Liberation Through Postmodernist Thought in the Music of Morton Feldman

Tyler Shaver
Saint Ignatius College Prep, USA

“My desire was not to compose, but to project sounds into time, free from compositional rhetoric”

- Feldman, Morton. 1985. Morton Feldman essays. Edited by W. Zimmerman. Hanover: Frog Peak.

ABSTRACT

Morton Feldman has often been characterized by his lack of motific, rhythmic, or textural development. Because of this, Morton Feldman has been a composer hard to analyze. Some even argue that Feldman cannot be analyzed. However, there are similarities between the compositional process and aesthetics of Morton Feldman’s music and the French Postmodern philosophy. Both share themes of ambiguity, skepticism, paradox, and abstraction. Thus, postmodern philosophy can be used as a tool to analyze Morton Feldman’s compositions. By engaging with Postmodern philosophy, this paper seeks to recontextualize the ambiguous music of Morton Feldman. In doing so, this paper uncovers the intricacies within Morton Feldman’s music and their connection to the broader philosophical and musical landscape during the late 20th century.

Introduction

In the mid-late 20th century, composers relentlessly broke rules of harmony, melody, and rhythm that had been constructed since the Renaissance era. Serialists attempted to serialize every parameter to music, emphasizing form. Soundmass composers such as Xenakis or Ligeti emphasized timbre. Morton Feldman’s group, the “Downtown” music scene in New York, consisted of chance and influences from all types of sound. Downtown composers were notoriously bizarre, being unable to conform to both European classical and popular music. Because of this, the music can seem random and unanalyzable.

Meanwhile, in France, postmodern philosophy sprouted from the horrors of both communism and capitalism. America, a capitalist democracy, was committing atrocities in southeast Asia against Vietnam. Meanwhile, the USSR, a totalitarian communist regime, was committing atrocities inside gulags against its citizens. Postmodern ideas began to attack the metanarratives that produced both atrocities, favoring highly abstract, unpragmatic, and uncompromisingly critical ideas.

While there is no proof that the Downtown music scene and postmodern philosophy were aware of each other's existence, both movements have many similarities. Morton Feldman’s music and postmodern philosophy are mutually related and can be used to recontextualize each other. Specifically, postmodern philosophy can be used as a tool to analyze the abstract music of Morton Feldman. Analyzing Morton Feldman's music alongside postmodern philosophy reveals an intersection characterized by their shared rejection of objective structures and hierarchies. Paradoxical notation, repetition, and the dissolution of traditional boundaries within Feldman's works exemplify key aspects of postmodern thinking. This challenges established narratives of music composition and performance, freeing sound from conventional constraints. Feldman's compositions embody postmodern ideals that break boundaries, transcend musical categorization, and explore the possibilities of how people interact with music, freeing sound from compositional rhetoric.

Morton Feldman

Morton Feldman (1926-87) was an abstract expressionist and groundbreaking composer from Woodside Queens (Ross). He was a smoking, womanizing, brusque man who claimed to have taken more inspiration from painting than sound (Kissane et al 7). Feldman was not afraid to voice his own opinion which often antagonized his colleagues. In his writings, Feldman relays a message that composers must learn from painters: "Everything we use to make art is precisely what kills it." Furthermore, Feldman refers to the academic focus on old music as a "voodoo tradition" (Gann). He is often paradoxical and contradictory. In one breath Feldman remarks, "I wanted sounds to be a metaphor, that they could be as free as a human being might be free", and in another Feldman growls, "I added another link to the chain, and they called it 'freedom' (Zimmerman 5). This may be because Feldman did not feel represented in the musical world, and is bothered by the intense focus on 19th-century Germanic compositions. He often noted, "I want to be the first great composer that is Jewish" (1).

