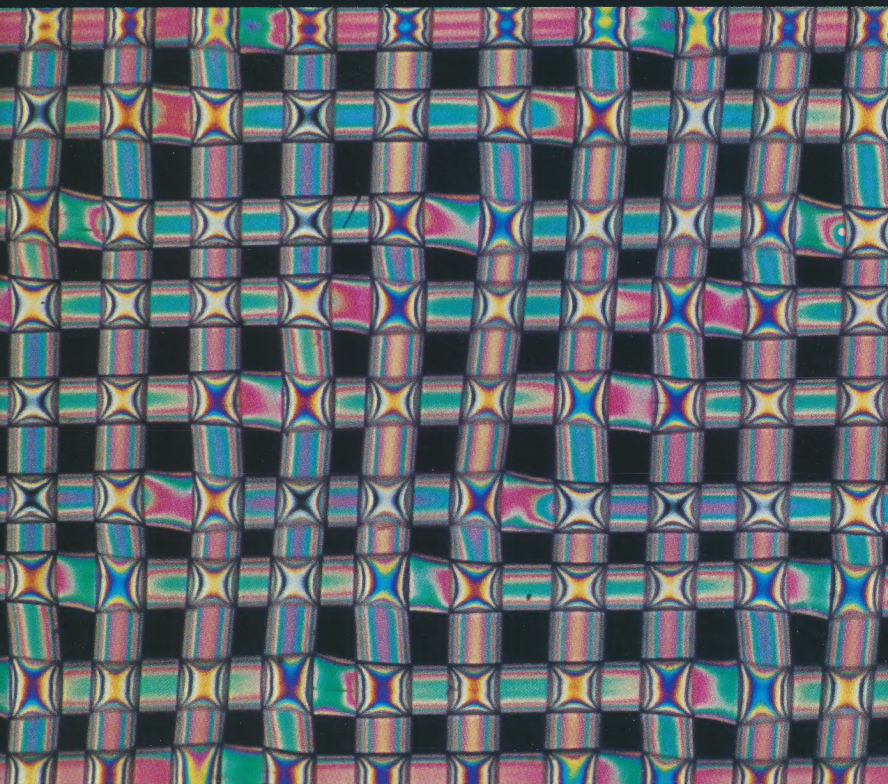


**KRONOS QUARTET** WITH AKI TAKAHASHI



**MORTON FELDMAN** PIANO AND STRING QUARTET



**MORTON FELDMAN**  
*PIANO AND STRING QUARTET (1985)*

**KRONOS QUARTET**

DAVID HARRINGTON, *VIOLIN*  
JOHN SHERBA, *VIOLIN*  
HANK DUTT, *VIOLA*  
JOAN JEANRENAUD, *CELLO*

WITH

AKI TAKAHASHI, *PIANO*

(79:33)



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MORTON FELDMAN

(b. 1926, New York, NY; d. 1987, Buffalo, NY)

*Piano and String Quartet* (1985)

KRONOS QUARTET

David Harrington, *violin*

John Sherba, *violin*

Hank Dutt, *viola*

Joan Jeanrenaud, *cello*

WITH

Aki Takahashi, *piano*

(79:33)

Universal Edition



***“What I tried to bring into my music are just a very few essential things that I need.”***

Morton Feldman seemed one of music's great paradoxes. He was a big, garrulous, friendly man with a raucous sense of humor. He had an inexhaustible supply of ideas and theories—some brilliantly illuminating, some hilariously off-the-wall—about music, about art, about philosophy, about life. He was an occasionally gruff and always overpowering presence who spoke with a memorably thick New York accent. Yet he wrote a music of refined, exquisite, prismatic beauty unlike any other, a music of floating tone and mesmeric harmony and gorgeous sounds, surrounded by eloquent, mysterious silences. He was a man often short of breath who wrote, in his later years, the longest-breathed phrases in all music, pieces that can go on, unbroken, for hours.

