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Aspects of Time in the Later Music of Morton Feldman

Edward Jurkowski

There is probably no western art composer who has been more influenced by the visual arts than Morton Feldman. One would be hard pressed, for instance, to find an interview or essay by him in which visual art does not play some role when describing his compositional work.[1] Feldman was, of course, a member of John Cage's circle, who in the early 1950s along with the composers Earl Brown and Christian Wolff and the pianist David Tudor, formed an alliance that has frequently been referred to as the "New York School" of composition. As is often the case, the label is misleading, for each of these artists would follow distinct compositional as well as geographical trajectories. However, in Feldman's case the label is rather appropriate, as his art was consciously related to a group of New York-based painters that includes such names as Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. For instance, it was Feldman's association with such noted modernist painters combined with his deep understanding of visual art in general that gave him the sense that intricate, slowly evolving musical patterns could fill a musical time space in much the same manner as the figurations of a Guston painting fill up a canvas (or beginning in the early 1970s, the weaving patterns of a Turkish carpet, a passion that consumed Feldman until his death in

[1] Feldman 2000 contains a comprehensive collection of his writings.

1987). Despite his radical innovations, in some ways Feldman was the most traditional of his generation of experimentalists, for he was unwilling to sacrifice beauty for any other compositional idea or technique and never seemed to stray very far from romantic notions of tone color and emotional power.

Feldman's early published works from 1950 are graphic in design; for the next fifteen years his scores were either graphic in nature or were notated traditionally using varying degrees of indeterminacy. However, by the late 1960s Feldman abandoned the elements of indeterminacy that had characterized these pieces and instead began a remarkable compositional journey in which he relied upon his intuition and acute sense of orchestration to create works of ferocious difficulty where every note and rhythm was notated to formidable precision. Concomitantly, Feldman's compositions also became increasingly greater in duration; in the final decade of his life they reached lengths of unheard of proportions—for instance, the four-hour 1984 *For Philip Guston*, written for flute, vibraphone, and piano or the two-hour cello and piano composition from 1981 entitled *Patterns in a Chromatic Field.* The pieces from Feldman's middle period, generally considered from the early 1960s until 1977, are less long, less slow, and, his detractors would say, less monotonous than these later pieces and, therefore, can be more easily absorbed. Many of his most popular pieces come from this time period. For instance, in a work such as his 1970 *The Viola in My Life* the lyricism and nostalgia of the title reflects a lighter mood—silences interrupted by episodic events makes this, as well as other compositions from this time period, more

poignant than the longer, meditative late works. Ironically, given the focus of this paper, many pieces from this period seem to evoke a memory, or remembrance, as in the 1970 *Madame Press died Last Week at Ninety*.

Unquestionably, the most challenging pieces for performers and audiences are the works from the last ten years of his life—i.e., the compositions beginning with the 1977 trio *Why Patterns?* for flutes, piano and glockenspiel. Although the atonal harmonic language, low volume level and austere textures from his earlier works still remain, they now contain a significant amount of repetitive material and, as was just noted, tend to be of enormous length. Along with the sheer difficulty of playing the notes on the page, whether a solo instrumentalist or member of an ensemble, Feldman demands that the extreme concentration needed to play this music be sustained for long periods of time. Perhaps no work stretches such expectations more than his 1983 String Quartet no. 2. The quartet is, like most of Feldman's pieces from his late period, constructed by literal repetitions of small motives. Such repetition in this later music has evoked charges of monotony from his critics; however, what is astonishing about the second quartet, as well as these other works from Feldman's final ten years, is the vast amount of variety and change they actually do contain. The quartet's duration lasts anywhere from four to six hours; the wide variation is determined by the number of repeats taken during a performance. As such, the extreme length of the quartet has given the work a notoriety all its own—a status that has been exacerbated in recent years when the Kronos Quartet, the ensemble

for whom the work was written, announced that they were too old to continue to play the composition, due to the extraordinary demands of stamina the piece places upon the four players.

