

weds@7
october 6, 2010

arco

(ppp)

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1/2 ped. →

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1/2 ped. →

morton feldman
patterns in a chromatic field

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Morton Feldman (1926 - 1987)

Patterns in a Chromatic Field (1981)

Charles Curtis, cello

Aleck Karis, piano

Conrad Prebys Concert Hall, UC San Diego

wednesdays@7

October 6, 2010

“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.”

Morton Feldman defined composition at least as much in terms of attention as invention: it was an attempt to elicit creation from his medium’s essential nature, from sound in time. This is the core, at once mystical and materialist, of his aesthetic, the “Abstract Experience” in which existential responsibility and an ideal purity meet in “a unity that leaves one perpetually speculating.”

But the nature of sound (especially for one who composes at the piano) is to disappear. Sound is what becomes silence, and to follow sound’s nature, then, is to write a music always on the verge of vanishing, a music of shadows. Feldman’s work, from his early graph scores to the late epics (among which *Patterns in a Chromatic Field*, from 1981, is hardly one of the longest), concentrates almost exclusively on quietness, near-stasis, nuance to reveal this essential ambiguity of sound: “Decay, ... this departing landscape, this expresses where the sound exists in our hearing—leaving us rather than coming toward us.” Occasionally Feldman dramatizes this departure, rupturing the fragile texture of his music with vehement attacks; elsewhere he finds a structural analogy for it, letting the instrumentalists drift apart inexorably from a common beginning. *Patterns* does not employ such strategies; it seems even, initially, to contradict them, in the blockiness of its construction, the obsessive resistance of its panels of ostinati to erosion. But erosion sets in nonetheless: the ostinati are imperfect, their variability of detail dissolving the identity of material in the very act of establishing it; and the work’s large scale is unsupported by functional harmony (which, Feldman objected, “hears for us,...like going to a public accountant”) or by apparent narrative or architecture.

In following this path, Feldman leaves behind Cage’s ideology of “sound in itself” without rejecting it. Metaphor inheres in the phenomenon of sound, making music an image of loss, of the approach of death. *Patterns*, like Feldman’s other late works, builds disappearance and remembrance into the musical substance as the piece “dies of old age.” Its continuity evades

logic. Panels succeed others of utterly different character and scale, without transition or apparent consequence: minutes of near motionlessness unexpectedly follow on frenetic figuration. A fragment will recur in subtly altered guise—shifted in register, at different speeds, superimposed on something alien—without fulfilling recurrence’s traditional implications of stability or development. Some apparently fundamental patterns are forgotten and never surface again; other gestures, sometimes of bewildering eccentricity (a series of rising glissandi, a single repeated ponticello tone, brief forays into the extremes of the piano’s range), happen once and vanish. Such thwarting of expectation constitutes Feldman’s “conscious attempt at ‘formalizing’ a disorientation of memory.... 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.*”

Disorientation arises not only from an elusive continuity but from the smallest details. Throughout his work Feldman is preoccupied with “in-betweenness,” a reliance on values that resist perceptual differentiation. Feldman often spoke of the inspiration he derived from the variation of color (“abrash”) and pattern he found in Central Asian rugs: “‘Abrash’ is that you dye in small quantities. You cannot dye in big bulks of wool. So it’s the same, yet it’s not the same. It has a kind of micro-tonal hue. So when you look at it, it has that kind of marvelous shimmer which is that slight gradation.” The title *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* suggests the analogy with rug-making, the weaving of figures from narrow bands of neighboring pitches—the four tones that fill a minor third, for example—and neighboring rhythmic values.

Take *Patterns*’ opening, variants and echoes of which pervade the whole work. The piano repeatedly alternates between two versions of the same three note cluster, the first low and in close position, the second high and open, continually and minutely altering rhythmic profile and placement. Against it, the cello, in fragile artificial harmonics, permutes four neighboring tones in a slightly lopsided rhythm—always a version of 9 in the time of 8 thirty-second notes, always three sixteenths and one dotted

sixteenth, but with the latter always shifting position. Feldman is aiming at the exact border between regularity and irregularity, at an almost imperceptible nuance: “The patterns that interest me are both concrete and ephemeral, making notation difficult. If notated exactly, they are too stiff; if given the slightest notational leeway, they are too loose. Though these patterns exist in rhythmic shapes articulated by instrumental sounds, they are also in part *notational images* that do not make a direct impact on the ear as we listen. A tumbling of sorts happens in midair between their translation from the page and their execution.”

