

SCRUTINY | Feldman Festival Day Two Examines Composer's Enduring Influence

By Joshua Denenberg on September 18, 2016



Feldman Festival Day Two | Soprano Charlotte Mundy. (Photo" Courtesy Thin Edge New Music Collective/Facebook)

Thin Edge New Music Collective: Feldman Festival, Sept. 16 at Array Space.

It is always interesting when a festival, rather than programming only works by the composer it is celebrating, programs compositions by other composers. This effectively makes Thin Edge's Feldman Festival a 2-2 split of Feldman and non-Feldman. This was a well-informed decision. It shows that Feldman was not a singular composer but the progenitor of an aesthetic. It still has active torch bearers, in this case, Linda Catlin Smith and Feldman's widow Barbara Monk Feldman. Both clearly owe a lot of their respective styles to Feldman, but the ways in which they diverge is fascinating. It answers the question of "what's next?" and how to respond to a monolithic figure like Feldman.

Linda Catlin Smith's music, in her piece "Ribbon" for piano, violin, and cello (performed by the same respective players from last night), adopts Feldman's contemplative simplicity. What Catlin Smith brings that is new is an almost romantic sense of line and phrases. Obviously not in the traditional sense. The music is still fiercely fractal and sparse. But, there is this sense that there are pieces of a larger whole in constant ebb. She, Catlin Smith, describes it

as a kaleidoscopic effect. I'm inclined to agree with her description. The end result is music that, contrary to Feldman, sounds more expressive. It is more idiosyncratic to the instruments, like listening to something that is shifting in and out of focus. As opposed to the overt blockiness that much of Feldman's music employs there is a real sense of fluidity and form even if it is abstract. The trio of Cheryl Duvall (piano), Ilana Waniuk (violin), and Dobrochna Zubek (cello) sounded even more comfortable with "Ribbon" than last night's quartet, almost certainly a result of the differences in writing and scope, which led to a very strong performance. There is also a degree of developing a process that also tends to be absent from Feldman, a kind of catharsis when the originally short gestures and even single notes become fully formed and — I dare say — melodic.

Barbara Monk Feldman is by contrast more close to authentic Feldman. There is no explicit sense of process in her composition, "The Northern Shore." Once again, a simplicity of texture and technique with limited musical ideas stretched over an extended duration are front and centre. Where Monk excels is her orchestrational sense, which was especially evident after last year's opera *Pyramus and Thisbe*. The addition of pitched metal percussion, performed by Nathan Petitpas, to the duo of piano and violin adds another layer of depth. Through this, Monk creates a dialogue between the differing sounds that is often not present or even avoided in Feldman's music. Readily recognisable orchestrational technique is at play. Monk uses the violin to sustain notes that otherwise would decay on the piano. She articulates notes on the vibraphone that would otherwise be too subtle by a solo violin. These are generally common sense solutions that are employed deftly. And because there is so much synchronicity between parts, when they diverge it is a major event, all the while staying unpredictable. With Monk's abstract but largely diatonic sense of harmony, this piece sounds curiously more contemporary than strictly modernist.

While these two composers may compromise on some of Morton Feldman's aesthetic dogma, it all seems for the sake of creating something both familiar and unique.

The final composition on the festival returns us to Feldman's "Three Voices", written for solo voice (sung fantastically by Charlotte Mundy) and two pre-recorded voices. I found this composition to be difficult to understand and appreciate. A lot of what makes Feldman "Feldman" is still present. There is, however, a lot that isn't. Again, a sparseness of texture is paramount. The voice sings primarily straight tone the entire time against her own prerecorded voice. It is essentially a single sound for the entire forty-five or so minutes. However, whereas "Piano, violin, viola, and cello" employed a very strict control of ideas and repetition, "Three Voices" is almost the exact opposite. It sounds far looser. While the timbre stays largely static, there is a constant barrage of new and varied ideas presented in delineated blocks. Feldman exercises as many possible permutations of his ideas but never gives you the chance to contemplate. It becomes more complicated when Feldman moves back and forth from an abstract vocalise to full words and complete sentences (after a poem by Frank O'Hara). All of this results in a near constant barrage. As well, his clichéd setting of the word "falling" (a descending scale) seems so utterly un-Feldman like, him being a composer who is usually attempting to defy programmatic and formal expectations.

Feldman does explore the possibilities of combining the live voice against the two prerecorded voices. What was at one time sung live eventually moves into a recorded voice and vice versa and panned between the speakers. He creates genuinely convincing polyphonic, imitative, and canonic effects. However, the result sounds very similar to early minimalist compositions. In fact, while searching the original recording by Joan Le Barbara, I found her performance to be incredibly rhythmic and pulsed when compared to Charlotte's, which was by contrast more fluid. Even by 1982 standards, Feldman's usage of Stereophonics is not especially novel. I thought after sleeping on the piece I might warm to it. Instead, I have more questions. The program note explains that economics played a substantial role in the writing process. Even considering this, I still cannot dismiss that this might just be a weaker composition in Feldman's oeuvre.

My complaints aside, the Thin Edge New Music Collective deserves the highest of praise. Yes, maybe Feldman's music has not aged perfectly. How many composers or musicians over the course of history can lay claim to that? It's important to keep this music alive and present it to an audience that otherwise would never have the opportunity to hear it. Feldman is one of the more important composers of last century and the preservation of his, and similar composers', art is an important and admirable undertaking. I can safely say I'm eagerly looking forward to the rest of Thin Edge's 2016–17 season.