Clearly there is something new and special attached to these later works. Although Feldman's attraction to the visual arts has been identified at least as early as the 1950s, commentators of his music suggest that the greater length and the increased amounts of motivic repetition that these later compositions contain can be attributed to the influence from two sources that began to take hold in the early 1970s: one, his interest in the crosshatch paintings of Jasper Johns; two, his passion for Turkish and Persian carpets.[2] The latter, in particular, has received attention by scholars and commentators of Feldman's music alike.[3] These hand-loomed rugs are characterized by repeating, self-contained square- or diamond-shaped geometric patterns set within a border; the carpets themselves are rarely exactly rectangular. Because the wool used for these rugs is dyed in small quantities at a time, there is typically a multitude of shades of the same colour. These patterns, although geometric, are often imprecise and will vary in colour, shape, and/or size. The upshot is that unlike the rugs made in commercial factories, the colours and patterns of these hand-made rugs do not adhere to a consistent identifiable system of usage, but appear freely in the overall design.

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[2] Johnson 2002 discusses the role that Jasper Johns may play in Feldman's *Why Patterns?*

[3] Feldman himself discusses the role that Turkish carpets play in his music in his 1981 "Crippled Symmetry" essay. See Feldman 2000, 134–149.

As a composer who always demonstrated great sensitivity towards visual art, as regards its influence upon his compositional work, the close interrelationship between colour and pattern in these rugs led Feldman to gradually reevaluate his views about the nature of musical material. What Feldman came to recognize is that a musical pattern could serve as an analogue for the musical colour of these carpets, where musical pattern is synonymous with musical material, musical image or motive. Like the geometric designs in the rugs, these musical patterns are self-contained units which repeat; importantly, the repetitions allowed Feldman to break off without preparation into a different pattern. However, the multiple hues and slightly imprecise geometric designs of these rugs also influence the variations associated with these repetitions; a few musical analogues that could be cited include changes such as chordal revoicings, chromatic alterations or changes in register. In short, the irregular placement of the rugs' patterns translates into irregular musical pacing. As an illustration, consider the opening page of his 1981 piano work *Triadic Memories*, shown in Example 1. The constant 3:4 rhythmic conflict is typical of the rhythmic arguments that pervade many of the later works—although it should be noted that the complexity here is relatively mild compared with some pieces. These bracketed durational proportions frequently appear in Feldman's later works. As Paula Kopstick Ames notes in her analytical essay on Feldman's piano work entitled "*Piano*":

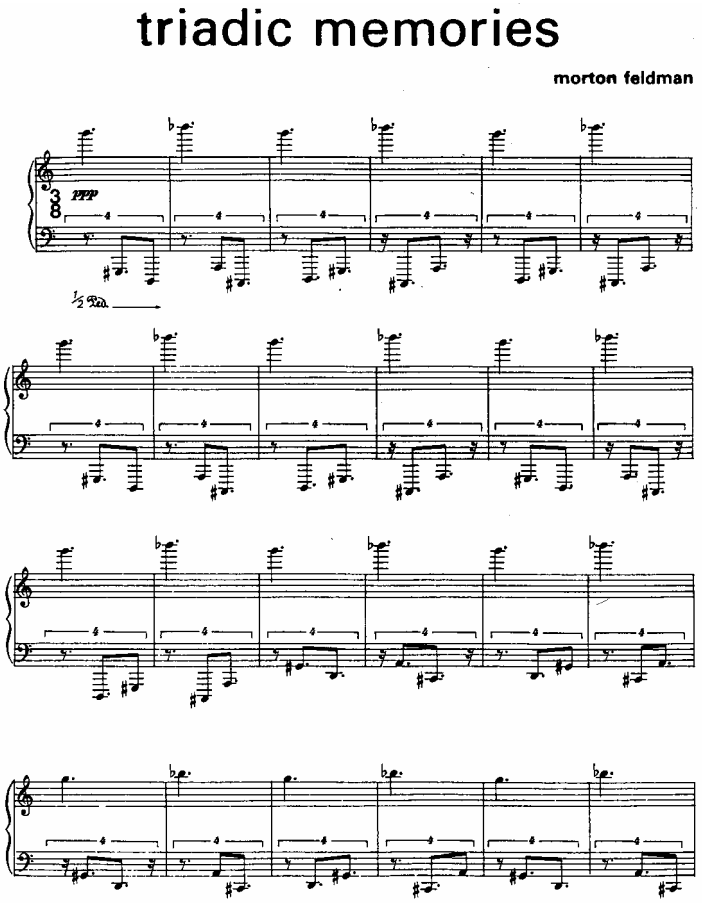
> It would be incorrect to follow convention by designating these bracketed proportions as 'groupings.' [For example, i]n many instances, Feldman's brackets

