

Morton Feldman

Your pieces seem to me very enigmatic in a certain sense. If one tries to find out, he won't find out. You really don't know how MORTON FELDMAN composes.

WELL, I don't know how WALTER ZIMMERMANN lives and spends his time, and you don't look to me like an enigmatic young man. Well, when I first started to work, that was my fault. Now it's becoming my virtue. Haha, as a man gets older, his SINS become charming.

One cannot help but notice in the course of writing a piece that some underlying principle seems to be ah.....there. Now, the question is to what degree you want to embrace this underlying principle. And also every piece has a different degree. Sometimes you meet it halfway. Sometimes you just shake its hand and it leaves. Sometimes you decide not even to use it, though the suggestion hovers over the piece. Why don't you do this? It's crying out for this. And it's not done. And it is almost as if it's in. Only because of its impact it's ah.....like a So I'm aware of these things, and ah.....

But ALL this in a sense is really not a compositional problem. I think I can make my pieces the way I do. And recently in the past six years, I've been writing very long pieces.....only because of my concentration. My pieces are to some degree a performance. I'm highly concentrated when I work. In fact I found ways to arrive at concentration. One of the most important ways is that I write in ink. So if I begin to work and I see that I am crossing out time, I realize in a sense that I thought I was concentrated, but in fact I wasn't concentrated. So the writing in ink is an itook back onto nner parameter to how concentrated I really am. And then I go ahead and write the piece, again using the ink as a parameter. And if I see that I'm crossing out or whatever, I just leave the piece and go to it at another time. So to me that concentration is more important than someone else's pitch organization or whatever conceptual attitude they have about the piece. That's a very underlying all important approach.

I see in your pieces that every chord which follows tries to establish a completely different world from the former one.

Yes. Actually now I just try to repeat the same chord. I'm reiterating the same chord in inversions. I enjoy that very much, to keep the inversions alive in a sense where everything changes and nothing changes. Actually where before I wanted my chords in a sense to be very different from the next, as if almost to erase in one's memory what happened before. That's the way I would keep the time suspended...by erasing the references and where they came from. You were very fresh into the moment, and you didn't relate it. And now I'm doing the same thing with this relation. And I find it also very mysterious.

But let me play you a series of chords, which is exactly the same chord. Now, I'm not improvising the time. The time is actually there. I'm playing exactly what happens.

(Feldman goes over to the piano and plays softly some chords.)

I think there are three things working with me: my ears, my mind and my fingers. I don't think that it's just ear. That would mean that I'm just improvising, and I'm writing down what I like, or

I'm writing down what I don't like, (cough) But I think those three, those three parameters are always at work. Not that I write EVERYTHING at the piano, but ah

Well, one of the reasons I work at the piano is because it slows me down

and you can hear the TIME element much more, the acoustical reality.

Ah, you cannot hear these time intervals, especially if you work with larger forces like orchestras. You can't hear the time between. Ah, just sitting down at a table, it becomes too fancy. You develop a kind of system, either asymmetrical relations, or of time. You get into something that has really nothing to do with acoustical reality. And I'm very INTO acoustical reality. For me there is no such thing as a compositional reality.

And exactly that's what distinguishes you from the European approach to making music. You once said, "For centuries we have been victimized by European civilization." So I see this working together with CAGE and WOLFF in the fifties as one step out of the victimization.

Yes, I think one of the interesting things in a sense where CHRISTIAN WOLFF and EARLE BROWN and JOHN CAGE and myself met, I think we might have met in some kind of common field was one week. (laughing) But the week was important.....

Was that we began to listen, we began to listen.....
For the first time.....

Jazz musicians they work within changes. They listen for the kind of change that might go into a more innovative change, you know. But they're working in the confines of given situations even when ORNETTE COLEMAN took the piano out, so it wouldn't influence the harmonic thinking of the trip.

