

## Reverberating Kaleidoscope of Sound Morton Feldman's Previously Undocumented *Instrumental Music*

by David Cline

The following list of works appears at the end of a 1959 biography of Morton Feldman by Heinz-Klaus Metzger:

*Projections* (viol. et p.), *Intersections* [(1 pour 2 p., pour orch. et pour piano solo), *Extensions* (pour p., pour orch., pour viol. et p. et pour 3 p.), *Intermissions* (p. solo), *Pièce pour un, deux, quatre pianos, Instrumental Music* (petit orch.), *Trio* (pour 2 p. et vcelle). *Composition pour 15 instruments*, plusieurs œuvres pour quatuor à cordes et la cantate *Journey to the end of the night* (sopr. et plusieurs instruments).<sup>1</sup>

As of 1959, this list was radically incomplete, but more surprising than the numerous omissions is the high proportion of unfamiliar titles included, for Feldman's documented output does not encompass an *Intersection* for two pianos or an *Extensions* for orchestra,<sup>2</sup> and it does not include works entitled "Composition for 15 Instruments" or "Instrumental Music." It is tempting to dismiss these anomalies as errors, attributable to the vintage of Metzger's text, which was issued before Feldman organized his catalogue for publication in the early 1960s. This would be a mistake, however, for there is every reason to believe that at least one of these unfamiliar appellations was genuine.<sup>3</sup> Although the Morton Feldman Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation does not include materials bearing the title "Instrumental Music," a score entitled "Instrumental Music – 1958" is located elsewhere in its Münsterplatz vaults, forming part of its Mauricio Kagel Collection. How it arrived there is an issue I will return to in due course.

Kagel's copy of *Instrumental Music* is a photoreproduction of an original manuscript in Feldman's handwriting. It consists of a title page, incorporating a list of instruments and a set of explanatory notes (*Plate 1*), followed

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1 H. K. M. [Heinz-Klaus Metzger], "Feldman, Morton," *Encyclopédie de la Musique, Tome II*, ed. François Michel (Paris: Fasquelle, 1959), p. 39.

2 A page in an early notebook is headed "Extensions #2 for orchestra." Below this title appears the following note: "Under consideration." See "Sketchbook 3" (Morton Feldman Collection, PSS).

