

# Morton Feldman's *The Kitchen* Instruments'

center for video and music

BY TOM JOHNSON

There are so many kinds of fine new music current today that no one can expect to really understand them all, so we tend to oversimplify. That is particularly true in the case of a composer like Morton Feldman, whose music is so distinctive that one only needs to hear about three notes of one of his pieces in order to recognize the style. By now, I don't think anyone denies that Feldman is one of our major composers, but I don't think many people really listen to his music very carefully either.

"Sure, I know Feldman," I hear



Earle Brown

## Feldman: instrumental colorist

people say. "He's the guy that writes the soft sparse music with free rhythm." Or something like that. And once we can identify the style, and have pigeonholed the name up in our brains somewhere, we have a tendency to stop listening and go on to something else.

Later the conversation shifted to painting metaphors, and Feldman's intentions became clearer. He was acquainted with many of the abstract expressionist painters, particularly Philip Guston, and he continues to think of his music in terms of painting. He talked about how, now that he was working on a larger scale, using larger canvases, there was a greater possibility that a strange glissando or a swish of maracas would enter the picture. One could say that his pieces of the '60s were all-over paintings, which

maintained a constant mood from beginning to end. But now, one sometimes finds areas in his canvases which stand out rather sharply from the rest of the music. It is also a question of color. While his work in the '60s was done largely in pastels, he now uses occasional browns and grays as well.

But the most important thing about all of Feldman's work is his uncanny sensitivity to instrumental colors. Just as an example, at one point in "Instruments" the winds were playing the three-note cluster, and I found it difficult to tell whether they were all playing in the same octave or not. At first I thought the flute was an octave above the other instruments. Then it began to sound as if both the flute and oboe were playing an octave above the muted. The work, which lasts a little over 20 minutes, is scored for flute (Petr Kotik), oboe (Nora Post), muted trombone (James Kasprowicz), celeste (Judith Martin), and percussion (Jan Williams).

Unlike any other Feldman work I know, "Instruments" has a kind of tonal center. Or is it a theme? Anyway, much of the time the instruments play on a three-note cluster. As in all Feldman's works, the instruments generally play isolated tones and chords, and the texture is relatively sparse. But there are also a number of gestures which never occurred in his earlier pieces. The muted trombone plays occasional glissandos. A sequence of oboe tones may become almost melodic in character. Soft-timpani and bass-drum rolls occasionally intrude. At one point a quiet swish of maracas comes in, so dramatic in the context that it seems almost scary, for all its gentleness.

I was interested in finding out what Feldman would have to say about the changes in his music, and particularly about his more recent vocabulary, which I described as dramatic elements. He agreed that the glissandos and drum rolls create a tension which his music in the '60s never had, but he feels that this tension has

less to do with the materials than with the way they are used, generally entering as surprises, without being prepared in the usual ways. He also pointed out that he continues to avoid elements which have the strongest connotations, such as crescendoing drum rolls.

I have a special interest in Feldman, however, because I studied composition with him for a time, and because I know that he has remarkable insight into a lot of things. So I've kept listening to his music, and I've kept discovering new things in it. And by now, every new Feldman piece I hear sounds totally different from all the others. True, the style itself never really changes, but within that style, Feldman produces a continual stream of high quality music. And it seems to me that he doesn't actually repeat himself nearly as much as, say, Hindemith or Milhaud did.

Feldman has always been concerned largely with the sounds of traditional instruments. Lately this has become a more conscious concern, and he has begun to use the names of the instruments as titles. He has also begun to make longer statements. Most of his recent pieces last at least 20 minutes, and one runs almost an hour. "Voices and Instruments," "Piano and Orchestra," "Pianos and Voices," and "Chorus and Orchestra" are a few of the eight or 10 substantial pieces he has written since he moved to Buffalo in 1972. All are fully notated; the "chance" techniques of Feldman's early music having been long forgotten.

One recent piece, called simply "Instruments" (1974), received an excellent performance Friday night by the SEM Ensemble of Buffalo.