***“All I ask is that composers wash out their ears before they sit down to compose.”***

Piano and String Quartet, which was composed in 1985, two years before Feldman's death, is one of those late, otherworldly pieces. It

absorbs well over an hour's worth of time to perform even though it contains very few musical elements. The piano is devoted to isolated arpeggiated chords. The strings play primarily sustained chords. There are the occasional single notes, but in this context they sound almost like one-pitch chords. One of the major events is a five-bar stepwise motif in the cello, heard a few times around halfway through the work. The piano's sustaining pedal remains down throughout, so there is always a haze of piano resonance. The piece is written pianissimo throughout, and is most effective if played back at low volume.

***“There is a suggestion that what we hear is functional and directional, but we soon realize that this is an illusion; a bit like walking the streets of Berlin—where all the buildings look alike, even if they’re not.”***

However few and easily recognizable the elements of Piano and String Quartet, no road map of it, or more aptly star chart of it, is easily drawn; and if one could be, it would not be of much interest to the ear. This is music very carefully constructed to keep the listener always

surprised. Chords never appear the same way twice; repetitions of motives are always subtly altered in rhythm; the sonic character is always varied, if only slightly. This is music where reiteration is always changing and things that change always seem the same.

***“I prefer never knowing when you are gonna hear something, when you are gonna see something.”***

Feldman's is ultimately an art that celebrates the act of discovery, of finding and experiencing the sheer physicality of sound. He sets up an environment whereby sounds, beautifully made and realized, are allowed to be viewed from all perspectives, as if suspended in space. An individual chord, an individual pitch, a single instrumental effect can appear amplified into its own world. The first pizzicato of Piano and String Quartet, for instance, occurs near the middle of the work, and could not, by that point, seem more exotic.

***“As a teacher of composition the most important thing I can convey to the young composer is an awareness of what exactly is the material.”***

Morton Feldman was a composer always concerned with musical tradition yet always working outside it, a composer who spent his life sustaining music's mysteriousness in his composing, his essays and his teaching at the State University of New York, Buffalo. He was born in New York in 1926. His first piano teacher was Madame Maurina-Press, who had been a pupil of Busoni and friend of Scriabin, but who had little use for the profession of music. His composition courses with Stefan Wolpe, the Viennese modernist, were arguing matches.

***“Pitch is a gorgeous thing....the magic is to make sounds out of pitches.”***

Feldman met John Cage in 1949 and was immediately drawn into his circle. Describing the first time he showed Cage a piece, Feldman once wrote that Cage had asked him how he had made it. “In a very weak voice I answered John, ‘I don't know how I made it.’ The response to this was startling. John jumped up and down and, with a kind of high monkey squeal, screeched, ‘Isn't that marvelous. Isn't that wonderful. It's so beautiful, and he doesn't know how he made it.’”

***“What I am after is somewhat like Mondrian not wanting to paint bouquets, but a single flower.”***

Through Cage, Feldman met the painters and poets of the New York School in the 1950s. He found himself more attracted to the way painters worked than the way most musicians did. He became friends with Philip Guston, Franz Kline, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. “The new painting,” he wrote “made me desirous of a sound world more direct, more immediate, more physical than anything that had existed before.” He became known for his short, spare, graphically notated and indeterminate music as mystically hushed as a Rothko painting.

***“Art is a crucial, dangerous operation we perform on ourselves. Unless we take a chance, we die in art.”***

In the 1970s, Feldman began what seemed a radical change, writing fully determined pieces of very long durations. But these pieces were, in fact, a new way to better continue what he had always done in his music: break the domination of form over the immediacy of sound. “Up to an hour you think about form, but after an hour and a half, it's scale,”

Feldman explained. "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."

***"My music is hand made, so I'm like a tailor. I make my button holes by hand. The suit fits better."***

Feldman also liked to compare his long pieces to Asian rugs, for which he had a passion. Finding that the most interesting were irregular in their symmetries, he kept his patterns of chords, notes, motives or sounds carefully arranged so that their repetitions would be recognizable as repetitions, their patterns not discernible, the memory disoriented. That way the sounds, themselves, might always seem new and compelling.