3 For "Composition pour 15 Instruments," see below.

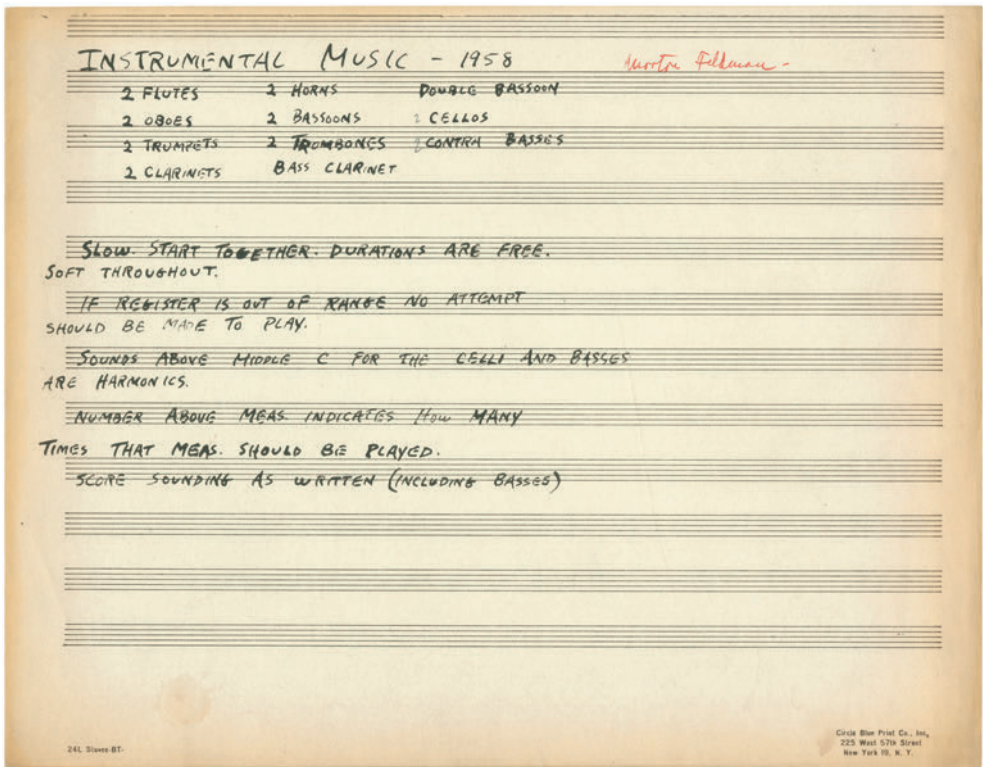


Plate 1: Morton Feldman, *Instrumental Music*, title page (Mauricio Kagel Collection, PSS).

by ninety-nine measures of music, crammed into three systems (Plate 2).<sup>4</sup> The list of instruments specifies one bass clarinet and double bassoon, plus two of every other instrument type, but the figures given for cellos and basses are inscribed in pencil on the photoreproduction and may have been added by Kagel. This suggests that the number of string instruments was originally unspecified, as in the contemporary orchestral works ... *Out of 'Last Pieces'* and *Structures*.<sup>5</sup> Most notes are stemless, implying that this is one of Feldman's so-called "free durations" pieces, in which pitches are fixed but durations are largely unspecified, even though the presence of bar lines differentiates it from published examples. That surmise is confirmed by Feldman's explanatory notes, which begin: "Slow. Start together. Durations are free. Soft throughout."

4 Numbers above measures indicate how many times they should be played.

5 ... *Out of 'Last Pieces'* and *Structures* are dated March 1961 and "1960-1962," respectively.

Plate 2: Morton Feldman, *Instrumental Music*, pp. [1–2] (Mauricio Kagel Collection, PSS).

The score is dated February 26, 1958,<sup>6</sup> indicating that it is an early example of Feldman's free durations style, established the previous year in *Piece for Four Pianos* and *Two Pianos*. Indeed, *Instrumental Music* forms an important bridge between these earlier compositions, in which the pianists play from identical parts, but do so independently, and a group of somewhat later examples, including *Piano Four Hands*, *Two Instruments*, and the *Durations* series, in which the performers play non-identical parts, each at their own pace.<sup>7</sup> This particular piece combines aspects of both schemes. When two instruments of the same type are specified, both performers play

6 This date, which appears below the double bar line, was cropped in the copying process and completed in red ink by an unidentified hand. The year is confirmed by its appearance in the given title. An untitled sketch of measures 51–99 is also dated February 26, 1958. See "Sketchbook 10" (Morton Feldman Collection, PSS).

7 *Piano Four Hands* and *Two Instruments* are dated April 10, 1958, and May 18, 1958, respectively. The *Durations* were composed in 1960–61.

FL  
OB  
TPT  
CL  
BN  
HN  
TROMB  
CB

Feb 26,  
1958

the same part, creating an echo effect, “like a series of reverberations from an identical sound source,”<sup>8</sup> also found in *Piece for Four Pianos* and *Two Pianos*, and something similar will also be heard operating between instruments grouped on the same staff, for these frequently play the same notes. Instrumental parts not grouped in this way rarely concur, however, meaning that performers playing parts presented on different staves usually play different materials, creating a “kaleidoscope of sound,”<sup>9</sup> as in *Piano Four Hands*, *Two Instruments*, and the *Durations*. Thus, *Instrumental Music* anticipates *The Swallows of Salangan*, dated October 1960, in which reverberations and kaleidoscopic effects are combined in similar fashion.

