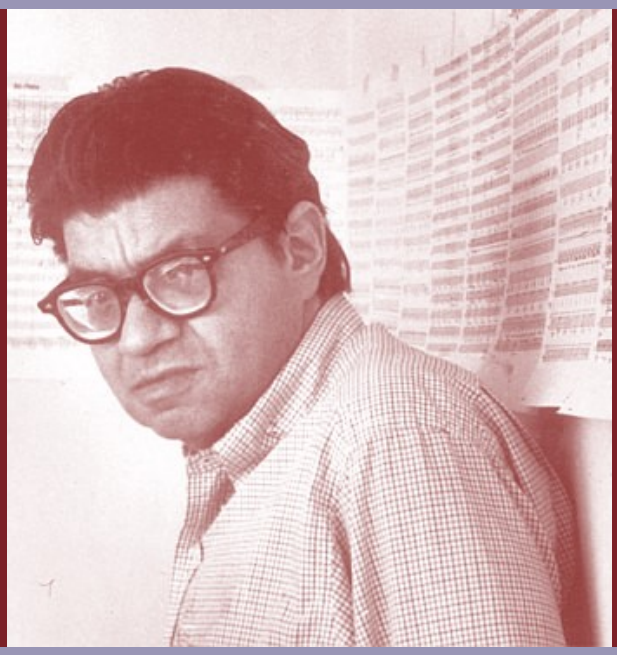
Morton Feldman: Patterns in a Chromatic Field



Paul Christopher, cello • Chialing Hsieh, piano

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

Michael Nyman in his seminal 1974 text *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* writes, "Experimental composers are by and large not concerned with prescribing a defined *time-object* whose materials, structuring, and relationships are calculated and arranged in advance, but are more excited by the prospect of outlining a *situation* in which sounds may occur." This statement sets up an essential distinction between composers associated with the avant-garde and those engaged in experimental music. Specifically, the European avant-garde of the mid-twentieth century—based at Darmstadt and led by figures like Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen—as well as their American allies like Milton Babbitt and Elliott Carter were, according to Nyman, extending the Western classical tradition in which a musical work is carefully signified through its notation. In other words, the musical space is thoroughly defined and described by what is on paper, so that the performer needs only to interpret these instructions and the listener, if familiar with the piece, will have certain expectations for what they will hear. Regardless of any other innovations made by avant-garde composers, our definition of music—our understanding of what is and what is not music—has not changed.

Experimental music, however, challenges our very definition of music. In the infamous "silent piece" by John Cage, *4'33"*, we do not hear music according to our conventional definition, nor does the performer perform, nor has the composer composed. Cage has, instead, outlined a situation and, in so doing, provided a space for listening; whichever sounds we hear become the music. This is what Nyman means when he reflects on experimental music in the quote above. Cage has only instructed that the performer be silent, making *4'33"* the most extreme case in which any sounds are possible. This was 1952, and Cage and the other experimental composers and performers gathering around him would have to become more nuanced in their approach if their aesthetic were to take hold. Over the next two decades, experimental composers would produce scores wholly absent of traditional musical notation and sometimes outline situations not usually considered musical. La Monte Young, for example, in his *Composition 1960 # 5* instructs, "Turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area… the composition may be considered finished when the butterfly flies away." His friend, Terry Riley, who has popularly been considered the father of minimalism, similarly produced compositions at this time in which sounds no longer seem to be the emphasis. In less radical cases, aspects of our standard musical notation are still utilized in experimental scores, but with enough freedom that no two performances sound alike. Consequently, the performer is no longer a passive interpreter of rigid instructions, but a co-creator alongside the composer.

This was the plasticity sought by the American composer **Morton Feldman (1926-1987)** when he began designing graphic scores in the 1950s. Though his teachers had been the professed serialists Wallingford Riegger and Stefan Wolpe, Feldman found greater inspiration in the paintings of abstract expressionists like

Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning who, like he and his musical colleagues, were mainly active in New York City. Feldman once remarked, "The new painting made me desirous of a sound world more direct, more immediate, more physical than anything that had existed heretofore… The new structure required a concentration more demanding than if the technique were that of still photography, which for me is what precise notation had come to imply." Feldman's series of five *Projections*, composed in 1950 and 1951, were his first graphic scores in which musical events are represented through connected boxes and their spatial placement on the page. Numbers and letters, respectively, specify how many pitches are to be played and their articulation (for example, bowed or plucked), but Feldman does not specify which pitches or give exact rhythmic units. He has, therefore, outlined the general characteristics of the musical composition, but has left the performer tremendous autonomy in determining for himself its specific contents. Feldman said of *Projection 2*, "My desire here was not to 'compose,' but to *project* sounds into time, free from a compositional rhetoric that had no place here." Although removed from the excesses of either Cage's *4'33"* or Young's *Composition 1960 # 5*, the intention behind Feldman's *Projections* is very much the same: to merely outline a situation in which the sounds have a new freedom away from the strict rhetoric imposed through traditional composition.

