

UCSD Master of music recital 2012

Jessica Aszodi performs

# Morton Feldman's Three Voices

Tape part performed by Jessica Aszodi. Recorded by  
Clint Davis and Scott Worthington. Edited and mixed  
by Scott Worthington.

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Morton Feldman's *Three Voices* was written in 1982 for the singer Joan La Barbara. In 1981 La Barbara asked Feldman for a piece for soprano and orchestra. He responded that he had something else in mind. La Barbara received the score to *Three Voices* shortly after. It was, to her surprise, something quite different to what had been expected. The piece was written for not one voice but three, had no tempo marking and no instructions on the score as to how the three-voiced piece was to be performed by a single soprano.

In an accompanying letter to La Barbara, Feldman explained:

*Dear Joan,*

*Well here it is. I'm somewhat shocked with the more sensuous if not "gorgeous" sound of most of it - never expecting it would go that way. The words are from the two opening lines of "Wind", a poem Frank O'Hara dedicated to me. I think Frank had a lot to do with some of the "gorgeous" aspect of the piece....*

*The bottom system is what you sing "live", the other two are layered in - where the two loudspeakers should be placed I have no idea - it is also one of the very few pieces where I didn't indicate a metronome marking - feeling that your tone and how you breath should pace it - it sounds good both "slow" as well as a "fast" slowness (whatever that means). Of course you can always return it for whatever reason.*

*All love to you and Mort  
from the other  
Morty*

Feldman later gave permission for his publishers to print the work with the instruction: 'For soprano voice with tape or



three voices', though his preference was clearly for the one-performer version.

The score thus allows the interpreter to make many decisions for themselves; several key aspects of the piece are dependent upon the personal taste and abilities of the performer. Tempo choice is a particularly pressing decision. As if to illustrate this point, for La Barbara's first performances of the work the slow tempo she chose resulted in a piece lasting 90 minutes; three years later she recorded a 45-minute version. Reportedly, Feldman was equally happy with both interpretations. As he stated, 'it sounds good both fast and slow'. La Barbara had the following to say on the topic of tempo choice:

*"In the faster version, one is suddenly propelled into the storm from the infinite stillness of intricate chords, and I felt O'Hara's image of the bear in the snowstorm, trapped in the ball of whirling snow that never fell: "Nothing ever fell." In the slower, ninety minute version, one experiences individual moments in a more precious, luxurious soundscape and perhaps one is drawn to the starkness of the abstract expressionists' fascination with "nothing" in a more nihilistic sense"*

For my version, as Feldman suggests, I allowed my 'tone and breath' to decide the tempo. I practiced the fast parts as fast as I could until I arrived at a basic tempo for the piece at large. As it turns out, the tempo arrived at in the fast sections is about as slow as I feel comfortable performing the 'slow' portions of the work. Feldman's late works utilize a single tempo throughout; despite *Three Voices* not having a metronome marking indicated, he has effectively built one into the piece, albeit one that bends to the body of the performer.

#### Time and scale

The compositions from the last years of Feldman's life are of vast lengths and are concerned with the sensuous experience of time:



the two pieces fascinating. Both pieces utilize mostly stepwise melodies and are intended to be performed by vocalists with the same simple, non-operatic vocal quality. The early piece is a pleasant, charmingly executed song but the later work operates on many levels at once; it is exceedingly complex but, in my opinion, sounds as crystalline and natural as the early piece. *Three Voices* shows Feldman's mature musical mind at the height of his powers.

### Painters and Poetry

The influence of painters and poets is a conspicuous element in Feldman's oeuvre. Painting inspired Feldman easily as much as, if not more than the music of his fellow composers. Although John Cage's influence on Feldman's early work is undeniable, in his mature style one sees more parallels in Feldman's music with the large black canvases of Rothko than with the musical works being made by the circle of New York composers with whom he had associated since the 1950s.