8 Morton Feldman, “Liner notes” [1962], in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B. H. Friedman (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 2000), pp. 3–7, esp. p. 7.

9 Ibid.

Even without having heard *Instrumental Music* played, it is clear that the slowly unfolding individual lines will combine in unpredictable ways if performers act independently of one another, as Feldman intended,<sup>10</sup> making the vertical organisation of the music on the page an imperfect guide to the sound in performance. As in his other works in this free durations style, Feldman mitigates the uncertainty by including static elements that are more likely to overlap. These meeting places are particularly prominent in the second system, which features a network of interlocking repetitions, but there is bound to be a considerable mismatch between notation and effect, despite their presence.

*Instrumental Music* utilises forty-four different pitches, together forming a perforated chromatic field that extends from B<sub>b1</sub> to B<sub>5</sub>. There are six omissions, mainly located towards its outer edges, but F<sub>4</sub>, which occupies a more central location, is also absent. The most commonly notated pitch is C<sub>4</sub>, and, broadly speaking, the prevalence of other pitches varies inversely with their distance in semitones from its location. Feldman's explanatory notes state that "if register is out of range no attempt should be made to play," a proviso necessitated by the use of pitches that are sometimes located at the limits of instrumental compass.

Individual parts are frequently discontinuous, with notes annexed by empty measures. Where notes are juxtaposed, repetition is the norm, but in other cases interval class 5 is favoured. This contrasts with the more dissonant vertical profile on the page, for within measures, interval class 1 is most common. Chords containing adjacent pitch classes are ubiquitous in Feldman's output, suggesting that this element of optical dissonance was premeditated, even though not necessarily mirrored in the sound of a performance.

In many free-durations pieces, Feldman created the impression of stasis by nurturing a consistency of effect, and comparable strategies also operate in this case. Thus, the second system features a significantly higher density of notes per measure than the first, which is likely to curb the inevitable thinning as individual parts disperse, thereby creating a more homogenous texture before the inevitable fade. That said, this particular work includes a notable episode in measures 48–54, positioned midway through the second system. In this passage, a series of sustained repetitions is followed by the longest imposed silence, which is subsequently broken by a group of sonorities that include the only occurrences of pizzicato in the strings.<sup>11</sup> Although the temporal dislocation of individual parts in performance will smudge this scenario, it seems likely to be heard, especially if Feldman was

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10 "Soundpieces interview, Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras, 17 August 1980" [1982], in *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964–1987*, ed. Chris Villars (London: Hyphen Press, 2006), pp. 87–94, esp. p. 88.

11 For cellos and basses, notes above middle C are harmonics.

correct in assuming that “no instrument would ever be too far behind or too far ahead of the other,”<sup>12</sup> arguably an outcome implied by the vertical alignment of parts on the page. *Instrumental Music* also includes a distinctive ending: the inexorable fade in the closing stages is bound to be accentuated by a sharp decline in the density of notated activity in the last seven measures, which are also highlighted by the fact that the few notes present all instance pitch class 0.

The notable episode in measures 48–54 straddles the midpoint of Feldman’s notation (m. 50). A review of the horizontal locations of the least frequently instanced pitch classes suggests that this is no accident: five of only nine instances of F are located in measures 25–29, which lie across the midpoint of the first half (m. 25), whereas six of nine occurrences of D are clustered in measures 73–77, which lie across the midpoint of the second half (m. 75). These correspondences indicate that Feldman was sensitive to proportional structure when composing. His self-confessed dislike of hierarchical organisation is also evident, here in the even-handedness with which he distributes sonorities (39–44 per instrument).<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the question of provenance, it is significant that Kagel was, for many years, an enthusiastic advocate of Feldman’s music. Metzger remembered him being “very excited about Feldman” in the late 1950s,<sup>14</sup> even though the two composers do not seem to have met in person until 1961, when they both attended the first International Music Week in Montreal.<sup>15</sup> Thereafter, they corresponded until 1966, with Kagel’s letters amply attesting to his admiration for Feldman’s output as well as his ongoing efforts to conduct performances of specific examples of it.<sup>16</sup> The latter culminated in the world première of *The Swallows of Salangan* in 1963 and an early rendition of *De Koening* in 1964.<sup>17</sup>

Kagel did not mention his copy of *Instrumental Music* in his letters to Feldman. Nor did he mention a complete set of performance materials for *Fourteen Instruments*, another previously undocumented work by Feldman that

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12 Feldman, “Liner notes” (see note 8), p. 7.