> contain but a single attack surrounded by rests … Feldman's use of bracketed proportions is usually oriented much more toward placing attacks within a frame of time, rather than, toward, say, compressing five notes into the period normally available to four.[4]

Feldman remarks in his 1981 essay "Crippled Symmetry":

> For my purpose, [an asymmetric duration proportion] "contains" my material more within the metric frame of the measure; while in post-Webern arrhythmic language, lopsided acceleration results from the directional pull of one figure to another. What I'm after is somewhat like Mondrian not wanting to paint "bouquets, but a single flower at a time."[5]

[4] Ames 1996, 107.
[5] Feldman 2000, 135.



Example 1 Morton Feldman, *Triadic Memories*, mm. 1–24

Even though the same pitch classes are used in each alternate measure, their position within a measure and their rhythmic realization change; at m. 15, the register of the pitches also changes. However, for purposes of a more extensive analysis of this piece later in the paper, let us consider that these patterns

are demarcated instead by the change in register of the G to B-flat ostinato; the first complete pattern, then, is from mm. 1–18. Example 2 illustrates that the ostinato right hand, in fact, masks two subtle rhythmic patterns in the left hand: one pattern is associated with the odd-numbered measures; the second pattern for the even-numbered measures (only the left hand pitches are illustrated). The integers refer to the proportion of twelve triplet sixteenth notes within each measure. The lower portion of Example 2 combines the patterns into one large pitch/rhythmic grid for Section I of the piece. Some comments about my notation are warranted. Square brackets indicate that the measures are identical both in terms of the ordering of the pitches and the rhythmic pattern. The arrows indicate that only one parameter remains the same between the two measures; the letters P and R indicate whether it is the pitch or rhythm, respectively. For instance, a bracket associates measures 1 and 7; however, an arrow relates measures 7 and 13. While the first pair of measures is identical, notice in the latter pair that the ordering of the rhythm for each measure is the same, but the order of the pitches is reversed. We shall come back to these eighteen measures later, when we study what role this opening section plays within the larger formal design of the opening seventy-eight measures.

* * * * *

While it is clear that these Turkish and Persian rugs play a prominent role to comprehend Feldman's later works, I would argue that the composer's deeper

appreciation of the larger canvases by such painters as Guston, Pollock and Rothko plays an equally valuable role in these compositions. For instance, one feature that appears consistently in interviews and writings from the last decade of Feldman's life is his use of "scale" to describe the expansive length of these compositions. Simply put, an understanding of scale seems paramount in order to appreciate what Feldman seems to be after in these later works. However, the word is obviously problematic, as it seems difficult to comprehend how and why Feldman would use an expression that portrays something visual to depict the temporal art of music.

As a point of departure to this topic, let us set the stage with a quote by the American composer George Rochberg that I believe has particular relevance here. In his essay "Duration in Music," the first in a group of three essays entitled "On Musical Time and Space," Rochberg discusses the role memory serves to comprehend musical design. He writes that:

> The power of return in music serves much more than a purely formal function about which we have heard so much in the past from theorists and aestheticians: ideas of unity in variety, repetition and return ... etc. It does not account for the sheer power of return, nor does it account for the enormous satisfaction gained when the meaning of a work is suddenly crystallized by the arrival at ideas, stated earlier in the work, emerging on a new plane. Return in music has something of the force of the past suddenly illuminating the felt present as a real element in the present.[6]

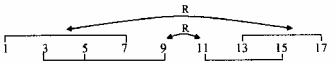
[6] Rochberg 1984, 73.

m.:	1			3			5			7			9			11			13			15			17		
	r	G#	D	r	D	G#	r	D	G#	r	G#	D	r	D	G#	r	G#	D	r	D	G#	r	G#	D	r	D	G#
	4.5	4.5	3	3	4.5	4.5	3	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	3	3	4.5	4.5	3	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	3	3	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	3

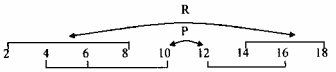
m.:	2			4			6			8			10			12			14			16			18		
	r	A	C#	r	C#	A	r	C#	A	r	A	C#	r	C#	A	r	A	C#	r	C#	A	r	A	C#	r	C#	A
	4.5	3	4.5	1.5	4.5	4.5	1.5	1.5	4.5	4.5	1.5	4.5	3	4.5	1.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	1.5	4.5	3	4.5	1.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	1.5	4.5	3	4.5

