

Morton Feldman

Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello

live at soundsofmusic festival

Nieuw Amsterdams Peil

Emma Breedveld violin

Heleen Hulst viola

Mick Stirling cello

Gerard Bouwhuis piano

About the album

An hour and fifteen minutes is long for a piano quartet, but it pales in comparison to the nearly five hours of *Crippled Symmetry* and the six hours of the *Second String Quartet*. Morton Feldman (1926-1987) is renowned for compositions that are simultaneously the longest, softest, and slowest.

Feldman completed his piano quartet, which is not actually titled as such but rather *Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello*, on May 28, 1987. He could not have foreseen that this would be his last work. A few days later, during a routine treatment for a stomach ulcer, the composer was diagnosed with an aggressive form of pancreatic cancer. Just over a month and a round of chemotherapy later, on July 4, the work was premiered in the composer's presence at the Eleventh Festival of New Music in Middelburg, a Dutch provincial town that became an international hotbed for new music for a few weeks each year during the seventies and eighties. Feldman dedicated the work to Ad van 't Veer, the driving force behind the festival.

Feldman visited Middelburg for the fifth time. Despite his declining health, he upheld his custom of engaging in extensive, public discussions with fellow composers (some sessions can be found on YouTube) and delivering some of his legendary lectures, which rivaled his music in length. These were labyrinthine improvisations, infinitely branching thoughts on music, art, history, humanity, and the world, tentatively formulated in elliptical sentences. Those who have heard the composer speak or have read his documented monologues believe they understand his music better.

"I'm very *into* acoustical reality. For me there is no such thing as compositional reality."

"...something that is beautiful is made in isolation."

"I think the piece dies a natural death. It dies of old age."

"Let sounds be themselves" was John Cage's compositional motto, and as late

as 1976 Feldman, decidedly influenced by Cage in the 1950s, echoed him: "For me at least sound was the hero, and it still is." Despite the vast differences between his early and late music, the premise remains the same: sound (and non-sound: silence) comes before all else, only then do form, technique, and rules enter. It is a distinctly non-European and even anti European approach. While compositional formalism prevailed in post-war European serialism, American experimental music gave precedence to sonic material. In this fixation on matter over form lies a parallel with painting, particularly American abstract expressionism. It is no coincidence that Feldman learned as much from the visual arts as from music. The painter Philip Guston was his best friend (For Philip Guston is the title of a four-hour-long trio), and for many years, he could be found every evening at the Cedar Bar in New York, a meeting place for artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and indeed Philip Guston.

"Beyond an hour length becomes scale."

In Feldman's later works, something strange happens with time. It ceases to flow and seems to come to a standstill in an endless moment, like a butterfly trapped in amber. Present, past, and future appear interchangeable, with time in a perpetual loop. There is no longer any dynamic form, no arc; there is only a-dynamic duration. The question even arises whether, in this imperturbably uniform universe, where things constantly remain just slightly different yet the same (and vice versa), a piece lasting six hours is fundamentally longer than a piece of an hour and fifteen minutes. A work like *Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello* can be listened to with equal justification as music fully zoomed out or zoomed in on the smallest detail. Does one tune into the larger whole or into the present moment, or both simultaneously? Is it a matter of sinking into the unchanging slow heartbeat of the music and shuttling between immersion and hyper-focus?

Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello is an even yet subtly nuanced sonic tapestry, unfolding measure by measure for the listener, in an unchanging tempo (which is barely a tempo) and with an unchanging pulse (which hardly feels like a pulse). The music

is varied in its uniformity and uniform in its variety: from a distance it essentially seems the same, but heard up close, it is always just slightly different. If there is any system at play, it is well hidden. Some melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic motifs appear and disappear again, others keep returning, preferably untransposed, sometimes in a slightly altered form. Since the music is fundamentally chordal – with the piano and strings consistently alternating – the rare melodic motifs stand out. Salient examples include a rising figure in dotted eighths (first at 6:42: A \flat -G \flat -E \flat -E) and two sighing minor seconds, which – unintentionally? – recall the beginning of Debussy's prelude *Des pas sur la neige* (first at 17:55: F-G \flat , E \flat -F \flat). In such an a-dynamic musical landscape, the most seemingly inconsequential changes can take on the character of a major event. Notice the very first rhythmic motif of repeated notes and chords (39:46 – 41:36), the very first arpeggio (56:34), the very first pizzicato (1:00:50). The four-note chromatic figure with which the piece ends (B \flat -B-C-D \flat) has sounded only twice before and seems to have a future. But that is an illusion. It has been enough. Here the music ends. No, it doesn't end, it simply gives up—"dies of old age."

Two months after the premiere of *Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello*, on 3 September 1987, Morton Feldman died at the age of 61 in his hometown of Buffalo, New York.

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Translation: Monica Germino





Nieuw Amsterdams Peil

Nieuw Amsterdams Peil (NAP) is a collective, formed by violinist Heleen Hulst and pianist Gerard Bouwhuis in 2005. The group of several like-minded musicians strive to open our ears to the diversity and richness of chamber music by composers of widely divergent musical trends, with a particular emphasis on the 20th and 21st-century repertoire. In addition to their concerts of instrumental music, NAP produces regularly music theater productions in which commissions are given to Dutch composers.

Musicians

Emma Breedveld violin

Heleen Hulst viola

Mick Stirling cello

Gerard Bouwhuis piano

www.nieuwamsterdamspeil.com





In the heart of what we do lies a simple truth: music should be felt as much as heard. Our label is founded on the idea that the purest form of listening replicates the magic of a live performance. It's not about grandeur; it's about authenticity, about capturing the essence of the moment when music comes alive.

With each recording, we try to craft an auditory journey, where the walls of your listening space dissolve to reveal the vaulted grandeur of a concert hall, the sacred quiet of a church, or the intimate warmth of a studio. Our role is that of a careful curator — we blend into the background, allowing the artists and the space to speak through the music.

We choose artists who resonate with this philosophy: musicians who inspire us not just with their talent, but with their drive to push boundaries whilst maintaining a heartfelt connection to their audience. It's this balance that guides our collaborations and helps us fulfill our pledge to bring forth recordings that honour the integrity of high fidelity sound, and the essence of musical storytelling.

At TRPTK, we quietly step back and let artistry take the spotlight. We're here to capture rather than enhance, and to deliver not just the sound, but the very soul of the music to you.

A handwritten signature in dark red ink that reads 'Brandon Heintz'.

founder & senior recording and mastering engineer

Equipment used on this recording

Microphones

Josephson C617 with Microtech Gefell MK221 capsules *main mics*

Josephson C42 *height mics*

Microphone preamplifiers

Grace Design m801mk2

AD/DA conversion (11.2MHz 1bit)

Merging Technologies Hapi mkII

Merging Technologies Anubis

Grimm Audio CC2 *master clock*

Weiss Engineering Saracon *samplerate converter*

Monitoring

Grimm Audio LS1be *main loudspeakers*

Grimm Audio SB1 *subwoofers*

KEF LS50 Meta *height loudspeakers*

Hegel C55 *amplifier*

Cabling

Purecable Optimus Link *microphone cables*

Purecable Optimus Power *power cables*

Grimm Audio TPR XLR *microphone cables*

Grimm Audio TPR8 *breakout cables*

Tuning

Pura Power Supplies the Dodo *linear power supply*

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Pura Power Supplies the Nautilus *power distributor*

Computer Audio Design GC3 *ground conditioner*

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Recording & mastering engineer **Brendon Heinst**

Assistant recording engineer **Antal van Nie**

Editor **Hans Erblich**

Artwork **Francesca Patella**

Liner notes **Elmer Schönberger**

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