13 For more examples, see David Cline, *The Graph Music of Morton Feldman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 140–62.

14 Heinz-Klaus Metzger, quoted in Amy C. Beal, *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), p. 234.

15 Kagel mentioned this meeting in a subsequent letter. See Mauricio Kagel to Morton Feldman, May 31, 1962 (Morton Feldman Collection, PSS).

16 Feldman’s letters to Kagel may be among Kagel’s personal papers, which are currently unavailable for study. In the 1980s, Feldman complained that Kagel had become less supportive of his music. See *Morton Feldman in Middelburg: Words on Music: Lectures and Conversations*, ed. Raoul Mörchen (Cologne: MusikTexte, 2008), p. 142.

17 Kagel conducted the Large Symphony Orchestra and Choir of Radiodiffusion-Télévision belge in the first performance of *The Swallows of Salangan* on March 5, 1963. He subsequently conducted the Chamber Orchestra of Radiodiffusion-Télévision belge in a performance of *De Koening* (1963) on December 12, 1964.

was also in his possession, which could, conceivably, have been misremembered by Metzger as the “Composition pour 15 Instruments” to which his biography referred.<sup>18</sup> This silence suggests that these items may have been presented to him in one of their occasional meetings, rather than sent by post. It also suggests that neither work was performed by Kagel, who would surely have referred to such an undertaking, and no evidence of them having been played by others has come to light as yet.

The reasons why *Instrumental Music* and *Fourteen Instruments* were not published are unknown, but it would be premature to conclude that Feldman regarded them unfavorably; indeed, the fact that he was prepared to share them with others argues against that verdict, although it cannot exclude a subsequent change of heart. Another possibility is that he parted with the manuscripts, something he is known to have done on other occasions,<sup>19</sup> in which case they may have been impossible to locate or inadvertently overlooked when the time came to organise his output for publication.

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18 *Fourteen Instruments* is scored for piccolo, flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, double bassoon, trumpet, horn, vibraphone, piano, violin, viola, and cello. The performance materials consist of photoreproductions of a full score and part books, all of which are conventionally notated in Feldman’s handwriting. These neatly presented materials are dated December 16, 1953, meaning that *Fourteen Instruments* predates the better-known *Eleven Instruments* by five days. It is clear that Feldman reworked some elements of the former in composing the latter, but the two works are nevertheless distinct. One striking difference between them is that whereas *Eleven Instruments* is always “soft as possible,” sounds in *Fourteen Instruments* are routinely marked “*f*”. A pencilled note on Kagel’s copy of the full score, in his handwriting, reads: “never performed!!”

19 In a letter to Cornelius Cardew, Feldman explained that he had given the scores of his piano *Intersections* (1951–53) to David Tudor as a “personal” gesture. See Morton Feldman to Cornelius Cardew, April 25, 1961 (Cornelius Cardew Papers, British Library). Feldman also parted company with the manuscript of his *The Possibility of a New Work for Electric Guitar* (1966), which was subsequently stolen. See John Cage and Morton Feldman, *Radio Happenings I–V*, ed. Gisela Gronemeyer and Reinhard Oehlschlägel (Cologne: MusikTexte, 1993), pp. 48–51, and Christian Wolff, “On Morton Feldman’s Music (1990),” in *Occasional Pieces: Writings and Interviews, 1952–2013* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 105–06, esp. p. 105.