He has always felt a strong connection between art and music. This does not come as a surprise, as Morton Feldman has been connected with visual arts since the beginning of his compositional career. His first composition teacher, Stefan Wolpe, once told young Feldman that his music that everyone should be able to appreciate his music. "What about the man on the street?", Stefan remarked. That man crossing the street was Jackson Pollock (Ross). Years later, Morton Feldman would find his crowd at Carnegie Hall where Mitropoulos conducted Webern's *Symphony Op. 21* and Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*. During the intermission between the two pieces, Feldman leaves the hall, disinterested in the romantic music playing next. While leaving, Feldman runs into John Cage leaving for the same reason (Ross). They strike up a conversation, and soon Morton Feldman is introduced to Earle Brown, David Tudor, and Christian Wolff (Morton Feldman and Abstract Expressionism). These men gave Morton Feldman the courage to drop everything and write the music he wanted to write. These five men began turning music upside down. In Feldman's words, "What was great about the fifties is that for one brief moment—maybe, says, six weeks—nobody understood art" (Ross).

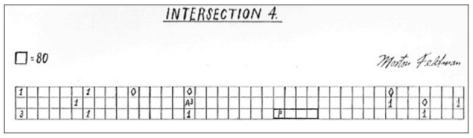

Figure 1. Feldman, Morton. Intersection 4. 1953. Morton Feldman, 1953.

Throughout this period, Morton Feldman began experimenting with different styles of notation. A few years earlier, composers including Earle Brown and Krzysztof Penderecki began experimenting with alternative ways to notate, but it was Morton Feldman who was the first one to produce an entirely original form of notation (Lewis, pg. 29). This form of notation was grid-like, creating indeterminacy and forcing musicians to rely on their musical intuition. While Feldman experimented with this starting in 1950, a matured version is found in his piece *Intersection 4* (1953) for solo cello.

Figure 2. Rothko, Mark. *Orange and Yellow*. 1956. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.

These early pieces are still, percussive, and maintain a breathy quality as sounds pause periodically. Furthermore, the grid notation itself creates a still and blank atmosphere because of its neat and organized layout. This new notation is influenced by Feldman's attraction to painting. One of Feldman's friends, Mark Rothko, also began painting rough boxes containing different shades of color (Goldstein 5). The complementing colors and organized boxes create the same atmosphere that Feldman's early graphic notation created. Feldman even cites a direct connection between these paintings and his work, "The new painting made me desirous of a sound world more direct, more immediate, more physical than anything that had existed heretofore (2). Feldman began to avoid graphic notation after *Intersection 4*, as it only approached his goal in music: "After several years of writing graph music I began to discover its most important flaw. I was not only allowing the sounds to be free — I was also liberating the performer," (Zimmerman, pg. 19).

Feldman's journey of liberating sound from the performer and focusing on sounds of themselves put him in a predicament. As noted previously, indeterminacy liberates the performer, who still holds control of sound. Regularly notated music, while controlling the performer, does not free sound. While forced to face this question, Feldman became interested in nomadic rugs (Molly & Paul Paccione). Feldman describes these rugs as changing his perspective, "Rugs have made me question notations I previously held on what is symmetrical and what is not. In the Anatolian village and nomadic rugs, there appears to be considerably less concern with the accuracy of the mirror image than in most other rug production areas. The detail of the Anatolian symmetrical image was never mechanical, as I had expected, but idiomatically drawn," (Zimmerman 35). Feldman found his answer and began evolving into his later style.

Feldman's late period was infamous for unchanging pieces that dragged on for hours. Most infamously, his *String Quartet II* is six hours long. Furthermore, these pieces are quiet and still. The dynamics of instruments rarely exceed pianissimo. The motifs in his pieces don't develop in the traditional sense. While ideas repeat with microscopic changes, they never go anywhere. Feldman simply changes to a different idea when he sees fit. Feldman finds beauty in this, remarking, "I find that as the piece gets longer, there has to be less material. That the piece itself, strangely enough, cannot take it… I don't have any anxiety that I've got to stop. But there's less going into it, so I think the piece dies a natural death. It dies of old age," (Zimmerman 55).

