


Ensemble Sospeso in Three Hours of Feldman

05/01/2012 by Stan

 **United States Morton Feldman, *For Christian Wolff***: Amelia Lukas (flute), Nicholas De Maison (piano, celesta), Issue Project Room. 8.12.2011 (DS)

This wasn't the usual pre-performance talk amongst friends. We were gearing up to hear Morton Feldman's three-hour, no-intermission *For Christian Wolff* at Issue Project Room. The buzz surrounded discussions of *how* to sit through it, *would* one sit through it, or if one would freely come and go (as the performers had invited audience members to do). A few announced their determination to remain seated for the duration, well-prepared with comfortable clothes and a bottle of water. Others figured they'd see how it goes – maybe heading to the cash bar midway or even taking a stroll outside to return, refreshed.

After the audience – a full house – settled into the rugged performance space, a hush fell over as Nicholas DeMaison (piano) and Amelia Lukas (flute) of Ensemble Sospeso took their positions (wearing no shoes to facilitate comfort). Sometimes hardly moving, they slowly transformed the mood with a focused silence, effecting an ideal transition from external harried life to the Feldman's structured timetable.

With daunting stacks of sheet music before them (there would certainly be no break for the performers), the flute succinctly stated the first tone as the piano followed, tacking a note onto its tail end. The pattern developed as an interchange between leader and follower with each group of notes sounding through a diagram of brief rests, framing each tonal overlap as an individual building block. For a massively unfolding masterwork, *For Christian Wolff* has great delicacy.

Feldman always turns the listener's focus to time. In this case, time is not only an element internally inherent within the measures but makes a statement in its sheer length. Listening, one is aware not only of the plays in time signature, tempo, and experiments of rhythmic syncopation but also in a kind of stretching out of the body of music. After one hour, which goes by surprisingly quickly, a sensation begins to develop of being in the midst of hearing a fast piece spaced out slowly, leaving the daily matrix of calendar time and entering the work's reconfigured time world. By the third hour, it feels perfectly

natural to be sitting in reverie, and after 180 minutes the issue is no longer how to keep going – but how to stop.

Crucial to the success of *For Christian Wolff* is the stamina and long-term vision of the performers. Lukas and DeMaison never once let up their focus or weakened in energy. With their intricate understanding, they crystallized each detail yet maintained a steady momentum; their sense of extended phrasing helped thread the parts together into an organic whole. But the audience was also essential in realizing Feldman’s concept. At Issue Project Room, individual listeners morphed into one concentrated listening behemoth, with not a sound – barely a rustle – and scarcely a thought of leaving the room.

Daniele Sahr

Daniele Sahr is a New York City-based writer and art historian.

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