

## Coordinating Morton Feldman's False Relationships

by Brett Boutwell

When comparing John Cage's use of indeterminacy to his own, Morton Feldman liked to remark that Cage, by exposing his work to unforeseen contingencies in performance, "opened up the door and got pneumonia," whereas he himself merely "opened up a window and got a cold."<sup>1</sup> As the joke suggests, Feldman's approach to indeterminacy was more moderate than that of his friend, yet the difference was surely one of intention as well as degree. Since he endorsed little of Cage's well-known philosophical platform, it follows that Feldman's reasons for exploring indeterminacy in music were largely his own. Today, those reasons might appear ill-defined when considered beside Cage's elaborate justifications for his own methods, as opaque as the vague performance instructions appended to one of Feldman's indeterminate scores. But for a composer so enamored of the veiled and the ambiguous in art, such opacity is perhaps to be expected. "The artist has only one responsibility," he once wrote on a page of musical sketches housed in the Morton Feldman Collection of the Paul Sacher Foundation: "not to communicate."

The work whose sketches bear that curious aphorism has a fittingly opaque title: *False Relationships and the Extended Ending*. Composed in 1968, this piece is one of many works in Feldman's catalog whose individual parts are intended to remain either partially or wholly uncoordinated with one another in performance. These pieces span two decades, from *Piano Four Hands* (1958) to *Why Patterns?* (1978), and they vary considerably in their conceptual orientation, notation, and audible style. Most of them fall into two broad categories: small chamber works with uncoordinated voices, and larger chamber works featuring two or more instrumental choirs that remain internally coordinated but proceed independently of one another. Scored for an eclectic ensemble of three pianos, violin, cello, trombone, and chimes, *False Relationships and the Extended Ending* belongs to the second category. On any given page of the work's score, the entire ensemble is divided into two or three subgroups of mixed instrumentation, with the constituent voices of each subgroup aligned internally; at the larger level, however, the coordination among those choirs of instruments remains undefined, despite the vague suggestion of vertical alignment resulting from

The image displays two pages of musical notation for Morton Feldman's *False Relationships and the Extended Ending* (1968). The top page features staves for Piano (PF), Violin (VN), and Tablature (TAB). The bottom page features staves for Piano (PF), Chamber Ensemble (CH), and Viola (Vc). The notation is highly complex and includes numerous handwritten corrections and annotations, such as "Pizz", "Arco", and "II". The score is characterized by its staggered vertical alignment of parts, creating "false relationships".

Example 1: Morton Feldman, *False Relationships and the Extended Ending* (1968), montage of photocopies with autograph corrections (Morton Feldman Collection).

their placement above and below one another in conventional score format. These are the “false relationships” of the work’s title, created as the choirs fall behind and push ahead of one another in performance, rarely aligning vertically in the manner suggested by the printed page.

Since the instructions included with the work’s score fail to address this crucial aspect of indeterminacy, musicians preparing to perform this piece and others like it may reasonably wonder how far offset the composer expected such parts to become in performance. But throughout his career Feldman was intentionally quiet on such questions, less inclined to specify his wishes verbally than to craft his notation in such a way that it coaxed

performers into realizations amenable to his creative vision.<sup>2</sup> In the case of texturally indeterminate works like *False Relationships and the Extended Ending*, he evidently conceived his uncoordinated parts to remain in loose proximity to one another, not to be separated by great lengths of time.<sup>3</sup> Because performers read the music from scores rather than from dedicated parts, the visual position of each group on the page vis-à-vis the others could subtly influence the players to remain within range of one another. Working with such a presumption, Feldman appears to have shaped the language of these pieces broadly on the basis of timbre, register, and harmony to suit the ever-shifting relationships engendered by this particular vein of indeterminacy. Such a view is reinforced by the study of his sketches and drafts, which yield insights into the composer's creative methods and reflect his practical concerns over the realization of his indeterminate scores.