Feldman's later period occurred from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. In the late 1950s, the period directly before Feldman's late period, composers attempted to break previous ideas surrounding classical music. This period is known as the Avant-Garde period. One of the most infamous composers during this period, Lachenmann, remarks about the musical atmosphere during this time: "… I defined "beauty" as 'rejection of habit'," (Lachenmann 97). Composers rejected conventional pieces to create unique soundscapes. Morton Feldman's music can be seen as an extension of this trend. By using long durations and repetitive figures without development, Feldman rejects previous forms that composers used to shape pieces of music.

But Feldman's music also stands out during this time as well. Other composers aggressively pushed music's boundaries through extended techniques that forced listeners to listen in a new way. Feldman's unconventionality is much more gentle and subtle. Feldman was a minimalist without being a Minimalist, an experimentalist without being an Experimentalist, an avant-gardist without being an Avant-Gardist.

Postmodernism

"That postmodernism is indefinable is a truism" (Aylesworth). At its core, postmodernism can be seen as an extension of nihilism, rejecting the existence of absolute truths or objectivity in the world. Instead, it focuses on analyzing the world through underlying structures, which are open-ended and subjective, intentionally avoiding any grand determinations. These subjective structures often defy conventional logic and can be explained paradoxically, offering a more accurate representation of the intricate nature of reality. The genesis of postmodernism can be traced back to a tumultuous period in modern history, where the ideologies that led to devastating world wars persisted and were further exacerbated during the Cold War. In this context, postmodernists view the world with skepticism, leading to their tendency for ruthless critiques and anti-institutional ideals.

A key figure in the emergence of postmodern thought is Jean-François Lyotard, often considered the founder of postmodernity for coining the term "postmodern" in his influential work, "The Postmodern Condition." Lyotard's critique centers on metanarratives, which are grand ideologies that seek to explain the world comprehensively and legitimize human actions. While some metanarratives, like religion, may seem benign, others, like Nazism, have had disastrous consequences, as they provide legitimacy for institutions to perpetrate atrocities (Lyotard pg. 75). Lyotard's skepticism extends to the realm of knowledge, arguing that science, once predominantly philosophical and open to verbal discussion, gradually legitimized itself by subscribing to a common metanarrative. However, the advent of computer technology raises concerns about the democratization of knowledge, as governments may control access, leading to elitism and exclusivity. Capitalism's influence may also twist knowledge for profit, deviating from its pursuit of truth. Lyotard's insights emphasize the interconnectedness of knowledge and society, fueling the postmodern movement in philosophy.

Building on Lyotard's ideas, Michel Foucault presents his theory of power, positing that power is omnipresent and exerted through knowledge (Gaventa). Rather than viewing power as wielded solely by individuals or institutions, Foucault sees it as a collective force. In his exploration of the History of Sexuality, Foucault illustrates how knowledge categorizes sex into "licit" and "illicit," leading to the repression of certain behaviors and the imposition of conformity (Foucault *History of Sexuality* pg. 24-25). People become both prisoners and wardens within the walls of collective knowledge, perpetuating societal norms and hierarchies (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* pg. 201-203). Social media serves as a contemporary example of collective power, where individuals conform to fabricated ideal versions of themselves to meet societal expectations. Institutions harness collective knowledge to maintain dominance over others, evident in the historical mistreatment of the mentally ill, where specialized knowledge promoted ostracization and inhumane treatment (Foucault *Madness and Civilization* pg. 217-218). Foucault's insights underscore the indirect exercise of power through the manipulation of knowledge.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari built upon Foucault's rejection of the conventional treatment of the mentally ill. They inquire into why the schizophrenic's thinking differs from neurotypical thinking rather than criticizing it for non-conformity (Van der Wielen J pg.1-2). Society's boundaries between mind, body, body politic, and historical periods limit creativity, while the schizophrenic fluidly moves between these boundaries, fostering enhanced creativity (Deleuze, Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus* pg. 341). German Judge Schreber serves as an example of the schizophrenic's thinking, as he describes living without a stomach and even entertaining thoughts of having a "Jew's stomach" (Schreber pg. 133-134). Deleuze and Guattari employ the metaphor of the "Body without Organs" to symbolize a mindset free from limiting boundaries. This rhizomatic thinking rejects the hierarchical organization found in representational thinking and supports the schizophrenic's unorthodox way of thinking. By liberating thoughts from categorization, rhizomatic thinking encourages creativity and demolishes conventional mental constructs. Deleuze is interested in new ways of thinking because he is obsessed with the new and the act of