But MY argument with past music is that in fact.....I noticed how..... Say with beat..... Even if you want to say, say twenty-five years ago, "Let's get rid of the beat," you only got rid of the beat by pulverizing it, which means..... That you were finding ways to get rid of the beat which means..... That you were working WITH the beat, you see. And I felt the thing about the beat was to ignore it. And that's why a lot of my early music at the time didn't look to interesting to a lot of people, American and European.

But now you've regained a kind of a pulse through the experience of listening over the years.

Yes. One of the problems about my chance music is that essentially it was too conceptual.

It's like one of the paintings hanging on the wall here, like RAUSCHENBERG and those.

Yes, well, they were my friends. They were my friends. But not only that. There's something about a concept that is impregnable, it's hard to break into. So you have for lack of a better term what is an image. And then you leave it alone. One of the big problems in my work was that, you know, as everything started to go into motion, I always felt that the performer in a sense didn't. They were sensitive as to how to play the sounds, but they were not listening. And they were not sensitive to the pauses I give. So, the reason my

music is notated is I wanted to keep control of the SILENCE, you see. Actually, when you hear it, you have no idea rhythmically how complicated that is on paper. It's floating. On paper it looks as though it were rhythm. It's not. It's duration.

You just mentioned that there was one week, twenty years ago, where CAGE, WOLFF, BROWN and you shared some experience together. And WOLFF mentioned too that you have take attachments to this time, and you look back onto it as a "Garden of Eden".

YES.... You see, the difference between America and Europe in the relation to the Garden of Eden could be best explained by VOLTAIRE. Let's say VOLTAIRE is Europe. You can't be more Europe than VOLTAIRE. And let's take a book like CANDIDE. In CANDIDE there were three gardens. Each one, the first two were very sublime. In the first he discovered making love to somebody else's wife. And he's thrown out of that garden, down the steps. Next we find him in Eldorado, also the Garden of Eden. And he finally has to leave there. And in the END he's in a little garden outside of Constantinople with a lot of junk. You see? (laughing) The Europeans change, because they're thrown out of Eden. Plagues come, upheavals come, cultures come, and they have to get out, from tonality, from atonality.

Well, Americans in a sense LEAVE the Garden of Eden. I'm a little too esoteric perhaps in my thinking, but I think that Americans have the ability to get OUT while the getting is GOOD.

There's first more space.

There's CULTURAL space. There's ARTISTIC space.

And also not this feeling of being embedded in a culture.

OHHH, our CULTURE in a sense, I don't know to what degree we don't have a culture.

I didn't say THAT.

No. WELL, for example... we found beautiful substitutes for culture. For example, it would be very interesting if you would look into nineteenth century painting. So we had no culture. No matter how good you were, you were an amateur.

But exactly that's the advantage.

No, but it wasn't an advantage. It wasn't an advantage in American painting in the late nineteenth century. Let me tell you a little bit about it. Because it's a field in a sense that most Europeans don't know, American painting in the nineteenth century and what happened, especially earlier. So no matter how good you were, you were an amateur. So, being that we were still part of England, the young American, English American would go over and study in London. And all he was doing here was he was painting portraits. And he goes to London and he sees.... Well, it's like ME going to Europe for the first time. I'm painting portraits, and I see that there's not enough INFORMATION, that the portrait in England is out in the garden, that you have to handle nature AND the sitter or family, you see.

And what happened to most of the early American painters is that they started not only to have more information, but they had to deal with significant material. So they started to paint great things. They were told by important English painters that

you must look for things outside yourself. Otherwise you just repeat yourself, you see. And so forth and so on. And THEN toward the middle of the nineteenth century they still didn't have a thing. They had no history. And they discovered something else. They discovered something in a sense that Europe really didn't discover. But they discovered landscape painting. So nineteenth century American painting is where landscape painting became a subject. Now I'm not just talking about a field and a cow. I'm talking about a whole LANDSCAPE became a kind of philosophical and aesthetic prerogative. They discovered what ah someone called a kind of pantheistic idealism, where nature became the ideal, not as a subject for art. But it became a little.... it became in a sense perhaps not as great as a COURBET, but philosophically it became a little more interesting. Well it was STILL a work of art, but it was a little more. It started to get involved with the metaphysical aspect of nature. Now this metaphysical aspect of nature, I think began to effect the literature -Hawthorne, Melville - that's all strange stuff in relation to nature.

