

**scottish
ensemble**

Tom Service on: Morton Feldman

Wednesday 4 November 2020: 19:30



Listening to Morton Feldman – an introduction from Tom

And listen we should. Really listen. Because Feldman's works are an invitation to join music in a world of proliferating sensuality, a confrontation with the quickening beauty of each musical moment. It's music that seems to respond to our attention when we give it, to live and grow and develop on the invisible membrane between this 'now' and the next.

It's only on the surface that Feldman's music seems 'quiet' or 'soft'; it's only on the surface that so many of his works seem 'long'; it's only on the surface that his music seems like it's got anything to do with a conventional 20th century 'modernism'. In fact, this garrulous New Yorker makes music of ecstatic instantaneity, even if those 'instants' can last up to 5 hours(!!!), in his *Second String Quartet*, or 4-and-a-half(!!), in *For Philip Guston*. But as he said, the problems of writing an hour-long piece are different to those of writing music that extends further in time. These pieces last longer than *Götterdämmerung*, but they are the opposite of epic. They scale the moment rather than the mountain-top; they live with you, inside you, as part of your consciousness. In fact, they change you in ways that are hallucinatingly profound: not through the triggers of easy transcendence of hypnotic repetition, the opiates of so much long-form music in our musical life today (Feldman's music only sounds as if it's repeating; in fact, nothing repeats predictably in his music; the ideas are always growing according to a logic that's just out of reach, so we're always catching up and caught unawares by the sequence of musical events - sorry for the length of that clause, hang on!) but through an invitation to truly concentrate on the immediacy on what's happening in the change from one idea to another. Feldman's pieces spread out in a network of time, which means that time is simultaneously shrunk and stretched - a paradox you'll understand when you hear all of the pieces below!...

Which, of course, you don't have to! The first playlist includes Feldman's shorter pieces, and his orchestral vision, *Coptic Light*, is a good place to start. You'll find the *Second String Quartet* and *For Philip Guston* on the subsequent playlists, along with the four most revealing hours of composers talking to one another I know, as John Cage and Feldman get together to smoke and drink and talk in New York in 1966, as well as a guide to Feldman's music I wrote a few years ago for *The Guardian*. Enjoy: and look forward to seeing you all on Wednesday!

Listening Links:

Playlist - [Feldman's Shorter Pieces](#)

Coptic Light

String Quartet and Orchestra

Piano and String Quartet

For Bunita Marcus

Crippled Symmetry

Rothko Chapel

Neither

The Longer Pieces:

[*Second String Quartet*](#)

[*For Philip Guston*](#)

Interviews:

[Feldman and John Cage in conversation, 9-7-1966:](#)

[Feldman in interview, 1987:](#)

Further Reading

Tom's [Guardian Article](#) About Morton Feldman

Morton Feldman's writings: [*Give My Regards to Eighth Street*](#) (Book)