creating. His theories surrounding “becoming,” the constant process of transformation, find prevalence in Morton Feldman’s music. Deleuze believes that new is created by “difference,” the potential of transformation that everything has, and “repetition”, repeating something over again. This is because no repetition is the same, and the minute variations within every repeated action are what realize an object's potential for transformation (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* pg. 4-5).

Jacques Derrida focuses on deconstruction to challenge binary oppositions in language. He demonstrates how words like "life" and "death" are not opposites but intrinsically intertwined, with life reliant on death, and vice versa. Language's inherent instability and subjectivity lead to varying meanings based on context, rendering it hierarchical and malleable. This understanding emerges from Derrida's exploration of "arche-writing," the concept he introduces in his work "Of Grammatology." Arche-writing is a form of communication that incorporates all forms of representation including alphabetic scripts, images, symbols, and spoken language (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* pg. 56-57; Reynolds). Derrida uses arche-writing to make an argument that written text is just as important as spoken words and conceptual thoughts. Derrida critiques the use of binary oppositions in institutions where subjective meanings are disguised as objective truths. Deconstruction reveals the subjective nature of language and the multiplicity of interpretations that emerge from a single text. Derrida also dismantles Plato's World of Forms, arguing that the hierarchical relationship between signifiers and signifieds is yet another subjective binary (Derrida, *Dissemination* pg. 6). Instead, he introduces the concept of "différance," emphasizing that meaning arises from the interconnectedness of words. This aligns with rhizomatic thinking, as signifiers are not confined to hierarchies but interconnected in a network of meaning.

Morton Feldman and Postmodernism

There are many similarities between Morton Feldman’s compositional practices and postmodern thinking. One is the rejection of objective structure in music. Similar to postmodernism's rejection of structuralist thinking from Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and others, Feldman can also be seen as a rejection of serialism headed by Boulez, Stockhausen, Babbitt, and the hyper-organization of sound. For example, Morton Feldman incorporates asymmetrical and decentralized logic in his piano miniatures (Borio pg. 3).

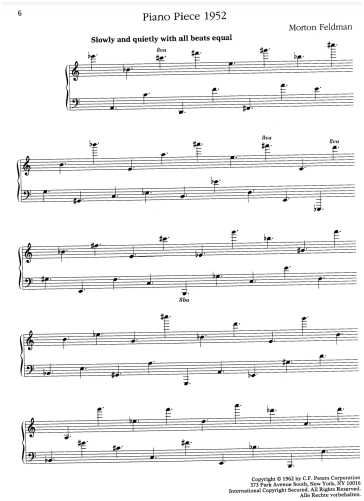

Figure 3. Feldman, Morton. Piano Piece 1952. 1952. C.F. Peters Corporation, 1962.

The first note is a high Eb, then low A, middle Bb, middle C, high C#, low D, high F#, middle F, high E, etc. The only consistency in this piece is the alternation between playing notes with right and left hands quietly and equal in length as stated where the tempo mark would be. Because of the extreme register and pitch shifts, the piece appears to be inconsistent. This extreme shifting continues throughout the piece for 8 minutes. There is no

development or coherent structure. Through this, Feldman avoids the binaries found within music. He rejects tension and release, consonance and dissonance, harmony and melody, motif A and motif B. Feldman attacks the hierarchies of tonality and form. In this sense, Feldman becomes anti-institutional by attacking the rigid and deterministic serialist practices found in academia at the time. There is a correlation between the philosophy of Michel Foucault and the compositional practices of Morton Feldman. Both attack categorical generalizations (insane and sane, tension and release). There is also a connection between Feldman and Lyotard. At the time, there were huge narratives regarding serialism and the future of music. Schoenberg believed that serialism was the future of all music and that he was following the lineage of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms. Connelly says, "Schoenberg was convinced that atonality was the future of music; that one-day "grocers' boys would whistle serial music on their rounds"' (Connelly). As seen in Feldman's music, he rejects the serialist narrative surrounding music.