NB: (1) "r" denotes rest; (2) durations based upon twelve quadruple sixteenth notes per notated measures

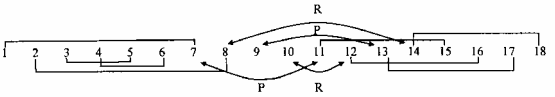
Pitch (P) / Rhythm (R) Associations in Odd-Numbered Measures



Pitch (P) / Rhythm (R) Associations in Even-Numbered Measures



Pitch (P) / Rhythm (R) Associations within Section I (mm. 1–18)



Example 2 Pitch/Rhythm analysis of Feldman, *Triadic Memories*, mm. 1–18

I believe that it is safe to say that Rochberg's comment is one with which most musicians would not disagree. While many composers and listeners alike have intuitively or formally adhered to traditional formal designs, others have viewed them with suspicion. For instance, Feldman had felt that forms such as ternary or sonata had become taken for granted, clichéd and overused. As he recounted in his *Crippled Symmetry* essay:

> Over time I have come to realize that musical forms and related processes are essentially only methods of

> arranging material and serve no other function than to aid one's memory. In short, Western musical forms have become a paraphrase of memory.[7]

Right from his early pieces in the 1950s—indeed, one of the hallmarks of the composer's style overall—Feldman was interested in conveying to the listener the immediacy of the sonic experience. However, in the 1970s, Feldman began to consider that memory could operate in a manner virtually opposite to Rochberg's perspective, through a conscious attempt at "formalizing a disorientation of memory [by] avoiding any acoustical anecdote likely to orient the auditive memory."[8] What Feldman began to discover was that as new material was introduced and repeated successively, he would forget the previous material. Simply stated, as Rochberg (and others) have noted, memory acts as a point of orientation in most Western music; however, for Feldman it became the basis of disorientation. Further, this confusion could be enhanced by placing absolute attention on the minutest of details—first, through the numerous repetitions (which the performer has some control over), and then subtle alterations of these repetitions; examples include the rhythmic framing of a repeated bar, the careful displacement of a pitch or pitches by an octave, the reorchestration of a harmony or melody, or by finely altering a dynamic level. As an illustration of such minute changes in action, consider the opening measures of the second string quartet, shown in Example 3. The opening harmony, C-sharp, D, D-

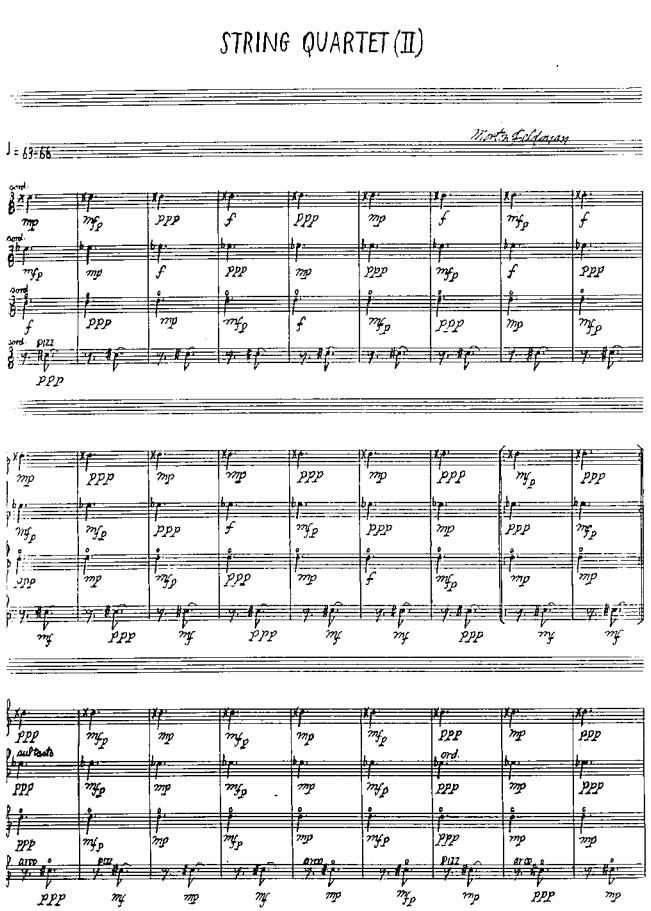
[7] Feldman 2000, 137.
[8] Ibid., 137.

