

FELDMAN: *Triadic Memories*. Piano, two pianos, piano four hands, piano three hands. Roger Woodward<sup>1</sup> and Ralph Lane<sup>2</sup>, piano(s). ETCETERA KTC 2015 (DDD); two discs: 73:29, 71:39. (Distributed by Qualiton.)

Morton Feldman's music seems to be undergoing a revival of interest in the CD era, and thank heavens for that! I can think of less than a handful of other composers who share his outright necessity for an absolutely quiet background upon which such soft sounds may hold sway. Not to mention the neglect of Feldman's uncompromising music in general. But the adventurous Swiss label hat ART has issued a wonderful disc of solo piano music performed by Marianne Schroeder and promises the premiere recordings of *For Benita Marcus* (a haunting seventy-minute piano work) and *Crippled Symmetry* (for a trio of various flutes, keyboards, and vibraphone/glockenspiel); New Albion has issued the virtuosic *Three Voices*; and I've seen advertisements recently for three different recordings of the nearly ninety-minute solo piano *Triadic Memories*. This is the first of those three to reach me, and no beating around the bush—this is an essential pair of discs for anyone with an interest in music of this century, or a desire for a thought-provoking, aesthetically satisfying musical experience.

The key word in the title, for me, is "memories." In his later, longer works, one of Feldman's curiosities was how the mind recalls certain patterns, or phrases, or even single notes over an extended period of time—or, if the reintroduction of the pattern, say, was not the same, might the mind imagine that it was the same, creating a sense of familiarity and order, even if it was false? So the effect of one's individual memory became a point of structural significance. Yet while the music does contain ravishing details which evolve from moment to moment, you'll listen in vain for recognizable structural forms or even repetitious patterns which follow any formulaic or consistent path. Feldman composed this music by ear, if you will, at the piano according to his individual aesthetic choices. Apparently he would play a pattern of notes, or a characteristic chord, which he would repeat until he grew tired of it, or it fulfilled its dramatic or tonal function, and replace it with a new pattern of notes or chord. One chord, for example, might be played twice, followed by another chord repeated seven or eight times. Feldman had an exquisite sense of tonal weight, density, and color, and a love of the timbre and texture of sheer sound—rather than (as most composers) an attraction to the mechanics of manipulating sound—what the painter Robert Motherwell once spoke of as "a sensual interest in one's materials."

Feldman's asymmetrical construction was influenced, to some degree, by the patterns on the classic Turkish rugs he grew to love in later life. So in his sonic tapestries it's quite amazing to hear how his simple patterns and chords *cohere*, and provide inevitable momentum, no matter how slow the progress. There is a captivating sense of concentration involved in the music's process, and an energizing feeling of spontaneity, as well as a spiritual calm *and*—here's where the genius comes in—structural integrity. Perhaps paradoxically, the gradual, inexorable progress induces not an hypnotic effect, but an intense focusing of one's perceptions.

*Triadic Memories* begins with a dark, dramatic two-note motif rumbling in the bass register and a single note (alternately G or Bb) chiming in the treble. The notes soon change registers but keep the same intervallic relationship, criss-crossing roles, and eventually the triad is expanded until it's merely a memory. By keeping the texture sparse and the details simple, Feldman creates an enormous amount of tension, which allows otherwise ordinary events extraordinary stature, as when the music is reduced to a single note, its overtones, and dying resonance (by isolating it so, and heightening our awareness of its properties, we hear it as lush and luxurious); or when that single note is repeated until it blossoms into a garland of unconnected notes in different registers, sprouting like wildflowers. When chords come they're a marvelous shock, like church bells, and often what sounds like a closing cadence resolves itself in some unexpected way into yet another pattern, and on and on.

Feldman composed *Triadic Memories* in 1981, when he said that he was no longer thinking in terms of "time," but rather "scale"; its hour-and-a-half length actually pales in comparison to, say, his four-hour *For Philip Guston* and other epic works. Yet, once it's started and we grow accustomed to its organic evolution, it feels as if there's no formal reason why it should ever stop. Once we're comfortable with this notion, late-50s pieces like the under-four-minute *Two Pianos* and the seven-and-a-half-minute *Piano Four Hands* seem like excerpts; even the twenty-plus minutes of *Piano* (1977) seem like a small easel painting compared to the later huge canvases. Of course, in the earlier, shorter pieces he was working with different materials, different points of reference, but the characteristic touch, concern, and focus are all there. To my mind, *Piano Three Hands* (1957–58) is the most important and illuminating of these, and I had a powerful emotional response to it. It's only (only!) nineteen minutes long, and the sounds proceed so very slowly that the silences between the sounds are exaggerated and take on equal musical value. Due to the acute use of pedal

the tonal resonances shimmer, and chords sometimes *emerge* out of the mist, or, more dramatically, out of thin air. There's something sorrowful communicated by the extreme sparseness of sound and gesture in this music, but something pure and beautiful and spiritual as well. Roger Woodward and third-hand Ralph Lane display exquisite control and strength in their restraint and tender phrasing.

In fact, Woodward's playing is quite remarkable throughout, especially in *Triadic Memories*, where he avoids metrical rigidity without resorting to a too loose use of rubato, keeping things in proportion, with patience and obvious loving attention. There are slight differences between his version of *Piano* and that of Marianne Schroeder on her hat ART disc. *Piano* is based upon insistent chords, primarily sotto voce but including a brief eruption of hard, sharp attacks in dynamic contrast. Schroeder has a firmer touch and emphasizes the pedal more, creates a grander gesture in the ringing chords, and benefits from a "larger" recorded sound (though Feldman intended the music to be quiet and intimate). Woodward has a leaner piano tone and a crisper articulation. We're fortunate to have them both.

Art Lange

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