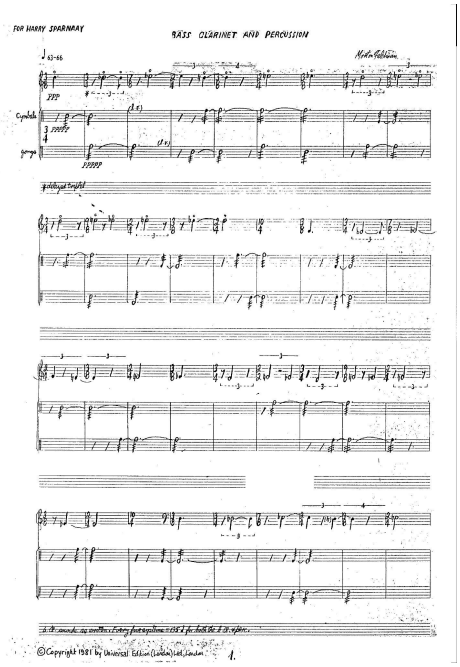

Figure 4. Feldman, Morton. Bass Clarinet and Percussion. 1981. Universal Editions, 1981.

Derrida's ideas can be found in Morton Feldman's piece *Bass Clarinet and Percussion* as well. In this piece, Feldman uses a wide variety of paradoxical techniques to disconnect the performer from the music. Most notably, Feldman layers different time signatures on top of each other, yet continues his grid-like barlines. A 3/8 measure appears to be the same length as a 3/4. When following along with the score, what is seen is not what is heard. They are separate entities in this sense.

Furthermore, Feldman gives the bass clarinetist paradoxical instructions, asking the performer to play alternative fingerings at an extremely high register in *ppp*. Feldman also includes an asterisk and a dotted line to indicate "delayed triplet." But Feldman never specifies what a delayed triplet is anywhere in the score. It is left up to the performer's subjective interpretation, a Derridian idea. Even in a paper published by Mariano Etkin, where he specifically explains what is meant by a "delayed triplet", Etkin emphasizes that "This rewrite… destroys the composer's intent. The Feldman notation is more a representation of the sound result than an encoded guide for execution, making it closer to the composer than the interpreter," (Etkin pg. 3). As specified before, Feldman felt that the visual aspect of scoring music was as important as the sound itself. In a world where sound is emphasized more than physical score (which is deemed as a mere set of instructions), Feldman further sides with Derrida in arguing that text (or score) is as important as spoken word (or sound). Interestingly, both Derrida and Feldman use the same method to make the same claim. They both make different semiotics, whether it be "différance" or "delayed triplet", use convoluted methods of communication, and forcing the audience to come up with different interpretations by making instructions extremely complex and paradoxical. Ironically, I see a similarity between the

music of Morton Feldman and Brian Ferneyhough. By making instructions extremely detailed (in Ferneyhough's case) or paradoxical (in Feldman's case), the composer gives the performer freedom to choose what to interpret and how.