The text heard in *Three voices* is taken from the first two lines of a Frank O'Hara poem from 1957, entitled 'Wind' (which was dedicated to Feldman). O'Hara and Feldman were close friends and collaborators; O'Hara inspired a number of Feldman's works. When O'Hara died in 1966, Feldman was deeply grieved. In 1973, he dedicated an instrumental homage to his friend, *For Frank O'Hara, for 7 instrumentalists* and, though he had already set the poem once before (in the *O'Hara Songs* of 1962), Feldman used *Wind* again for *Three voices*.

In the decades preceding *Three Voices*, Feldman lost a number of close friends in unexpected and untimely circumstances. Traces of Feldman's lost friendships are to be found embedded in many of his late works. He considered *Three Voices* to be a "dual elegy for Frank O'Hara and Phillip Guston" (Feldman).



Relations between Feldman and Guston had been icy for several years when Guston died of a heart attack in 1980. Their friendship soured because of Feldman's negative reaction to Guston's return to a figurative painting style in the late 1960s. The two remained friends but Guston was acutely hurt by Feldman's criticism. As in illustration of that point, in 1977 Guston painted the portrait 'Friend – to M.F.', where Feldman's face is turned away from the viewer. Feldman wrote several works dedicated to Guston in the wake of his death. In addition to *Three Voices*, he composed the 4-hour trio for flute, percussion and piano: *For Philip Guston* in 1984.

In *Three voices*, the composer's desire to honour the dead and to work through his own grief is evidenced not only in his choice of text but also in his unusual choice of instrumentation. One motivation for Feldman's decision to write a work for solo voice with tape was that:

*'There is something kind of "tombstone" about the look of loudspeakers. I thought of the piece as an exchange between the live voice and the dead ones – a mixture of the living and the dead'* (Feldman)

### Patterns – Rugs and Paintings

In his later years Feldman developed a particular interest in Islamic rugs from central Asia. These rugs were hand-made and showed large-scale geometric shapes and patterns.

Feldman's approach to pattern and repetition is clearly related to the rugs he collected. The rugs appear at first to show symmetrical designs, but upon closer inspection, reveal inconsistencies of pattern and subtle alterations of colour and form; traces of the hand that made them are visible in every detail. Small inconsistencies in a dye (yielding a more brilliant shade to one part of a design than another) or imperfectly proportioned images (where small repeating motifs are supposed join together to form a larger symmetrical shape but are not evenly numbered on all sides of the rug), mirror well Feldman's approach.



"In his music, Feldman often arranges sound so that repetitions are recognizable as repetitions, but the patterns of those repetitions are not discernable" – Louis Goldstein

Feldman's late music betrays the shifting focus of the artisan.

There are aspects of *Three Voices* that seem to quite literally invoke the aesthetic of these carpets. Often, Feldman will utilise one musical idea simultaneously in all three voices but the rhythms will be arranged to sound slightly different or will phase in and out of sync. The effect of those heterophenous textures on the ear is not dissimilar to the effect of irregular knots in hand-made carpets on the eye. The touchingly human 'imperfections' are allowed to contribute to the detailed richness of the work.

Feldman's approach to stasis and repetition is influenced more strongly by the work of the Painters he admired than by any compositional aesthetic. He wrote that: "*Stasis, as it is utilized in painting, is not traditionally part of the apparatus of music. [...] The degrees of stasis found in a Rothko or Guston were perhaps the most significant elements that I brought to my music from painting.*" The static energy of tiny fragments repeated until bursting point is a powerful force in *Three Voices*.

For me, listening to this piece is not dissimilar to viewing one of Feldman's rugs or a Rothko painting. Music however, requires time to unfold and the work cannot be revealed all at once.

When I am singing *Three Voices* I feel my 'gaze', wandering over the 'image' of the work, taking in the traces left by the hand that made it. One has no choice but to look and listen closely to the details, bit by bit. At the end of the piece, it is like stepping back and seeing the work as a whole, for the first time.