sharp and E, is repeated no less than thirty-eight times. Only these four pitches are used, whose registral placement and rhythm never change; yet these thirty-eight measures contain a tremendous variety, as only a couple of chords contain the same pattern of dynamics. In short, even though it is the same chord in terms of pitches, it is rarely the same chord: by focusing our attention on the constant dynamic changes and occasional alterations in orchestration, our disorientation as to the work's structure, made problematic because of the repetitive harmonies, becomes greatly exacerbated.

By employing such devices in his compositional methods and by making disorientation one of his main concerns, Feldman intentionally confuses our "active memory," i.e., our sense of auditory retention. Of course, in much Western art music this confusion does not occur to such a great extent since less attention upon a composition's minute details is usually placed upon the listener. By contrast, however, in a piece by Feldman the detail *is* the point of focus for the listener. In short, like the string quartet excerpt from Example 3, what we are left to cogitate upon are the complex fragments of an unclear design and it is through a mindful attempt at the disorientation of memory that Feldman is able to direct the listener towards a more conceptual and elusive listening experience.

Yet since all of the parts of a composition achieve equality, an interesting phenomenon takes place. Specifically, Feldman demands that the listener focus intensely upon each feature of a composition's design since the listener's attention, once directed to any one particular element, is not pulled away by what

occurred before it or by what will follow it. In other words, moments of equal importance follow one another. However, this leads to a crucial question: if a structure consists of a series of events, all equally important, and, at the same time, each event becomes the focus of attention, to what, then, do all these events and their details add up? In other words, what makes all these events into a unified whole? With such a paradox in mind, let us now place this highly repetitious sound world within the context of the expanded length of Feldman's later works.



Example 3 Morton Feldman, String Quartet no. 2, mm. 1–27

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As noted earlier, Rothko had long been a member of Feldman's group of friends; the painter and composer grew especially close during the 1960s until Rothko's untimely suicide in 1970. One of

Rothko's trademarks beginning from the early 1950s was his penchant to paint big paintings. As regards the expansive dimensions of these canvases, Rothko wrote:

> I paint very big canvases. I'm conscious about the historical function in doing grandiose and pompous paintings. The reason I'm doing it—and this goes for the other painters I know as well—is exactly the opposite: I want to be as intimate and human as possible. To paint a little canvas means that you put yourself outside your own experience, as if you observed an experience through a diminishing glass. When you paint a big canvas, however, you are in it. It's out of your control.[9]

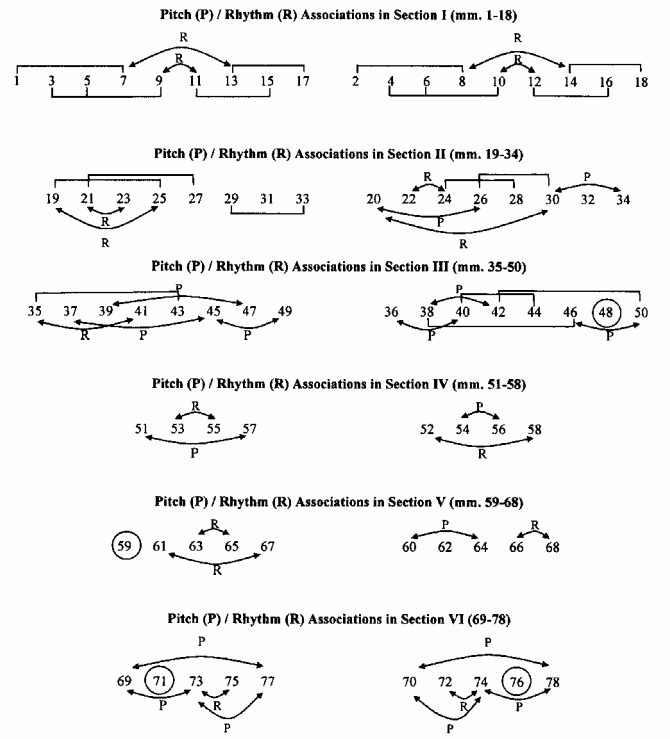
By his own accord, Rothko's huge paintings, vibrating with color, had a major influence upon Feldman; he often identified the state of immobility in Rothko's paintings as something he himself sought for in his own music. Along with his large canvases, Rothko demanded that viewers stand in close proximity to them, thereby preventing one from being able to survey the paintings, an assessment that hinders a direct experience of them. Feldman sought a similar effect when composing his music, in part by not allowing the structural parts of a composition to stand in simple symmetrical relation to one another or the whole. In this way he avoids predictability and overview. For instance, the relatively straight forward symmetrical pattern of harmonies A-B-C-B-A, shown in Example 4, could be, to use Feldman's term, crippled in some manner, an important means by which to avoid periodicity and, therefore, a

