in the last period of his composition really are not about form in any traditional way. They are not made up of parts. They're really about evolving an idea over a very long period of time. So I felt the movie did that in a way for me. But is that my superimposing an idea?

Well, it was because of what happened to me. I call it "The Morton Feldman Syndrome"! It's a syndrome. It's a malady. That you hear Morton Feldman's music for the first time [gasps sharply!] and that's it! And you fall in love so badly! It's love at first C-sharp! [laughter!] That's right! And that's it, you just can't do anything about it. So this syndrome, there is no cure for it! But you're blessed with something for the rest of your life. And many years ago this happened to me. And it's because I have been living him, completely living him. And I realised after "Softly" was finished, that his music was completely within me when the film was being made, and that's why you sense that progression that exists in his music, and exists in this only half-an-hour piece.

I have a question about your choice of the piece, "For John Cage". I don't know what came first in your process of making the film, how did you arrive at that choice?

Well, you always have your favourites of a composer, favourite pieces. When I decided to make the film, actually it's odd to tell you this, but the *title* was the first thing! "Softly - A GIANT STEP" because, in my opinion, his music is soft. By now, everybody knows that! It's extremely soft. And, in my opinion, and I'm sure in your opinion, Morton Feldman has taken a giant step in American musical history. There is no question about that. He has revolutionised how we hear music. And it's very, very different from other composers. So, to answer your question, "Softly - A GIANT STEP" the title came first.

And what do you choose? The first piece that I heard, that I fell in love with Morton Feldman, was this piece for violin and piano. And it had such an incredible effect on me that I needed to use that.

You're a translator of Persian poetry, and I was wondering what connections you have discovered between Morton Feldman's music and what he does with that music and your translation work.

Yes, I'm a translator, that's my first career. And I have been translating medieval Persian poetry for over forty years. When you translate poetry from one language to another, it's incredible how music of the first language into the second language is the most important thing. And so I realised that in order to translate something so distant from the English language, Persian into English, you have to bring two things into the second language: meaning, of course, that's the first thing, you need to bring meaning. And the second thing, as important as meaning, is the music of the first language into the second language. So I often actually would give a key, like E minor, to the poem that I was translating, and then, once I would translate this short poem from Persian into English, if the English translation also sounded like E minor, that was successful! So, to answer your question, yes, my work as translator has affected very, very, very much the films that I have made, including "Softly - A GIANT STEP".