

OBITUARY: *Morton Feldman*

Chris Newman

DEATH is something so strange that you know it must be real. Morton Feldman looked so different from how you expected that you knew he must be a great composer.

For most composers, instruments are a way of transcending their musical material to something greater. Feldman, however, succeeded with his musical material in transcending the instruments themselves; wrote music which would transcend their sound; dissolved them into a world of pure sound. Sitting in a concert, listening, you didn't even notice the instrumental situation—the violin and piano, the instrumentalists, and their interchange: the music had transcended it. Just as the material was only concerned with transcending the instruments, so was its presentation only concerned with transmuting sound into a substance. That's why the repetition of whole sections is necessary: they had to be repeated until the whole thing turned into a substance—at which point the piece could stop. Repeated, that is, until the music is no longer music, and then it stops.

In this respect Feldman had much in common with the painter Mark Rothko (they were close friends). Just as Feldman's theme was pure sound, so was Rothko's theme pure colour, and through its presentation he (in the best cases) managed to transcend it into a substance. No longer a painting, the colour acquires a substance of its own.

After listening to Sibelius's Seventh Symphony for about 20 minutes I thought: 'It's funny—I'm listening to music, and I've only just noticed it' (that I was listening, that is). So it is with Feldman's greatest work—the fact that it is music becomes irrelevant; it transcends the condition of music.

Here are some of the things that have occurred to me since I met Morton Feldman for the first time; which might not have occurred to me had I not met him:

Art is caused by the frustration of wanting to be alone and yet not being able to do without other people.

Art is a reduction of life.

(Art is always a little pretentious; to be an artist you have to be a little pretentious.)

Using music as a substance, a material, not trying to portray it. Portraying it would be like painting pictures of it. Most composers try to portray music.

To what extent should notation obscure the way in which the music was written—obscure the background of the music; to what extent should it reveal it? Transcended by revealing or transcended by obscuring? In this respect notation and instrumentation are the same thing (from a compositional point of view).

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

from RONALD STEVENSON

IF OSCAR WILDE had read Antony Beaumont's letter in TEMPO 159, he might have written a new maxim for the instruction of the over-educated.

I am concerned with the spirit rather than the content of Mr. Beaumont's letter which criticized the Editor's review of the ENO production of Busoni's *Doktor Faust*. Mr. Beaumont seems to me to degrade truths into facts. It is a pity that, having done such sterling work as translator of Busoni's letters (see this issue, p.27), he should not have let Busoni's spirit of comradeship-in-art rub off on him. Like any of us, Busoni could let himself go in a private letter, but his open letters were models of the ethics of his profession.

The only *raison d'être* for polemical correspondence is that it should raise vituperation into an art-form. Kaikhosru Sorabji is a past master at it. Mr. Beaumont is not.

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