Feldman, nevertheless, would not keep to graphic scores. Though his aesthetic—one which is fundamentally soft and slow—would change little, he would become more specific in his signification of sounds, returning to standard musical notation in many of his subsequent works. He admitted he had no intention of freeing performers; this was, initially at least, only the unavoidable consequence of freeing sounds. Indeed, improvisation, as this term is understood in jazz, has no place in experimental music. Ultimately, once Feldman had developed his particular aesthetic, he could rely on standard notation again, for he knew how to specify the sounds which he had previously left to unfold for themselves. Also worth noting is Feldman's refusal to subscribe to any particular ideology. Feldman himself professed ideological independence from both the avant-garde and experimental music, even if he maintained professional relationships with proponents from both camps. He commented, "The fact that men like Boulez and Cage represent opposite extremes of modern methodology is not what is interesting. What is interesting is their similarity… In the music of both men, what is heard is indistinguishable from its process." Feldman was, instead, more intuitive in his approach than either of these composers whose music at the time was highly deterministic in how it was composed and, as a result, in what was heard. This again reminds us that Feldman was primarily concerned, not with how his music was *created*, but with how his music *sounded*.

Mark Rothko, Untitled (Red and Burgundy over Blue)

By the late 1970s, Feldman's compositions had become immense in length. *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* for cello and piano, dated May 13, 1981, is one of these massive later works, clocking in at over an hour in length and without any sectional breaks. Additionally, its score is fully-notated. Regarding the immensity of his later works, Feldman has commented, "As soon as you leave the 20-25 minute piece behind, in a one-movement work, different problems arise. Up to one hour you think about form, but after an hour and a half it's scale… scale is another matter." His composition, *For Philip Guston*, for example, is for only three players but runs continuously for over four hours! The critic Paul Griffiths suggests that Feldman's admiration for the New York painters might have encouraged him to create works of this length: that he might have wished to emulate in music the monolithic presence of a large Rothko painting, for instance, so strange and without any seeming rhetoric but also unthreatening to its observers.

We must reorient ourselves to appreciate a work like *Patterns in a Chromatic Field*. As listeners, we cannot approach it as we would a shorter piece; instead, we must apply a long-term listening, one where we hear the momentary shifts in synchronization but recognize and pace ourselves with the larger transitions from one motive to another. Its performers must also build this endurance, and they must learn to bring-out these monumental changes. Our experience should not be passive—only patient—and, though we might not be able to listen formally, material has a way of subconsciously becoming familiar, so that its recurrence sparks our perception.

The title also gives us a clue for how to approach this work. In later life, Feldman had developed an appreciation for Islamic rugs. He admired their simple patterns which simultaneously possessed symmetry in regards to their geometry and asymmetry with respect to their scattering of colors. He especially valued rural rugs which have an additional asymmetry because their wool is dyed in smaller quantities, so that rugs possess slight gradations and inconsistencies in their colorings where a particular shade of wool has run out. It was through the observation of these rugs that Feldman brought repetitive patterns to his music—not through emulating the minimalism of his younger colleagues as the patterns might at first suggest. Although the title *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* does not actually appear on the score, it provides a striking visual correlation where the "patterns" relate the interlocking geographical motives in the rug to the insistent rhythmic motives of the music, while the "chromatic field" aligns the asymmetry of the rug's color scheme to the subtly-colored pitch material of the music. We can hear this contrast of symmetry and asymmetry, what Feldman called "crippled symmetry," in a work like *Patterns in a Chromatic Field*. The one force commands uniformity while the other continually pulls this uniformity apart and inspires variety. The symmetry is ultimately dysfunctional even if it gives the impression of functionality. Feldman has reflected, "There is a *suggestion* that what we hear is functional and directional, but we soon realize that this is an illusion; a bit like walking the streets of Berlin—where all the buildings look alike, *even if they're not*."

Feldman, therefore, has maintained his desired plasticity even in this late, fully-notated work. In *Projections* and other early graphic scores, the plasticity was in regards to realization and which sounds would emerge when a certain situation was outlined. Now in his late works like *Patterns in a Chromatic Field*, Feldman has precisely outlined the situation—seemingly composed in a traditional manner—but the result remains fluid as patterns and colors intersect, but without function, without direction, and without form. These things are illusions, and sounds remain free. "I feel that I'm subservient. I feel that I listen to my sounds, and do what *they* tell me, not what I tell them," Feldman has offered. The rhetoric imposed on sounds by composers has vanished. It is music that can appear, fully-formed and without any other purpose except to exist as music. And, yet, by its monolithic presence, it can also inspire questions as to its purpose and its origins. Like a Rothko painting or an archaic rug, *it simply exists*, and that has been the true accomplishment of Morton Feldman.

Small-pattern carpet, Anatolia, 16th century

About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer graduated with his Master of Music in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville in May 2019 following the completion of his thesis, "Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail, and Kaija Saariaho." He has shared this pioneering research through presentations given at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter's annual meetings in Asheville, NC and Sewanee, TN and at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN. During his studies in Louisville, he was the recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Dwight D. Anderson Memorial Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection which houses scores, recordings, and documentation for over five thousand entries by the world's leading contemporary composers. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars' College in Natchitoches, LA. Then, from 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. He has remained a concert annotator and organizer, acting as Director of Scholarship of the annual Sugarmill Music Festival. The writings he has produced for this festival have even attracted the attention of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Aside from his studies, he is a composer, choral singer, and award-winning nature photographer.

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