Realizing these “notational images” makes extreme demands on the performers’ skill and concentration, demands that Charles Curtis and Aleck Karis meet with impeccable precision, tact, and delicacy. But for the cello the complications of Feldman’s notation comprise not only rhythm but also consistently eccentric enharmonic spellings: its opening “chromatic field” is written not as, for example, A, A-flat, G, B-flat, but, awkwardly, as B-double-flat, A-flat, F-double-sharp, A-sharp, implying infinitesimal microtonal deviations and alienating sound from “how the music looks.” For Feldman, this difficult notation alters “the focus of the pitch,” and as such prevents a “hardening of the categories”: “Which gets us, believe it or not, to why I use the [microtonal] spelling.... When you’re working with a minor second as long as I’ve been, it’s very wide. I hear a minor second like a minor third almost.... It depends on how quickly or slowly that note is coming to you, like McEnroe. I’m sure that he sees that ball coming in slow motion. And that’s the way I hear that pitch. It’s coming to me very slowly, and there’s a lot of stuff in there.” When, later in the work, Feldman follows a G-double-sharp in the cello with a B-double-flat, he brings the latent microtonal friction into the foreground, illuminating the pitch world’s underlying instability while also attaining a strange poignancy.

Feldman wrote that the unity of the abstract experience leaves one “perpetually speculating.” This speculation is another form of the in-betweenness, the neither/nor, the shimmering one finds throughout his music. It is both anxiety and pleasure, the attention to an ambiguity that both tempts and eludes rational formulation,

emotional absorption, relaxed sensuality. “Death is the mother of beauty,” writes Wallace Stevens; only her terror and “sure obliteration” can yield “fulfillment to our dreams / And our desires.” As *Patterns* moves inexorably into silence, frustration and loss yield, if not fulfillment, beauty; near the work’s end, as a last variant of the opening material opens with unexpected lyricism into a higher register and then finds its way back down, this blossoming of melody from stasis hints at a paradise lying just out of reach of permanence.

Erik Ulman is a composer and teaches at Stanford; and with Marcia Scott he co-directs the arts organization Poto (potoweb.org).

(All quotations from Morton Feldman, *Essays* (Kerpen: Beginner Press, 1985): 237; 104; 89; 159; 203; 127; 193; 132; 192.)

Charles Curtis and Aleck Karis first performed Feldman’s *Patterns in a Chromatic Field* on June 2, 2002, in UCSD’s old Center for Research in Computing and the Arts, when it was still housed in the former Camp Matthews bowling alley. They performed it again on October 26, 2002 and on January 8, 2003, in Warren Studio A. In May 2003 they recorded the work in the auditorium of the Neurosciences Institute in La Jolla, and this recording was released by John Zorn’s Tzadik label the following year. In December of 2004 they presented *Patterns* as the last performance ever in the Arts at Cooper Union series in New York. Performances followed in Barcelona, Lisbon (at the Hot Club de Portugal), Paris (Instants Chavirés), Brussels (Charlemagne Palestine’s and Aude Stoclet’s villa), Berlin and Hamburg in Spring 2005; at the Double Knot Rug Gallery in Lower Manhattan (in an exhibition of Turkoman and Anatolian weavings) in December 2005; at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia in 2007; and at the New England Conservatory and at Duke University in March 2008. Including informal run-throughs and open dress rehearsals, tonight’s performance is roughly the 17th public traversal of this extraordinary score for these two musicians.

The cellist **Charles Curtis** performs a unique repertoire of major solo works created expressly for him by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, Alvin Lucier, Éliane Radigue, Alison Knowles and Mieko Shiomi; rarely-heard compositions by Terry Jennings and Richard Maxfield; and works by Cardew, Wolff, Feldman and Cage. La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's four-hour long solo composition, *Just Charles and Cello in the Romantic Chord*, has been heard in Paris, Berlin, Lyon, New York, Dijon, Polling and Bologna. Éliane Radigue's recent concert-length *Naldjorlak* for solo cello has received over thirty performances worldwide and, as part of a new trilogy, was premiered in the Auditorium of the Musée du Louvre last October and at Brooklyn's new Issue Project Room space in September 2010. Lucier's compositions for Curtis include music for cello and piano, cello and sine waves, solo cello with large orchestra (premiered with the Janacek Philharmonic at the Ostrava New Music Days 2007), and, most recently, a trio for the unique combination of cello, tuba and clarinet, premiered at the MaerzMusik Festival Berlin in 2009.