And I think it had a lot to do with the music in the fifties. That is that pantheistic idealism. If you substitute sounds for nature, you see, and try to arrive at some philosophical truth about it. But CAGE and myself are more lucky than the nineteenth century painters, because we KNOW as much as the European, and we're just as SMART as the European.... We are on equal footing, you see. And that's why the work, you see, has a terrific SURVIVAL element. There's no question about it.

Ya.

If we wrote this music like IVES did, I think in a sense we wouldn't be able to survive. We would take too much. It would be too LITERARY. One of my problems about IVES is that the work is just too literary. It's too pragmatic. It's like an objective MAHLER. You know, where MAHLER was subjective, and yet it's literary. But even that objectivity has to do with the fact that a self surrenders into this kind of pantheistic idealism. In other words...

Ya, because it was never important for IVES to unite just music. It was only important to transport thought through his music.

RIGHT. But unfortunately for me it was really not musical thought, you see. I think where CAGE and myself differ from IVES in a sense is we're writing MUSIC. In fact, one of the most interesting things is perhaps at the time we were the ONLY ones writing music.

Because you didn't use anything which was transported by historical...

Well, that's right. We weren't fed in.....

Well, let's say CAGE'S relation to DUCHAMPS is completely misunderstood. So they're the other side of the coin. I mentioned it to CAGE, I mean just in conversation. And he didn't say anything. He just listened. They're the opposites. For example, the interest of DUCHAMPS for so many young people is that he took the experience out of the eye, out of the retina, and he made it conceptual. CAGE took it out of the past conceptual nonhearing aspect, formal aspect of putting music, and he put it directly to the ear. So that's absolutely the difference, you see? For all I know the greatest musical DUCHAMPS was BEETHOVEN. Ha ha ha ha ha ha.

And it's true with IVES. He's transporting thought within historically and musically accepted structures.

WELL, that was the historical period. Let's not hit him over the head because he was born in that time. I mean he was just an outstanding person, but he wasn't.... But to what degree would he have existed without his literary references..... is very difficult to ascertain.

But he at least stimulated, and I think he is still stimulating the practice of living where you are and finding there universals, even if you're in the midst of a cultural desert. And that's a typical advantage in America for doing art.

Well, you're certainly more successful than HAUER, you know, the Viennese twelve-tone architect. But there is this difference I think in America. And America is in a sense ah..... I think the references are more hidden.

Another thing that I like, or just what I see here in American individuals is the aspect of being a ROUSSEAU type, living in a ROUSSEAU like situation.

I think that's a mistake. We're not primitives.

I don't know if that's the only thing which characterizes ROUSSEAU.

I think ROUSSEAU is a very dangerous, very dangerous....ah. There's only one ROUSSEAU.

And then there is another one, THOREAU, who is more and more referred to now.

Well CAGE is.....

But I see your music as a kind of living on your own, and that goes along with THOREAU.

I think one of the things has to do with identity. Either I have NO identity as a composer, which makes me do what I do, or I have SO MUCH identity that I could open up and not worry about my identity. And I think the latter is true. I feel that I have A LOT of identity as a person. And so I don't ask myself, "Is this music?" For years I didn't even ask myself, "Ah, how could I be a composer and not living a professional life?" But the Americans I know, even of other generations, never THOUGHT of composition as a profession. Yesterday's amateurs become today's professionals. Yesterday's professionals become today's amateurs. But I always felt that the European needed that identity in order to survive. And consequently they had to pay tribute to historical processes.

And of course this attitude also produces very funny and at the same time very tragic attitudes. Like CARL RUGGLES. He just didn't write enough music. He painted water colors for forty years, you see. So.....