[9] Rothko 1951, 104.

predictable rhythmic pulse. Three possible cripplings are shown; there are, of course, further possibilities. Since each letter can represent a single harmony, a pattern of harmonies in a progression, or at a higher level, even sections of a work, the range of possible cripplings is very large indeed. It is important to note, by the way, that when Feldman thought of crippled symmetries, he did so with regards to both the object (i.e., a musical pattern) and its placement. Feldman considered that objects placed at irregular time intervals was an especially powerful means of crippling, for it greatly diminishes the close-knit aspect of patterning and, therefore, provides an important element of unpredictability.

(a) A-B-C-X-B-A
(b) A-B-X-C-B-A
(c) A-B-C-X-B-Y-A

Example 4 Three possible cripplings of the symmetrical harmonic progression A-B-C-B-A



Example 5 Pitch / Rhythm associations in Feldman, *Triadic Memories*, mm. 1–78

While exact repetitions of a harmony, measure, or group of measures frequently appear in Feldman's later works, it is very unusual for the As or Bs in the illustrations of Example 4 to repeat exactly. By fashioning a seemingly endless variety of crippled symmetries through a myriad of disturbances, distortions, and skewings of symmetrical forms, Feldman provides a unique, individual shape to each of the symmetrical forms employed. Further, the breaking of a symmetrical formulaic shape adds an

element of the unknown, and thus of freshness and surprise to the form. Most importantly, this balancing of order with disorder opens up the closed system of the symmetry to new transformations of the material.

As an illustration of how Feldman's use of crippled symmetries can serve to generate a work's formal design, let us return to *Triadic Memories*. We recall that a feature of the opening eighteen measures was the similarity in the pitch/rhythm correspondence between the odd-numbered measures and even-numbered measures. Example 5 reproduces the two analytical graphs of mm. 1–18 we saw earlier, and now adds the analytical charts for the other five sections from Part One. Like section one, only three pitches are used for the odd-numbered measures and the even-numbered measures for the remainder of Part One—G, G-sharp, D and A, B-flat, C-sharp, respectively. Further, the dynamic level remains constantly set at triple *piano*; the ½ pedal marking adds a "suspended" quality to this mix of trichords. In typical Feldman fashion, despite the apparent similarity throughout part one, no two sections are designed the same. However, even though the patterns of the first and sixth sections are not the same, nor are they even of the same length, these are the only two sections in which there is an exact correspondence of pitch and rhythm between the odd-numbered and even-numbered measures. In short, this similar association between sections one and six engenders a framing role to these outer sections, infusing a sense of symmetry in an otherwise disordered series of sections. Note, however, that even this symmetry is slightly skewed: unlike the first section, in which the pitch/rhythm correspondence

between the odd-numbered and even-numbered measures is the same, the pitch/rhythm association of the odd-numbered measures in section six is an exact retrograde of the even-numbered measures.

Feldman has acknowledged that these crippled symmetries an important feature of his later works. However, Wes York argues that these symmetries are themselves cast within multiple recursive levels of crippled symmetries to generate a composition's overall design.[10] Simply stated, it is the unique balance of the overall shape, ordering and expansion of these crippled symmetries within each work that Feldman refers to as a composition's scale. We can take confirmation of Feldman's conception of an all-encompassing musical balance from his description of a similar process he observed in Rothko's large paintings, articulated in his "Crippled Symmetry" essay:

> It seems that scale (the subliminal mathematics of a work) is not given to us in Western culture, but must be arrived at individually in our own work and in our own way. Like that small Turkish 'tile' rug, it is Rothko's scale that removes any argument over the proportions of one area to another, or over its degree of symmetry or asymmetry. The sum of the parts does not equal the whole; rather, scale is discovered and contained as an image. It is not form that floats the painting, but Rothko's finding of that particular scale which suspends all proportions in equilibrium.[11]

Feldman's quest for a distinctive equilibrium of crippled symmetries for his later compositions

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[10] York 1996.