A former faculty member at Princeton University, and for eleven years the first solo cellist of the NDR Symphony Orchestra in Hamburg, Curtis has performed major concerti with leading orchestras under conductors such as Max Rudolf, Christoph Eschenbach, Herbert Blomstedt and André Previn. His chamber music associations have included pianists Rudolf Firkusny and Earl Wild, violinists Oscar Shumsky, Shlomo Mintz and Joshua Bell, soprano Kathleen Battle, and jazz legends Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock and Brad Mehldau.

Curtis has created original music for films by Jeff Perkins (*The Painter Sam Francis*, shown at film festivals internationally) and Luke Fowler (for BBC Television and as an installation at the Serpentine Gallery London), as well as for a series of installations and collaborative performances with painter-filmmaker Raha Raissnia. His performances in recent seasons have taken him to the Guggenheim in New York (in concert with La Monte Young and the Just Alap Raga Ensemble), the Museum of Contemporary Art in Bordeaux, the Galerie Renos Xippas in Paris,

the Angelica Festival in Bologna, Dundee Contemporary Arts, the Kampnagelfabrik in Hamburg, the Emily Harvey Foundation in New York, the ISEA Ruhr 2010 in Dortmund, as well as Chicago, Ferrara, Austin, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Harvard University. In the Bavarian village of Polling Curtis performs and teaches every summer at Kunst im Regenbogenstadl, a space devoted to the work of La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela. Last Spring an in-depth interview with Curtis appeared on the online new music journal Paris Transatlantic; and he has published articles on Young and Radigue in the journals Oase and O Sirhan O Sirhan. He continues to perform and record the traditional repertoire for cello, both as soloist and as artistic director of the chamber music project Camera Lucida.

For over thirty years, **Aleck Karis** has been one of the leading pianists in the New York contemporary music scene. He has performed and recorded with many of the city's new music groups and was called on by the New York Philharmonic for its Horizons Festival as well as the return concert of Pierre Boulez. He has been the pianist for Speculum Musicae since 1982 and has performed with that group all over the US and at the Bath, Warsaw Autumn, Geneva "Made in America" festivals and Venice Biennale. He has simultaneously pursued a parallel career as a soloist with orchestra and in recital, performing concertos by Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Franck, Ravel, Carter and Hyla. Last season he played Stravinsky's Concerto for Piano and Winds with the Columbus Symphony and performed Messiaen's Trois Petits Liturgies with the New York City Opera Orchestra under George Manahan at the newly refurbished Alice Tully Hall in Lincoln Center.

Karis has participated in dozens of premieres and has been a persuasive advocate for numerous composers, many at the beginning of their careers. He has had an abiding and passionate commitment to the music of Elliott Carter, Mario Davidovsky, John Cage and Harrison Birtwistle. He was the first non-dedicattee to record Carter's Night Fantasies, which he has performed around the world, and has played virtually all of Carter's ensemble music with piano. He has recorded Davidovsky's Synchronisms No 6 twice, and recently recorded his Duo Capriccioso with Curt Macomber.

His disc of Cage's Sonatas and Interludes for prepared piano has received broad acclaim. He has presented Birtwistle's massive "Harrison's Clocks" many times, as well as the chamber concerto Slow Frieze with Speculum Musicae, and The Axe Manual for piano and percussion (in three sets of performances, with Steve Schick, Daniel Druckman and Ross Karre).

Karis' discography includes music by Mozart, Chopin, Schumann, Stravinsky, Carter, Cage, Glass, Babbitt, Martino, Liang and Feldman, on Bridge, Nonesuch, Tzadic, New World, Neuma, Mode, Centaur and CRI Records. His most recent disc, of late piano music of Frédéric Chopin, was released on Roméo Records in 2009.

Karis studied with Charles Wuorinen at the Manhattan School of Music, where he won the Sherman Ewing Composition prize. During his four years at MSM he studied piano privately with Artur Balsam. He worked for two years at Juilliard with Beveridge Webster, receiving a Master's in 1978. His chief piano mentor has been the brilliant Brazilian-American teacher William Daghlian.

♩ 63-66

Norton Johnson

Handwritten musical score for the first system. It consists of three staves: a treble clef staff with a melody, a piano accompaniment staff with chords and arpeggios, and a cello/bass staff with a bass line. The music is in 3/4 time and features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes. The piano part is marked 'pppp' and '4/16'. The cello part is marked 'no ped.' and includes a '3' indicating a triplet. The system is divided into two measures by a double bar line.

Handwritten musical score for the second system, continuing the piece. It follows the same three-staff format as the first system, with treble, piano, and cello/bass staves. The notation is consistent with the first system, showing the continuation of the melodic and harmonic lines.