But what I asked you earlier, when you came into the house, about why is CAGE and myself and WOLFF in this whole series of conversations that you will be having. Most of the people you mentioned to me are completely different interests. Where do you see the tie-up?

First of all, I don't care if you are from a different generation. It's just that your music is still interesting. And all these people I'm going to visit demonstrate in their work being real American composers in so far that they are as

independent of European-like historical thinking as American-like commercial thinking. And because of the present situation these musicians are challenged to think again about basic forms of music making. And that's what I want to find out. On the other hand, I'm presenting you at the very beginning because I would like to have a "summing up of an experienced man."

HA, "A SUMMING UP OF AN EXPERIENCED MAN"..... That sounds like the title for ah.....

the summing up of an experienced man. WELL, WHO am I supposed to sum up?

Well if you especially compose the early fifties where you were together with CAGE and so on, how the music developed and how you see the situation now. And how do you think the music will grow in the future?

..... I FEEL THAT the lesson that CAGE and myself at least

..... well, let's not even speak for CAGE. How could I speak for CAGE? I would feel that whatever implications in my own music is, I was telling other composers that they could be ABSOLUTELY themselves. And I feel in a sense that this message I was giving them in a sense has failed.

How come?

Well, I feel a failure because....One of my complaints about the younger generation.... is that for me at least sound was the hero, and it still is. I feel that I'm subservient. I feel that I listen to my sounds, and I do what THEY tell me, not what I tell them. Because I owe my LIFE to these sounds. Right? They gave me a life. And my feeling is in a sense is the young people.....

instead of thinking of sound as a hero, of experience as the hero, you get to think that THEY'RE the heroes. And I find a little bit too much drawing attention to themselves....in their work, drawing attention to their ideas, whether they're anti-society, or whether it's political.

In other words, I wanted to give them the freedom to be esoteric. But evidently it's not considered a virtue. Now, I'm not absolutely clear. And one of the reasons I'm not clear is because I'm not mentioning any names. I will NOT mention names. In a sense this is not really a criticism. It's the way things are. And they're all fine men and women.

.....I feel that the whole idea was a little too hot to handle, and that one of its manifestations was: if sounds are free, then people are free. And if sounds and people together..... you know ah ha ring around the sound with society, ah hand in hand.

This concept of art in fact doesn't work any more. Today it's more urgent to think about the people who should be free than the people who are free.

..... To take a militant attitude towards society means that you're involved with that aspect of society. You're not involved with life. To take a militant action in relation to life, that's more mysterious. THAT needs thought. To me, I took a militant attitude towards sounds. I wanted sounds to be a metaphor, that they could be as free as a human being might be free. That was my idea about sound. It still is, that they should breathe.. ...not to be used for the vested interest of an idea. I feel that music should have no

vested interests, that you shouldn't know how it's made, that you shouldn't know if there's a system, that you shouldn't know anything about it,..... except that it's some kind of life force that to some degree REALLY CHANGES YOUR LIFE.....if you're into it.

I don't know what a composer is. I never knew as a young man, I don't know now, and I'm gonna be fifty next month, in two months.

And I think that whole business of control is very important. One wants to be in control of society, one wants to be in control of art. One wants to be in control, control, CONTROL. Now, just because the control is for something that's on the GOOD side, it's still control.

....See, when you get into society, you see the big dilemma in society I think was expressed beautifully by CAMUS, where he says that one man, when he desires freedom, will be at the expense of others. In other words, one man's freedom makes someone else a victim. You understand? And I feel the same way in music, that if you're idealistic, and you insist that music be a certain way, then it's at the expense of the music. If you use the music for means, then it becomes a polemical thing.

And do you think that any kind of social reality could make this understanding of what music has to be livable?

To understand what music has to be you have to live for music. Who's ready to do that?

Besides devoting yourself to the music to make it to a pure space in the world, you'll have to reach this point where you can afford it.