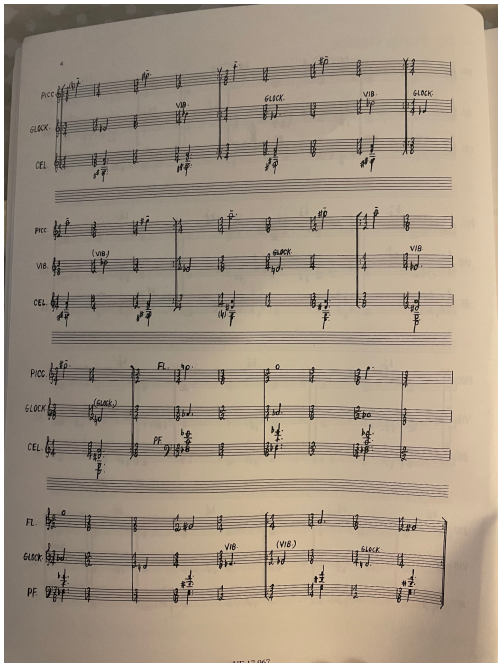

Figure 5. Feldman, Morton. For Philip Guston. 1984. Universal Editions, 1984.

This paradoxical notation can also be interpreted in the Deleuzian sense of blurring boundaries between harmony, rhythm, and timbre as well as the difference between physical score and phenomenological sound. These pieces are schizophrenic, meaning that they are free and liberated from the categories and expectations of music. They are rhizomes that expand without concrete structure through repetition. Take the 4-hour long piece *For Philip Guston*. Feldman uses the sounds of flutes, mallet instruments and chimes, and keyboards as material for the entire piece. As seen in the photo, Feldman has an idea and repeats it, making minuscule changes in rhythm or instrumentation. The piece slowly morphs in an unstructured fashion. The only thing connecting this mass of sound is the slow transformation from one thought to another.

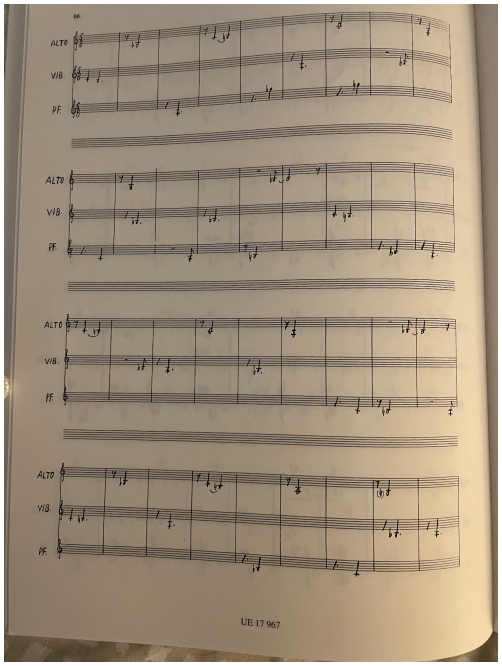

Figure 6. Feldman, Morton. For Philip Guston. 1984. Universal Editions, 1984.

On pg. 4, notice the repeating barlines between groups of measures which further emphasize repetition. Because of the multimetrics, it will not feel like an exact repetition, and further blur the line between one group and another. It is the realization of Deleuzian thinking in music. After a while, as seen on pg. 66, Feldman will unexpectedly change to a completely new idea. Further along in *For Philip Guston*, Feldman begins holding back sound. This is near the end of the 4 hours, while the audience is forced into a mesmerized state. This section feels as if the piece is composed of silence, and the noise produced by instruments interrupts it. Because of the extremely long sections, it doesn't feel like a juxtaposition between the more active section and the more spacious section. When Feldman returns to the more active section, there is barely any development. The only arguable development is the memory one had of when this section was played previously. There is no gradual change or linear trajectory, only a recurrence.

Conclusion

Morton Feldman's music is groundbreaking. During a time when music was extremely academic, mathematical, and modernist, Feldman stood as a figure who proved that a future of music existed that wasn't serial or a retrogression into previous practices. Whether Feldman was aware of this or not, his music is the embodiment of postmodern thinking. He used the same techniques and methods to convey the same ideas expressed through different media. Feldman employs paradoxical notation and extreme repetition, and lacks conventional development and meaning. Feldman challenges his audience and performers uniquely and originally.