Handwritten musical score for the third system. The notation continues across the three staves, maintaining the intricate rhythmic and harmonic structure established in the previous systems.

Handwritten musical score for the fourth system, the final system on this page. It concludes the piece with the same three-staff format, showing the final melodic and harmonic resolutions.

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The first page of the score. The space of the page resembles a rug, the four horizontal bands "ornamented" with repeating, slightly varying patterns. The second strain in the cello is an exact retrograde of the first strain, except for the ninth bar, which repeats its corresponding bar prograde, perhaps because of its parallel position on the page.

The first system of the handwritten musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is the treble clef, containing a melodic line with various accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals) and slurs. The middle staff is the piano part, featuring dense chordal textures with many accidentals and slurs. The bottom staff is the bass clef, providing a rhythmic and harmonic foundation with fewer notes and some accidentals. Dynamic markings like 'p' and 'f' are visible throughout the system.

The second system continues the musical piece with similar notation to the first system. It features three staves: treble, piano, and bass. The piano part remains particularly dense with complex chordal structures. The melodic line in the treble clef continues with intricate phrasing. The bass line provides a steady accompaniment. Dynamic markings and slurs are used to guide the performer's interpretation.

The third system of the score shows further development of the musical themes. The notation remains consistent with the previous systems, with three staves (treble, piano, bass). The piano part continues to be a focal point with its complex textures. The melodic line in the treble clef has some more pronounced intervals. The bass line maintains its role as a supporting part. Dynamic markings and slurs are used to indicate phrasing and volume changes.

The fourth system concludes the page with complex notation and dynamic markings. It features three staves: treble, piano, and bass. The piano part continues to be a focal point with its complex textures. The melodic line in the treble clef has some more pronounced intervals. The bass line maintains its role as a supporting part. Dynamic markings and slurs are used to indicate phrasing and volume changes.

The second page.

Pizz

ped. →

The first three pitches in the cello are echoed by the last three in the piano, and vice versa, although spelled differently; a kind of reciprocal canon. Three durations are distributed each time differently across each bar, such that the two instruments only rarely coincide.

The second bar elongates the durations of the first bar, just barely.

8

8

7/8

Later in the piece, the elongated durations from the previous example are notated differently (with exactly the same rhythmic value); the piano punctuates these with attacks on the 7/8 pulse.

1/2 →

From the second note of the second bar, a five-note “micro-chromatic” descending scale: g-double-sharp, b-double-flat, g-sharp, a-flat, f-double-sharp.

A microtonally compressed “dies irae”-like motif, in which the third note is subtly lower than the first.

PIZZ. arco

$\frac{1}{2}$ ped. →

This system contains the first three measures of the piece. The top staff begins with a 'PIZZ.' (pizzicato) marking and an 'arco' (arco) marking. The music is written in a key with one flat (B-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The first two staves are treble clef, and the third is bass clef. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings.

$\frac{1}{2}$ ped. →

This system contains measures 4 through 7. The notation continues with similar melodic and harmonic patterns as the first system, maintaining the same key and time signature.

$\frac{1}{2}$ ped. →

This system contains measures 8 through 11. The musical material continues to develop, with the same structural elements as the previous systems.

$\frac{1}{2}$ ped. →

This system contains measures 12 through 15. The piece concludes with a final measure that mirrors the opening, as described in the caption.

Late lyrical material. Clearly an echo of the very opening of the piece, each bar is now fractionally longer, giving the melodies some breathing room.

Handwritten musical score for the first system. The top staff (cello) contains a series of sixteenth-note patterns with various accidentals (sharps, flats, naturals). The bottom staff (piano) features chords with accidentals and a half-pedal marking ($\frac{1}{2}$ ped. →) at the beginning.

Handwritten musical score for the second system. The top staff (cello) has a *cristallino* marking above it. The bottom staff (piano) continues with chords and a half-pedal marking ($\frac{1}{2}$ ped. →).

Handwritten musical score for the third system. The top staff (cello) continues with sixteenth-note patterns. The bottom staff (piano) has chords and a half-pedal marking ($\frac{1}{2}$ ped. →).

Handwritten musical score for the fourth system. The top staff (cello) has an *ard.* marking above it. The bottom staff (piano) includes a *ppppp* dynamic marking and a complex chordal structure. A half-pedal marking ($\frac{1}{2}$ ped. →) is present at the start.

From the third bar of the top system, the cello quotes the opening pitches of the piece for seven bars, with exactly the same sequence of notes and the same spelling, but different rhythms (ten "real" thirty-second notes rather than nine over 4 sixteenths); the piano refers to its opening material without quoting it verbatim.

