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To Weave Time: the Late Music of Morton Feldman
Through the Example of Violin and String Quartet

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte

There are only few analysis of Morton Feldman's (1926-1987) music, especially for his last phase (Hanninen 2004a, p.225). Combined with his language focusing on repetition and scale, his music challenges listening and analysis and requires different approaches. Here, we will concentrate on Violin and String Quartet, which is part of this last creative phase, in which he dramatically extends the duration of his music. Written in 1985, Violin and String Quartet lasts more than two hours. Two years before, the Second String Quartet went above the five hours, and one year before, For Philip Guston (1984), for flute, piano and percussions reached four hours.

Objectifs et corpus

We aim to show that:

1. Violin and String Quartet uses a strict compositional method through the use of patterns. Basically, a pattern is the content of a measure. This one is very respected, and it's only in precise part of the piece that a note is held beyond the measure bar. No modification is applied to the pattern inside the measure, and from measure to measure, the only modifications are made on the temporal alignment of the different instruments. The quaver is used as the basic unit for these modifications. Pitch are never modified inside a given pattern. As we will progress through the piece, we will see that there is different scales of patterns. From the micro level of the bar, to the medium level of the system, to the higher level of the page, to the macro level of sections that draw the form. Thanks to the well-defined construction of the patterns, Feldman uses them as the basic bricks for a combinatory method of composition : permutation, retrogradation, structuring of elements at systems and pages scale, or even visual organisation are commonly used throughout the piece.

2. Violin and String Quartet follows a formal plan. Looking at the evolution of patterns, we will observe that their repartition is far from being random and that they follow a plan. Ten patterns are used, and an introduction followed by nine sections can be deduced, each section being characterised by the use of a handful of patterns. Hence, each section is clearly identified. New patterns are introduced at each section, until section V, whose beginning happens to be at the gold number of the piece. Then, no more new patterns are introduced until the last section. This last one exposes some kind of recapitulation of the piece, as every past patterns are re-used. It has to be observed that the succession of the different patterns, and so of the different sections, makes sense and serves as a narrative path, through the use of the elementary methods of tension / release and full/void. These methods are used at all the different scales. The formal plan deduced from the patterns is coherent with other parameters such as the metric or the absence/presence of repeat bars.

3. The musical language of Feldman, the modular composition through the use of patterns, takes a strong inspiration in weaving and rugs. He was passionate about

them has spoken about the inspiration they gave him (Feldman 2008, p.336-337). Looking more precisely at the oriental rugs he was enthusiast of, we can see a clear spur in the manufacturing method itself: the weaving. Here, we see micro patterns combined to form a macro pattern, we can observe vertical and horizontal translation in the combination of the micro patterns to form a different macro pattern, or the repetition of patterns that forms sections, or micro-variations in these repetitions to make ever changing patterns, or the use of span of colours to structure the rugs, etc. As an analogy with the weaving of patterns that finally form a rug, we can see the music of Feldman as the patient weaving of time through the use of patterns. We will then see that the same produces the different.

4. Feldman uses particularities of human perception in his composition method. We think that Feldman was very aware of the theories of auditory cognition, as they appear at the same time when he starts to considerably lengthen his pieces. We listen through temporal windows: the echoic memory. The general consensus in musical cognition is that this echoic memory lasts between 2 and 6 seconds (Chevalier, Platel, Eustache 2007, p.175). Or, if we look at Violin and String Quartet, and more generally to all late music of Feldman, we see that the tempo is 63-66: combined with the 8/8 metric that occupies most of the piece, each measure (= each pattern) lasts between 3,6 and 3,8 seconds. It means that each pattern fills the echoic memory. As the patterns are repeated many times with constant variation in the temporal alignment of its elements, while the pitches remain the same, it means that during each section, the memory is filled with the same material. We understand then more clearly the words of Feldman about his wish to disorientate the memory of the listener: the micro path - the one we follow in real-time while listening to the piece - is diluted in a temporal experience. The long durations of the sections are a necessity for the lost of a local point of reference, and time is given to immerse in each pattern. It's a justification of the frequent silence at the beginning and end of the patterns: they are isolated from each other, time is given to listen to them. But at the same time, their perpetual variations maintain the attention, and the attention is not overloaded through time thanks to the simplicity of the material, its non variation inside the measure, and the slow pace. It allows the macro path (at section scale) to be readable. This is also a justification of the ppp nuance used throughout the piece, and of the harmonic playing: an effort is asked to the listener to concentrate on what he's listening, to put him in the right conditions to receive the music.

We will then see that Feldman's music is very coherent, from its concept to its sonorous realisation.

The score, its interpretation by Peter Rundel with the Pelegrini Quartet (Rundel & Pellegrini 2002), and the writings of Feldman (Feldman 2008) will be our major sources.

Méthodologie

To achieve this, an in-depth analysis of the score will first revealed the basic material of the piece (the patterns), the form and the compositional methods. Through the analysis, the piece will be progressively unwoven, putting in light the

strategies used by Feldman to maintain the interest on such duration. His passion about rugs will become very clear in the process. Then, the links with auditory perception and memory functioning will be discussed.

Apports et retombées

Using many examples, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of Feldman's music, with a method and results that can be extended to all his last phase music.

The other key consists in understanding what is imagination, not what is interesting (Feldman, in Feldman 2008, p.426).

Mots-clés

forme - langage musical - musique contemporaine - temps musical - perception

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