

Triadic Memories is the second of four solo piano works that Morton Feldman (1926-87) wrote during the last decade of his too-short life. The first, *Piano* (1977), is a densely abstract work, opening a creative portal through which Feldman chose not to go. *Triadic Memories* (1981) and *For Bunita Marcus* (1984) followed, each well over an hour long, part of a deliberate attempt by Feldman to expand the temporal frame of his music. Finally came the luminous *Palais de Mari* (1986), briefer – about twenty-five minutes – a distillation of Feldman’s art.

The piano was at the centre of Feldman’s musical world. Even when he was writing for other instruments he would work at the piano because, as he said in a 1975 interview that appears in Walter Zimmermann’s book *Desert Plants*, ‘it slows me down and you can hear the time element much more, the acoustical reality.’ Perhaps more than any of his other piano music *Triadic Memories* is about that reality, the acoustic space created by the piano’s strings and soundboard, and in Judith Wegmann’s recording that space is within a magnificent Bösendorfer 280VC piano.

In the score Feldman instructs that the piano’s sustaining pedal should be held halfway down throughout the piece, as if the resonance of the instrument is intended to become a means of remembering the music. For a performance in Buffalo on 18th March 1982 Feldman explained the use of the pedal to the audience, joking that he didn’t want them to think that the pianist, Aki Takahashi (the work’s co-dedicatée, with Roger Woodward), was ‘one of those pianists that never take the pedal off’. Instead, he said, his intention was to create a sort of musical ‘gesso’, like the ground with which painters prime their canvasses. Specifically, Feldman was thinking of the way that Cy Twombly would scratch graffiti-like markings into a gesso ‘where the tint changed ever so slightly.’ Feldman wanted a tonal ground and took the idea of ‘a little gesso’ from Twombly, making music that, as he put it, is ‘on this very precarious gesso smudge, so to speak.’

A ‘gesso’, a ‘smudge’, a ‘memory’; so why ‘Triadic Memories’? Perhaps it has something to do with Feldman’s preoccupation with his position in music history. By the early 1980s the minimalist composers, especially Steve Reich and Philip Glass, had become the most fashionable figures in new music, displacing Feldman and John Cage from the centre of the downtown New York scene, and Feldman was aware of this. In a 1980 interview with Cole Gagne and Tracy Garas he told them that ‘if you think I can sit down and write a piece and not be worried about Steve Reich, you’re nuts. I worry about these people. I worry about strong alternatives. It *is* a contest.’ Two years later, in a lecture in Toronto, he was talking about the competition again: ‘I never really thought that I was gonna bring back a diatonic pattern. I’m not Phil Glass.’

Yet there, right at the beginning of *Triadic Memories* is a ‘diatonic pattern’: a G minor triad, the G and B flat high in the right hand, the D deep in bass. But because Feldman is Feldman, and not just a contestant, he smudges the triad, blurring the G with an A and a G sharp, the D with a C sharp. And, because this is music about the piano, he slowly moves the pattern across the entire range of the keyboard, drawing the hands together and then parting them again. Less than four minutes into Judith Wegmann’s performance not only have we heard the ‘acoustical reality’ of the instrument but we have also lost any sense of a diatonic pattern.

There is repetition too, but this is not the minimalist repetition of Glass and Reich, in which patterns accumulate to articulate architectonic forms. Instead in *Triadic Memories* Feldman will repeat a short figure because he wants to hear it again, to hear how it sounds in its own resonance; or he will transpose it into a different octave to hear how it changes in a new register of the piano; or he will minutely vary the rhythms of the figure, to hear the effect of time on harmony. Once he has heard enough he moves on. In a lecture in Darmstadt in 1984 in which he was mostly talking about his Second String Quartet he said three things that could equally apply to *Triadic Memories*. How does one thing lead to another in this music? 'I'm doing it one way, and then I'm doing it another way, with a different kind of focus.' And why does the music go on? 'I don't have an anxiety that I've got to stop.' Most tellingly, 'my music is handmade': there is no system, only listening.

'Triadic' music that is not triadic; 'memories' (repetitions) that are not memories. This is a contradictory music in which nothing is quite as we remember it, music whose only subject is its resonance, first in the piano and then in our consciousness.

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