[11] Feldman 2000, 148–149.

suggests that his music is constructed with a large-scale design in mind. This idea proposes a shift from the perspective that commentators often apply to Feldman's music—namely, that it is an aimless, or more kindly, "elusive" mosaic of beautiful sounds. In short, it is a call for a change in the analytical methodologies needed to comprehend this music—what little there are at present. Happily, there are scholars beginning to recognize and address these matters. For instance, in a recent article, Dora Hanninen discusses the "problem" of coming to terms with Feldman's later music. In her article entitled "Feldman, Analysis, Experience" she states that "Feldman's music asks analysts to become intensively introspective, to inquire into qualitative aspects of music experience, and to develop appropriate conceptualizations and methodology." Later, she notes that " … in much of Feldman's late music, organization emerges at a level theorists are not used to working with: the level of populations, not individuals."[12]

During his 1984 Darmstadt lecture, Feldman quipped that the reason why he was now writing long pieces was that he finally had the time and money to do so. In Jonathan Bernard's article entitled "Feldman's Painters," he suggests that a more profitable response to the question about Feldman's proclivity towards the extreme length in these pieces can be found in a 1980 interview in which Feldman remarked that "the fact that I have more time to compose now means that I'm asking myself different questions." Bernard comments that "these longer

[12] Hanninen 2004, 228.

pieces … enabled Feldman to realize certain durational analogies that he felt could exist between painting and music."[13] I not only agree with Bernard's assessment but would extend his thought further. It seems that in the end, length for Feldman was, in part, the result of simply enjoying to compose long pieces and a means of challenging musicians and audiences. But mostly he believed that writing long pieces was a matter of searching for the right scale, the overall shape and duration of a piece that, like a large Rothko canvas, made sense of everything else. To quote Feldman one final time:

> Form is easy—just the division of things into parts. But scale is another matter. You have to have control of the piece - it requires a heightened kind of concentration. Before, my pieces were like objects; now, they're like evolving things.[14]

In short, Feldman's later compositions *had* to be long because the same elements squeezed in or chopped off in works of lesser dimension would have been, to his ears, too simplistic or uninteresting, whereas at the scale he determined for them, they took on an inevitability and even a grandeur that defined their being.

For a painter like Rothko, the large size of the canvases that hindered an overview was a way of letting the viewer *be in the painting*—thus stopping time, a total immersion in the present. In Feldman's later work, his challenge is similar in intent but much more profound in outcome: by compelling the

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[13] Bernard 2002, 205.
[14] Griffiths 1994, 305.

listener to lose their sense of time by always being "present" within a work forces us to re-evaluate fundamental precepts of time, memory, form and ultimately, what it means to experience music.

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Abstract

During the 1960s, Morton Feldman abandoned the elements of indeterminacy that had characterized his scores since the early 1950s and instead began a remarkable compositional journey in which he relied on his intuition and acute sense of orchestration to create works of ferocious difficulty in which every note and rhythm was notated to formidable precision. Concomitantly, Feldman's compositions also became increasingly greater in duration—although given Feldman's life-long predilection for painting, it is perhaps more appropriate to speak of his works in terms of space rather than duration.

While it has been frequently acknowledged that Feldman's passion towards Turkish rugs played a vital role in how these expansive compositions from his last decade are structured, in this paper I argue that their design may be more profitably explained by studying the composer's deeper appreciation of the large canvases of such painters as Philip Guston and Mark Rothko. For instance, uncovering Feldman's relationship with these New York-based painters proves valuable to not only comprehend his frequent use of the term "scale" to describe the form and

length of these expanded musical compositions (an obviously problematic expression, given its association to portray the visual instead of the temporal art of music), but also the rationale behind his conscious attempt to disorient memory in his late works, an attribute that directs to what is Feldman's crowning compositional achievement—namely, a innovative means to experience musical time.