The impact of Morton Feldman's music on American contemporary music is incontestable. Minimalists such as Phillip Glass and Steve Reich are directly influenced by the repetition and mesmerizing effect of Feldman's music. This trajectory continues into the modern day, with Postminimalist composers like John Luther Adams exploring spacious, slow-moving soundscapes that are reminiscent of the lingering sounds found in Feldman's pieces. Feldman also fits in the broader movement of using notation as art itself and discovering new ways to use notation to connect with a performer. This can be found in the aforementioned music of Brian Ferneyhough, but also in Pauline Oliveros's *Sonic Meditations* and George Crumb's *Black Angels* or *Makrokosmos I & II*. Feldman successfully liberated music from boundaries and categories. It transcended the narratives of what it looked like to

compose and listen to music at its time. Feldman achieved his goal–to project time into sound, free from compositional rhetoric.

References

Feldman, Morton. 1985. Morton Feldman essays. Edited by W. Zimmerman. Hanover: Frog Peak.

Ross, Alex. “American Sublime.” *The New Yorker*, 12 June 2006, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/06/19/american-sublime.

Kissane, Seán, and Morton Feldman. *Vertical Thoughts: Morton Feldman and the Visual Arts*. Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2010.

Gann, Kyle. “Kyle Gann on the Writings of Morton Feldman.” *The Online Edition of Artforum International Magazine*, 30 Nov. 1BC, www.artforum.com/print/200102/the-writings-of-morton-feldman-31769.

Lewis, Kevin. “A Historical and Analytical Examination of Graphic Systems of Notation in Twentieth-Century Music.” *Academia.Edu*, etd.ohiolink.edu, 31 May 2014, www.academia.edu/3353963/A_Historical_and_Analytical_Examination_of_Graphic_Systems_of_Notation_in_Twentieth_Century_Music.

Goldstein, Louis. “Morton Feldman and the Shape of Time.” *Morton Feldman and The Shape of Time by Louis Goldstein*, 199AD, www.cnvill.net/mfgldstn.htm.

Paccione, Molly, and Paul Paccione. “Did Modernism Fail Morton Feldman?” Ex Tempore: A Journal of Compositional and Theoretical Research in Music, vol. 6/1, 1992, pp. 13–21.

Helmut Lachenmann (1995): On structuralism, Contemporary Music Review, 12:1, 93-102

Aylesworth, Gary, "Postmodernism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2015 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/postmodernism/>

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. University of Minnesota, 1997.

Gaventa, Jonathan. “Foucault: Power Is Everywhere.” *Understanding Power for Social Change Powercubenet IDS at Sussex University Foucault Power Is Everywhere Comments*, 2003, www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/foucault-power-is-everywhere/.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Penguin Books, 2020.

Foucault, Michel, 1926-1984. Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

Foucault, Michel. Madness and Civilization. Vintage Books, 2006.

Van der Wielen J. Living the intensive order: Common sense and schizophrenia in Deleuze and Guattari. Nurs Philos. 2018 Oct;19(4):e12226. doi: 10.1111/nup.12226. Epub 2018 Sep 21. PMID: 30239115; PMCID: PMC6175004.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Schreber, Daniel Paul. *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. New York Review, 2001.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Translated by Paul Patton, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.

Derrida, Jacques, et al. *Of Grammatology*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

Reynolds, Jack. "Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2023, iep.utm.edu/jacques-derrida/#:~:text=Arche%2Dwriting%20refers%20to%20a,the%20notion%20of%20self%2Dpresence.

Derrida, Jacques, and Barbara Johnson. *Dissemination*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Feldman, Morton, et al. "Morton Feldman and Abstract Expressionism Time and sound construction in his piano miniatures of the 1950s and 1960s by Gianmario Borio (English translation by Francesco Sani)." (2009).

Connelly, Charlie. "Arnold Schoenberg: The Father of Atonal Music Who Feared the Number 13." *The New European*, 8 July 2022, www.theneweuropean.co.uk/arnold-schoenberg-the-father-of-atonal-music-who-feared-the-number-13/.