

A conversation on music

MORTON FELDMAN and IANNIS XENAKIS

The present text is a transcription of a conversation between Morton Feldman and Iannis Xenakis which took place on Friday, July 4, 1986, at De Kloveniersdoelen, Middleburg, The Netherlands. The conversation was part of a five-day master class given by Morton Feldman during the Festival Nieuwe Muziek, June 19–July 6, 1986. It was edited by Vicent Gasseling and Michael Nieuwenhuizen, which sponsors the festival. Minor revisions have been introduced for the present publication in *Res*.

MF: Last night Xenakis came up, said a few words, and I started to, almost apologetically, talk about the work.(1) That maybe was overly philosophical, so he said, "You don't have to talk," and walked away.

IX: No, I told Mr. Feldman yesterday how much I enjoyed the piece, that I thought it was fascinating, and then he stopped me and said, "I have to explain in philosophical terms what I wanted to say with the music." I said, "There's no need." Sometimes I think composers talk too much. There is only music, that is it! I mean, it can be well played or badly played or... Yesterday we had a very good performance. Do you agree!

MF: Yes!

IX: Were you happy with it?

MF: I'm neither happy nor unhappy.

IX: What?

MF: I'm neither happy nor unhappy with it.

IX: What do you mean, why?

MF: I thought It was just a little stiff.

IX: You wanted more agitation?

MF: No, I wanted them to breathe with each other more naturally. Breathe rather than count.

IX: But they counted correctly.

MF: Yes, they counted correctly. Maybe that was it, that it was a little too mechanical in the counting.

IX: Well no, I don't think that was the problem, I think I

understand what you mean. Music is used as acoustical energy. The problem or composition is how to use that energy. Last night the energy wasn't there in a sense of an acoustical appearance. In the score it was there, from the combination or the sounds, the timbre, the rhythms, the length, and the timing of the piece. That is a complete different aspect. I was amazed by the fact that with so few notes you can produce that comprehension of things. I felt like a child because I write many notes.

MF: I felt like a child because I write so few notes. Half of the alphabet is not there...

IX: It also was a kind of lesson: I thought about a piece that I should write with very few notes.

MF: Apropos this: years ago I had one of those very curious conversations you can have with Stockhausen when he was writing all these big pieces, like Gruppen, and Hymnen, and at that time I was writing very tenuous little piano pieces here and there. He would use that as a weapon against me. He would say to me, "Have you ever written a big piece, Morton? You must try it, it's fascinating." So I said, "And Karlheinz, what you have to try is to write a piano piece for one finger." That was my revenge so to speak.

One of the things that has become---being that I am the master of ceremonies---a thread of the conversation during the last few days is the barrier of style. Where I talked about not really understanding or wanting to understand something, or one listens to something or learns something all in relation to its style and not exactly in relation to what it is, which I feel is very characteristic of all my students. They don't understand anything; they begin with style, they don't end with style. Now I don't want to phrase it as a question, but we all have these barriers of style and I wonder how you cope with this.

IX: Well, whenever I listen to music I don't want to consider any ideology whatsoever beforehand. I just want to listen and understand what happens, which I think is the problem of what you are trying to say with style. I think style means a kind of environment. You build up your own niche in the beginning, and from the beginning it should go through the piece and end in the same style. Why is it like this! It makes no sense! When you write music, you should have the same naive approach to music as the listener often has. Start all over again with listening and understand what happens without any knowledge of what you have read or heard before. Of course, if you come with some well-defined rules and you compare them with what you hear, you will be lost because the rules don't exist a priori. They should not be a priori, they should be [178] born out of what you hear; otherwise you're repeating, you're making an imitation of something that you have as a memory. Do you agree with that?

MF: Yes, and I was very taken with one of the things in the piece that you were interested in: the duration of things. I think that if

someone was listening in terms of some idealistic attitude about their style or what style it is, they would not have that perception about the duration. In other words, they would not be measuring this thing in their ear as they're listening.

IX: I must tell you that usually I can't stand such a long piece, but yesterday I could, although it was very late. I could follow the things that you were doing and I was attracted by what I heard. This is a positive thing, because when you're not attracted then you'll forget it. I was pinned by the sounds and by the preparation of the sounds, which I think is the most important thing you have done. Of course, that comes from the quality of what I heard, including the performance quality. Except for that chord that I didn't quite understand...

MF: The loud chord?

IX: Yes, the loud chord.