YEAH, BUT you have to make the distinction between social realities and social anxieties. I mean, we could always be socially anxious. I mean if you think New York is bad, you should go to Calcutta! I feel that music should be left alone and not be used as a tool for peoples' ideas..... to make propaganda, to make masterpieces, to force it to live in skyscrapers, to force it to live in mud huts.But a person should ah have a rapport with the sound world around him. And actually, I am manipulated. I hate manipulation. Every time I try to manipulate my work, for what I think is a terrific idea, the work drops dead. After working so many years, I'm not even ALLOWED to manipulate. I know in a minute I'd hear my music SCREAMING

HELP !

In that sense I have a very philosophical sense for my work.

How does it influence the thinking of the younger generation?

I don't think it influences it at all..... I think new music now again is used to draw attention to themselves or their ideas..... Sound perhaps is dead. Maybe sound was just the fifties and the sixties. Maybe sound just dropped dead, or will drop dead with me, or will drop dead with CAGE. Anyway, it was a marvelous period as long as it lasted. For the first time in history sound was free. But, like most people, they don't want freedom. They don't know how to handle it. With CAGE freedom became license, so they could act like idiots. With ME, my freedom was misinterpreted as TASTE, as ah an elitist approach.....

What I want to say is I feel VERY ISOLATED from everybody you are going to interview. I don't feel any connection at all. And to be connected with them, as if you would bring me a photograph of someone, and say, "Do you recognize it? I mean it's your DAUGHTER.And I would say, "Well, it almost looks like my daughter, but it's not my daughter."

And some of them work so closely together, you know. I think, there is nothing wrong there. There is a kind of sociological need, a phenomenon.

Maybe you have the most patience of all of them.

Also a lot of them are very ambitious. Now, if the time says everybody loves each other, everybody's good to each other, everybody has to help each other. I find that as true. At the same time I find that an aspect of careerism at its height. When I was young, nobody liked each other. Nobody loved each other. And careers just happened. Even to STOCKHAUSEN, it just happened. Versteht? He was a young man with fantastic energy, with fantastic intellectual curiosity. He wasn't arrogant. He didn't think of himself as a hero. I think he'll wind up a hero. You don't begin as a hero..... I think that's essentially the difference.....that everybody waited.

And so you're the perfect example of one who is true to himself over the years then. But you see, time changes.

LISTEN! This is a big problem. OBVIOUSLY things change. See, I lived with the thought that my whole life might be a mistake. But if someone who is writing a piece for ATTICA, I don't think that their life is a mistake.....

I feel that the young people, and this is also related to the whole sociological change, the young people just don't wanna compete. That's a big mistake amongst young people now anyway.

Because they have seen where competition leads.

Not that much in a sense, that I was competing or that I am competing. But when you recognize very strong voices around you. You are on another consciousness level. I had to bring myself into a certain creative pressure, and concentration. But what I do is what I mean, not just some idea that is gonna knock off in the afternoon. The word competition is not right. But I was perhaps one of the last survivors in a kind of ART ARENA. And I think the young people are not in an arena.... You see it comes from within. They think about society because they are directed by society. And they get their cues from society. And when society says, "Well, that needs changing!" they cannot be oblivious to this change. I think the big problem in a sense is that they've been victimized and manipulated by society. And their whole thinking in a sense apes, reflects society in terms of what they wanna manipulate.

So they are not competing with ART. They are competing with society. And the values of society. Remember, society changes. To compete with art is like competing with LIFE. It's too much of a force. The dynamic is too powerful. Understand? It's like jumping into a volcano.

So, people who want to establish this idea have to remove themselves from society.

NO! I never remove myself from society. These people have to depend on themselves. They need an inner strength.....to function in life and society

and art at the same time. It's an escape. That's my question. Das ist die Frage. It's an escape. The big problem is that we have to differentiate too between culture and art. Art is done just by a few people. Culture is the manifestation.

Publishers, students, teachers is culture. I'm a volunteer of culture, not art. And one of the things about culture, and I feel the young people are more aligned to culture, which again is society, than they are to the other things. Because in culture one has to have the illusion that one understands. You see?