In the case of *False Relationships and the Extended Ending*, as with many works of similar design, Feldman composed music for his uncoordinated choirs separately, but strategized the visual alignment they would ultimately assume in the score, annotating his drafts accordingly. The most significant instance of such strategized alignment appears at the work's visual midpoint in the score, a spot endowed with special compositional significance in many of the scores Feldman would subsequently produce during the 1970s and 1980s. After having created clean copies of the parts for both of the work's separate choirs, he taped them together so that they align at this point before revising the piece further (see *Example 1*). Feldman planned for this passage to appear on page eight of the combined score and labeled the music for the respective choirs accordingly, each of their systems of music preceded by a handwritten "8." In the composer-supervised recording of this work, the two instrumental sub-groups in fact arrive at this point nearly simultaneously, perhaps having been coached by Feldman himself to do so.<sup>4</sup>

The structural significance of this spot lies in the appearance of a special new musical figure. After a threefold statement of a violin harmonic in the upper choir, a five-note broken chord is sounded in the first piano part of the second choir's music. In a slowly moving work filled with sustained sounds, this figure initially stands apart simply for its rhythmic quality – its "horizontal" in time – as does the violin statement that precedes it. But immediately thereafter something unexpected happens: the piano figure is sounded again, now in the piano below, and in subsequent pages it continues to appear, its recurrence coming as a surprise in a piece otherwise devoid of such audible repetitions. The figure plays a key role in the close of the piece, rising above the undifferentiated surface of the work and providing an anchor of sorts for the listener.

However mysterious it might seem in its immediate surroundings, this reiterated broken chord augured important changes in Feldman's musical style. To understand why requires first that we look backwards in time. For

although motivic repetition played a part in the composer's work of the early 1950s, that feature was largely absent from his published output during the ten years that preceded the composition of *False Relationships and the Extended Ending*. With the appearance of the piano figure in that work, however, motivic repetition made its return to Feldman's music, where it would ultimately form the bedrock of his now-celebrated late style. Perhaps aware that he had turned a corner, he chose to reuse the very figure from *False Relationships and the Extended Ending* in his next work, 1969's *Between Categories*, treating it in much the same way: the broken chord emerges at the piece's midpoint and is repeated throughout the work's remainder, echoing incessantly between two pianos in the texture. Never before had Feldman reused important material across works in such a manner, although the practice would thereafter become something of a habit. In fact, his sketches reveal that he even considered including the same broken chord in two works composed closely on the heels of *Between Categories*.

It was certainly no accident that Feldman sought to coordinate his independent choirs at such an important moment in the piece, and the decision offers clues about his working methods. First, and most broadly, it can remind us that scores such as these, despite their sometimes radical appearance on the page, were shaped by a creative agent striving to achieve tangible aesthetic ends – a *composer*, in a fairly conventional sense of the term – and furthermore one who envisioned indeterminacy in more circumscribed terms than his better-known colleague, Cage. Second, it might serve to illustrate the great importance that Feldman attached to the visual appearance of his music on the page. That this composer, infamous for his long-windedness in conversation, would choose to remain silent on key aspects of his indeterminate works' interpretation – to “not communicate,” per the aphorism inscribed in his sketches – should be understood in light of the greater faith he placed in musical notation as a force perfectly capable of speaking in his stead.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Fred Orton and Gavin Bryars, “Morton Feldman,” *Studio International* 192, no. 984 (November–December 1976), p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> See John Cage and Morton Feldman, “Radio Happening V,” *Radio Happenings I–V*, ed. Gisela Gronemeyer and Reinhard Oehlschlägel (Cologne: MusikTexte, 1993), p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Theorist Jonathan Bernard arrives at a similar interpretation of these works in his article “Feldman's Painters,” *The New York School of Music and Visual Arts*, ed. Steven Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 195. Feldman's rare remarks upon this question of performance practice lend weight to such a view. See, for example, the instructions accompanying the score *Chorus and Instruments* (published by C.F. Peters, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Composers Recordings, Inc. SD 276, 1972. By the end of this recording of *False Relationships and the Extended Ending*, the instrumental choirs have separated, creating an incompatibility between their relationship in sound and in the score; this disjuncture is the source of the titular “extended ending.” Feldman's sketches show that he considered a few different variants on the work's title, including the more cumbersome “The Utilization of False Relationships towards an ‘Extended Ending.’”