MF: The fact [is] that I was surprised to hear it. I forgot that I did it.

So, well, a lot of people will ask why I write long pieces. I never felt that you wrote short pieces! I got involved with this aspect of time. I don't think that it's a question of whether it's long or short, or concise as Stravinsky would prefer to say. I think one of the problems for me is the social context; whether you play an hour piece for a typical audience in Lincoln Center or whether you play a piece in a big hall in Paris or in Amsterdam, that's the problem. So I noticed that the more established halls would not play a long piece. They feel that it's out of context.

IX: Well, they play Mahler symphonies that last for hours and hours.

MF: Maybe I should change my name?

IX: To Feldmahler

MF: Are you in any way involved with the social context of a piece?

IX: You mean, to whom it is addressed?

MF: Yes.

IX: No, one should never think in that way. If you think that the music is interesting---I use the word interesting in the sense of attraction---then it must be the same for other people because we are made the same way.

MF: Well, maybe you and me, but I don't know if we're all made the same way! I mean, what is interesting? I just wrote a piece in New York for the Philharmonic and I had a very interesting review. The review said that I was the most boring composer in the history of music. But I love the fact that you would use the word attract

rather than interesting, that you would not have a criterion.

IX: No, there are no criteria. This is why I think that music is not a science.

MF: Do you have a criterion for boredom?

IX: No, I think that even the most boring piece has many things to teach you. The most trivial pop music for instance has also very interesting things in it because it is based on tradition, on imitating things. And in its imitation it's like finding the structures that have been produced by generations or people or by civilizations. You can find out very interesting things. They can tell you something not in a sense of language because I don't think that music is a language. Nothing is a language except language itself, because there are semantics behind it. Now, if you're interested or not depends on yourself, but if you try you will see, understand, and grasp it. This is why I claim that even the most boring piece of music or art can teach you something. It makes you react in your own personal way. If it makes you feel rich or if it makes you react in a fantastic way, then it is a good piece. Maybe this could be a criterion. Of course, that might only happen with you and not with anybody else, like what the critic said about your music. He was bored but other people might not have been bored. What did you think of it yourself?

MF: No, I was not bored. But this has been the basic criticism on my music. That it is not interesting and what is really meant by that is that it doesn't contain an element of "drama."

IX: But it does contain drama, only not in a conventional way.

MF: When I listen to your music during all these years I never think of it as a metaphor or drama. I'm enthralled with the sound of it. I'm not even aware of whether it's loud or soft in that sense. I'm not involved with its dynamic thrust. I'm involved with its involvement. In other words, I become you when I listen to Xenakis.

IX: Thank you. The main thing is: how to change. This is a matter of music, of knowledge, of the universe. Everywhere you feel the change. The plants are changing, maybe not so fast as the human mind. They're changing slowly, as the particles do. Probably these particles are changing in the universe on a much larger scale of time. We know at least through astrophysics today that some of them are really mid-life, [179] like the heavy ones. They did not exist at the beginning, and the lighter ones did not exist at the very beginning. So if even the matter itself is changing, everything is changing. Why do I say this?

MF: Because you're changing.

IX: Yes, so the change in ourselves is a sign of freedom, I don't say that it is necessary to escape from your memory, because then you would be without any link to what you've been. The knowledge of

oneself is very primary, very fantastic, but the faculty to escape from that is also.

MF: Do you think that some memories are better than other memories? I mean like in psychoanalysis: one goes there to free oneself of the memories that make it impossible to live in reality, and I would say as a metaphor about becoming a composer that one has memories that one has to get rid of.

IX: I prefer artistry instead of psychoanalysis because in psychoanalysis... in fact what you do is, you're trusting on [to?] some traces or your memory, something different in your story, and when you think you have left that story you're building something different and it becomes your new past.

MF: Do you feel that the fact that you're so consistently productive brings you closer to perhaps an unconscious vision? I mean, I don't know anyone besides myself that works like a lunatic as much as you do! I'm sure that you're aware of this creative energy through the past.

IX: Yes, I'm aware that I'm working very hard because I don't do anything else. What I don't know is if there is any progress. That is difficult. The meaning of progress in art is meaningless.

MF: But you see differently. You might essentially do the same thing but from another angle, not from a clear linearity but from a kind of broken linearity. Do you feel that working the way you do brings you closer to your music, or does the freedom that you feel come from arriving at a certain distance from your music? Does it position you in a way to continue without being interrupted?