I'm in a situation for example where a situation has to exist, where a twenty-four year old student has to assume that he can understand what I'm doing. That's almost insane. He must be my equal. He must be WITH me. That's culture. Culture is mutual understanding.

That is not communication. Communication is what I have in my music, with myself. Do you know what communication is for me? Communication is when people don't understand each other. That's what communication is. Because then there is a consciousness level that is being brought out of you, where an effort is made.

But there are situations where this not understanding is such a gap that any effort evaporates.

But you're not supposed to UNDERSTAND art. You are supposed to understand CULTURE....And culture is just a department store which allows you to go and take what you want, if you can AFFORD it.

Ya, if you can afford it, that's the thing.

And I feel that too many of the young people are involved in a manifestation of culture. The thing is, how does one remove oneself from culture?

Not remove. But I see first the necessity to reestablish new department stores, like department stores where you get your food somewhere else.

But that's the whole BASIS of department stores. You're going to Bloomingdales, and the merchandise is a kind of middle class okay. You want a little better things, you go to Lord & Taylor. And if that's not good enough for you, go to a boutique.

I just remember when I arrived in New York I lived at Washington Square in Greenwich Village, and there was a delicatessen store. And in the evenings it was surrounded by people that held out their hands every time someone came out the door. So there are SOME people who don't have access to stores. And then I actually heard that there are more and more COOP stores, where people from a block organize their weekly grocery shopping. And they go out to buy it from the country. So it's cheaper and it doesn't go through the regular channels. It's exactly that what I mean when I talk about re-establishing new department stores, to make art possible again. So I don't know if it's enough if you have enough strength and identity in yourself.... how you mentioned before...

You can do it. You don't have to have STRENGTH. You can have weakness. Go away and suffer that it's a weakness, rather than try to tell yourself that it's a strength. I mean I don't think it's a question of one or the other. I think it's a question of....

Of learning what it is to be lonely.

I remember down in the Village when I was, you know, in MY TIME. There was never MUZAK on.

Golden times.

We talked. And I remember once I was in Berlin for a year or so, and I came back to the same place I used to go to.

And I walked in....There were new people there, young people....but there was MUZAK. They weren't talking.

They were MUMBLING. I don't know WHAT they were doing. And I'm, you know....

And that's one of the things what interested me when I was living in Berlin, is that you walked into a kneipe and there is no music.

But then there is too much talking.

Oh, I don't think there could be too much talk. It's just about politics. Too narrow. The political life is too narrow. And you cannot attack it. You see, you cannot attack a political life. One is on the defensive, because the goals, the aims, are SO noble, you see? So how could you attack noble aims? It's impossible. Of course I'm at a disadvantage, because I'm not involved in a political life. I'm involved in a revolutionary life. Any time I want to get up in the morning I'm making a revolution. I'm making either a revolution against history by deciding to write a certain type of music, or I'm making a revolution even against my own history. Many times I've put myself up against the wall and shot myself. Ha ha ho. I'm into a continual perpetual revolution in my own personal response to my work, which means action, immediate action, immediate decision that only I can make, and that I have to be responsible for. I don't like hiding behind issues, running to society is running back to Mama.

That's very true. But sometimes you need your Mama.

That's why I say that everybody has to learn what it is to be lonely again....

That's why, WHO said it recently? I think it was PAUL VALERY that when something is beautiful, it is tragic. And I think the implication for me as I see it is that something that is beautiful is made in isolation. And tragedy in a sense is a kind of psychic flavor of this loneliness.

And I don't think it's a reaction of some of the young people against art. And I don't think it makes any difference really what kind of art they make, or who they follow. I think the reaction is against being lonely.

And I think that the whole social change among young artists and their concerns for being together has a lot to do with this. They can't BEAR this loneliness.

I can very much imagine that you're lonely, because that's the basic aura of your music.

I mean it just in a sense of divorcing oneself from just the kind of camaraderie and group spirit in the sense that the young people seem to share together....

Just the idea of just going into a room and having to work six or seven hours because he has to do