***"I can't hear a note unless I know its instruments."***

Those sounds, and his profound devotion to them, became, perhaps, the glory of Feldman's late, long work. As he did with all his late music, Feldman wrote Piano and String Quartet, which was commissioned for the 1985 New Music America Festival in Los Angeles, with the aural

image of specific players. Aki Takahashi had been a dedicatee of Feldman's 1981 solo piano Triadic Memories; Kronos premiered Feldman's legendary 1983 five-hour String Quartet II, and has thus far been the only ensemble to attempt it. So relying on the crystalline clarity of Takahashi's playing and the passionate intensity of Kronos, he exploited their individual potentials: the explosive sparkling of the arpeggiated piano and its vaporous resonances vs. the tactile lushness of the string sounds. But as a long piece, Piano and String Quartet also allows the listener enough time to become sensitive to the inner worlds of these sounds, time to get to know their different and subtly varied environments, time to hear what deeper characteristic they share.

***"We [New Yorkers] are arch-modernists with no feeling whatsoever for modernity."***

The time that Feldman's pieces consume, however, has been their most daunting aspect to many harried modern listeners, dependent upon the modern world's excess of stimuli. Yet Feldman's music also comes from

an era that has witnessed a profound slowing down of music making. The Minimalists have diminished harmonic activity and rhythmic hyperactivity that had been accelerating in density through some ten centuries of Western music. Performances of traditional classical music, too, have been regularly slowing down, every aspect of their expressions amplified. And it may be no coincidence that Feldman, whose reputation has greatly increased in the years since his death, is now seen less as an extremist and anti-traditionalist than as a prophet.

—Mark Swed

Produced by Judith Sherman  
and the Kronos Quartet

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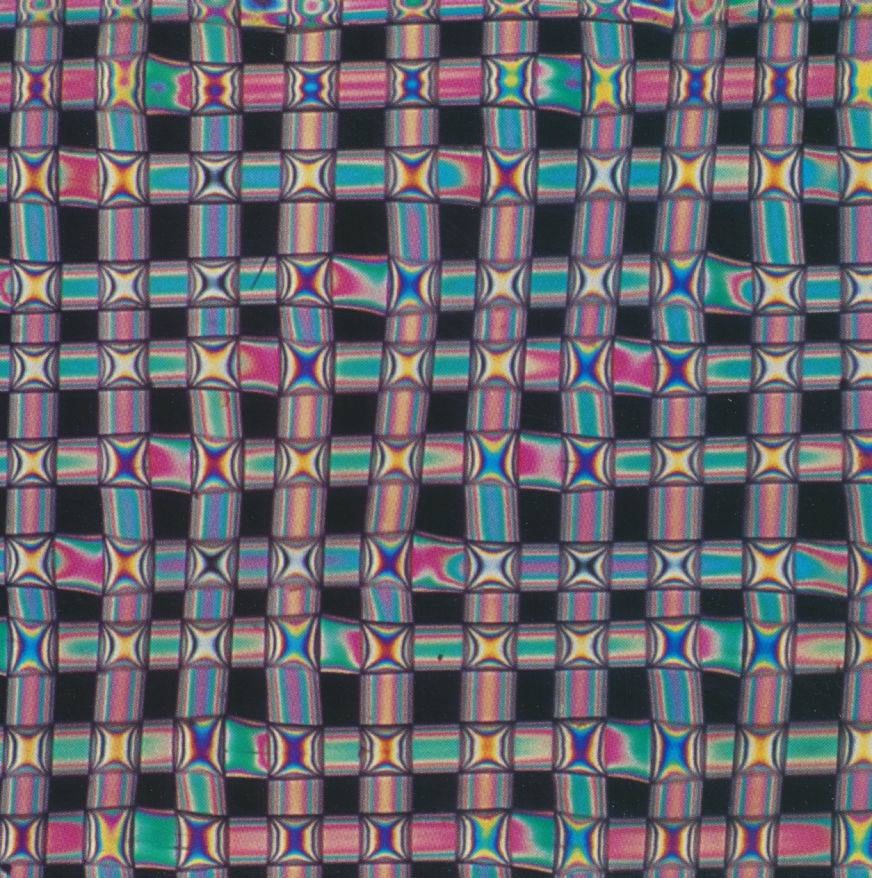




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