IX: No, the problem is much more simple and complicated at the same time. Each time that I write a piece I am afraid to repeat myself because there is no use in trying to do, say, music by Brahms or, which is the same thing, to compose music that you've done in the past. It has to be different. But how do you know that it is different? It is very difficult to work and do something different. The only way to escape from that is by just doing the things. Keep trying, and why shouldn't you keep trying? Well, that is an interior problem. Bergson would say it is l'élan vital. I know that I'm working very hard, as you are working very hard. That's all. I can't escape from that situation. It's also a bit sad; one should be able to make a complete blank in his own mind. That should be the maximum freedom.

There are two contradictory trends, at least in what I am doing, and I think that it also goes for people like you. One is that one forms some kind of, not "aim" but let's say "environment," "mind environment": we can't escape from what we are. This means repetition and that means imitation and unoriginality, which is a bad thing because it is poor. The other is to change. So how do you balance these things? This is only through working, without any criteria that will tell you that you are original or that you are

imitating. For instance, you write something that looks like what you've written, say two or three years ago, but you've changed something which could be a seed for a completely different way, and then you have to be there and you have to be conscious that somehow this could lead you somewhere else. Perhaps that is a strategy in the work.

MF: The reason I talk about this is because I feel that the younger composer has no comprehension of work. And I feel that that's the door! That you could only come close by this continual work, close or distant, whatever it is to continue. I know as a teacher, and I'm very conscious of myself as a teacher in the past twenty years, I developed a kind of moral responsibility from seeing all these dead bodies from generation to generation. Now it is not because they have no ideas or they don't have talent, but it is because the amount of work that really goes into writing a piece is incomprehensible to them.

IX: Oh yes...

MF: It doesn't seem important to talk about it, but I feel it is the key many times. The other key, of course, is to understand just what is imagination, not what is interesting. The element of the composer's imagination, in a sense where Xenakis is going, and then Xenakis makes that leap and it's something he's never done and you've never heard it before! I feel that for young people you don't put yourself in a position to make that leap, and the reason you don't make that leap is because you don't question what is the work that has to go into composing.

IX: And the risk...

MF: Oh, the risk... I mean a kamikaze doesn't take a risk. He's programmed. We're not programmed to take risks. [180]

IX: No, to take the risk in comparison to what you are doing. When there is something that looks strange but you are convinced that it is worthwhile, then you have to take the risk and do it.

MF: Yes, but you talked about the loud note.

IX: The loud note. Yes, but I liked the loud note!

MF: Oh, you liked the loud note!

IX: Yes, this was not a criticism.

MF: Oh I see. I thought that you were questioning it.

IX: No, it was not a questioning.

MF: Of course, when I do something like that, it kills the linear thinking that we're used to. For half an hour or forty-five minutes it's three p's and all of a sudden there are three f's. It stops

work for two days! I have to think about that. Should I take it in or should I leave it out? I left it in, but I remember stopping for two days, saying, "What is it doing here?" And maybe the reason was, again both complicated and simple, that the loud note was essentially like with a balloon, to break the balloon.

IX: One question: Was it loud enough?

MF: Well, Aki? Did you feel... remember we once discussed how to play the loud note?

AT: Oh yes, it's on page twenty-four!

MF: It's page twenty-four? Thanks! Could it have been louder? No!

AT: Forte, fortissimo...

MF: How do you feel psychologically where you're playing along and all of a sudden, without any context, you have to play a loud note?

AT: I have to prepare myself long before that I have to do it, you know, keep remembering that it is coming and...

MF: That it's not an accident.

IX: It should be very disturbing, because she has to keep it in mind all the time...

MF: Until page twenty-four...

IX: Five p's?

AT: Well, mostly three p's, piano pianissimo.

MF: I use a mezzo-piano on the strings as an attack. Many times it's amazing when they play mezzo-piano. I had this with the Kronos Quartet when they played my quartet. The mezzo-piano became like a sforzando. It's just the muscular release, very difficult to control. [...]

MF: See, here's where a Xenakis and a Feldman silence meet in equilibrium. Perhaps another question?

Audience: Mr. Xenakis, why do you use quarter-tones?

IX: There are three reasons why I use quarter-tones. The first reason is to enrich the sound with the beats that they produce and with the impossibility to distinguish pitches when they are very close, especially when you have many string instruments because they are able to vary the pitch in very small differences.

Another reason concerns the problem of scales. The scale is a fundamental thing that most of the contemporary musicians don't consider. They take it for granted, but in the past and in other

cultures, like Asia and Africa, the scales are very differentiated. When you have chosen your scale it's like producing your style already. For instance, an activating scale means from some point of view repetition: what you do in one range is the same thing in a lower range. You could enrich this by making a completely different nonoctavating scale. I've observed that if you transcribe the music of China Japan, or India it immediately looks like Western music. Western notation is an inaccurate notation, there's a loss of information due to very small differences in the tuning of the scales. So I tried to produce a kind of theory that would be able to produce any kind of scale.

The third reason that I might use not only quarter-tones but also differences in pitch, sometimes up to the comma, is that they might produce a sound more alive. If you listen to the music from Java, you will hear that it is tuned in such a way that it sounds false to our ears. Why? Because they want that. It's not by chance, it's because they feel that the unison shouldn't be there at all. These kinds of discrepancies are very alive. They think there's no need to have absolute unisons or to have a regulated scale like we have in the West, which not only is a theoretical trend but also has very practical reasons: when you have many instruments playing together, you need some identity. These conflicts are general and deep problems of music, and we have the same problems with rhythm and intensities.

MF: But you noticed the score of the trio and the string writing where I don't use quarter-tones but I use different spellings. For instance, I might have an octave out of tune, like an E-flat and a D-sharp. The reason I do this---I'm ashamed to tell you, but I've got a very good piano and I purposely keep it out of tune---is because it is warmer. I also use it for the same reason that Mr. Xenakis mentioned, to differentiate within small intervals to get more clarity, say, in a cluster. I think of it as... I use the word turpentine, it's like thinning out the music with turpentine.

IX: To get closer to a more complex sound.

MF: Yes. [181]

IX: Closer to the noise.

MF: Last Sunday I was with an artist friend in the Metropolitan Museum and we were talking about the late work of Degas. It turned out that as the painter got older and more secure the more thin he painted. Where in his middle age it was this thick, and when he was young it was like... [Feldman makes a very broad gesture]. It is very difficult to paint thinly because you don't know if it will become too flat. And that is the problem that I have with too little notes, that I feel that my music is going to become more or less like a poster, you see, that it is, just on the surface, that it is not going to have a kind of impasto, depth: that the sound complex itself is not going to have a dimension inward and outward.

IX: Right, this is also the case with string music---for instance in Japan, when they play the Biwa. The Biwa can produce very small, short glissandi. When the string is loose you can do very small modulations of the pitch in order to enliven the sound in a melodic way. You can find that also in Western music with the vibrato, but here it's used as a kind of mayonnaise to hide the inaccuracy of the pitch. When a singer sings and he doesn't find the pitch he...

MF: I have to tell you a very funny story about vibrato. I was at a festival in New York at the Juilliard School of Music. I'm very interested in schools, so I went around to the various classrooms, and I walked into an orchestral rehearsal and I noticed that the cellists in the first desk were playing with a lot of vibrato and in the back the girls and boys were younger and they were not playing with too much vibrato. So, as this piece---I think that it was a Haydn symphony---was going, I leaned over to the back-desk cellists and whispered into the ear of one of the young cellists, "Why are they using so much vibrato in the first desk?" and she says to me, "They're graduating, they are going to have their diploma!" I loved the fact that she was hip to this lie that was going on in the first desk.

IX: When you listen to the traditional music of India, then you see how they master the vibrato. In India it's an aesthetic technique in order to make the sound itself more interesting, but here in the West it is a mechanical thing, especially in schools. In France they use too much vibrato; in the Soviet Union the singers are also terrible. The harmony and the melodic pattern are completely lost, you don't know, where you stand. To hold a sound for a long time without changing the timbre or the dynamic is very difficult on a string instrument, and that should be one of the tests for their diploma.

There's another problem, the problem of the notation of a glissando. There is no pitch, it is the speed of the movement, and if you want to change that, then you have to put it in time with bars, because otherwise the players don't know how to play the glissando. For instance, if you're playing an ascending glissando on the violin, there will be an acceleration if your finger is uniform in its movement. It's like a geometric progression of the distance. If you need one uniform ascending movement of the glissando then the musician has to slow down his movement of the finger. They have to learn that, but they don't teach that at the conservatories. So, you know, you'll never obtain this uniform movement of the glissando with an orchestra. In any case Western notation is an approximation, an abstraction of the sound. Fortunate, because that gives the performer the possibility to make something out of it.