# Performing Feldman's String Quartet #2 : an interview with Tom Chiu and Max Mandel of the Flux Quartet

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# Performing Feldman's *String Quartet #2*

## An Interview with Tom Chiu and Max Mandel of the Flux Quartet

Ryan Dohoney

*Morton Feldman examining a score, Cologne 1978.* 

*Morton Feldman completed his "String Quartet #2" in 1983. It received its first abbreviated performances by the Kronos Quartet in Toronto (1983) and at the Darmstadt Summer Courses (1984). It did not receive a complete performance until 1999 when the Flux Quartet performed the quartet at Cooper Union in New York City. Since then, the Flux Quartet has given nine full-length performances of the work and recorded it for Mode Records.[1] Their most recent performance took place in Philadelphia on June 12, 2011 as part of the American Sublime festival (americansublime.org). Flux's current line-up includes Tom Chiu and Conrad Harris, violins, Max Mandel, viola, and Felix Fan, cello.*

*Chiu studied violin at the Juilliard School and founded the Flux Quartet in 1996. He has given the premiere of more than 150 compositions and has worked with influential figures such as Roscoe Mitchell and Ornette Coleman. He has also done multimedia work with Phil Niblock and the theater group Mabou Mines. He has recorded widely for Mode, Tzadik, Koch, and Cantaloupe.*

*Mandel studied viola at the University of Toronto and the Juilliard School. In addition to his work with the Flux Quartet, Mandel plays with a number of prominent ensembles including the Knights Chamber Orchestra, the Silk Road Ensemble, and the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra.*

*The interview took place via video conference call on June 28, 2011 between Portland, Oregon and Brooklyn, New York. In it, Chiu and Mandel reflected on their history with Feldman's monumental "String Quartet #2," audience reactions to the piece, and how they go about preparing for its performance. They also discussed the impact of Feldman's music on their work as a quartet and their approach to other music.*

*Ryan Dohoney: You're both fresh from a recent performance of Morton Feldman's "String Quartet #2." It was part of a larger festival of Feldman's late music in Philadelphia called American Sublime. How did you go about preparing for it? What was the performance like this time?*

Tom Chiu: The Philadelphia performance was our ninth performance of the quartet.

Max Mandel: And it's my sixth time playing. The Philadelphia performance would rank up there as one of the better ones. We performed in the Philadelphia Cathedral and it was really an ideal space. For a church, there were a lot of lighting options and many ways to arrange the furniture. We were able to set it up exactly how we wanted it, which doesn't always happen.

*RD: What is your ideal setting?*

MM: In the round. We came up near the middle of the church, closer to the altar. We face each other and the audience was pretty close; the first ring of chairs was about five feet away from us. The festival organizers laid out some Persian carpets for people to relax and sleep on. At the entrance of the church there was a foyer, which was perfect for muffling the sounds of people coming and going. Usually the noise is crazy.

At this performance, as with many others, you can always pick out the hardcore Feldman fans. We were talking to [composer and Feldman's long-time friend] Bunita Marcus and she remembers that there used to be this macho attitude towards toughing out the whole six hours, but for this performance a lot of people stayed.

TC: The presenters said that about 230 people came and that at least 70 stayed for the whole thing.

MM: Which is a high number. That's intense. Usually you can pick out the hardcore fans because they've brought their own chair, they have scarves and thermoses. They are ready for their camping trip.

TC: I think part of why this was so successful was that it was part of a whole festival of events—at least six events. The Bowerbird organization did a really great job of keeping the momentum going. It was a nice build up.

*RD: Did you get to see any of the other performances?*

MM: We were all coming from different places before the concert.

TC: I actually caught the concert by the Jack Quartet [a new music quartet based in New York City]. What I hear and what I read is that it was a very exciting week for Philadelphia.

*RD: What do you like about performing in the round as opposed to being on stage as you were when I heard you at Carnegie's Zenkel Hall in 2003?*

TC: We can say this about all the late Feldman works, they're not typical concert pieces. They're almost like sound events, or an installation with live people. That being the case, it's nice for people to experience hearing it from different vantage points. If we're on stage people can still move around, but the performance would be unidirectional.

MM: In the round, also, we're trying to break down the concert convention. The point of the piece isn't to blow up the concert convention, but it is one of its aspects. Anything we can do to get out of that is great. At Zenkel Hall we couldn't do it in the round but there's a great sound in there. One thing with that 2003 performance was that the hall can be in the round in Zenkel, but on this occasion it cost too much money to reconfigure it. They needed 24 hours to rearrange the seating and there were shows before and after so they couldn't do it. They built this state of the art hall with the ability to be in the round and they wouldn't do it.

TC: But they put some rugs on stage. We had a lot of people join us.

*RD: One of the things I've been thinking about a lot lately is a comment Feldman made in an interview from 1967. He said that the audience should think about his pieces as environments.[2] It's a bit strange to consider those pieces from the 1960s in that way, as they are rather brief, with the exception of "Two Pieces for Three Pianos." They really don't start becoming long-duration environments until the late 1970s. Then they become deeply immersive situations and his comment seems a bit more apt.*

MM: Feldman talked about how he wanted to warm up the piece for a bit and then invite the audience in. That's in the back of my head a bit. There's an awkwardness to starting the quartet, actually. That is, we haven't quite figured out how to make it work.

TC: This last time we came out, there was no applause, and we started playing.

MM: We snuck on and we just dove right in, which was perfect. There's an anxiety that emerges as soon as the music starts. The audience knows it's going to last between five-and-a-half and six hours. Everyone knows that. The beginning music is kind of fast.

TC: It's agitated.

MM: That music goes by really quickly and is followed by a repeated passage we call the "wind chime" section. There are these shifting harmonic rhythmic patterns that are extremely difficult to pull off. That's a very difficult page for us. The beginning always feels like this frantic thing. I fantasize about us just appearing, coming up from the bottom of the stage or lights appearing on us so that we're already there.

*RD: It's funny that you say that about the beginning because it has always struck me as bizarre precisely because it's so agitated. There's an anxiousness that the piece takes five hours to unwind.*

*Tom, how did you come to know "String Quartet #2"? You gave the first complete performance in 1999 at the Cooper Union, which has a long history of Feldman performances going back to the 1950s.*

TC: We heard the myth of the piece. Back in 1996 Kronos notably canceled their performance at the Lincoln Center Festival.[3] Howard Stokar, the series curator at Cooper Union, approached me with the idea and I said, "let's do it." The first time learning the piece was the most difficult. That's when we invested the most time. It's not that different from learning other pieces of music except that it's monumental—with six hours of material.

*RD: Had you heard recordings of the Kronos' earlier performances from Darmstadt or Toronto back in the early 1980s?*

TC: At that time I hadn't. The *Second Quartet* was my first grand Feldman experience. I had done a few pieces as a graduate student at Juilliard, but nothing like this. Over the years I've become much more knowledgeable about Feldman himself and his output.

*RD: Without knowing the precedents, how did you make decisions about performing the piece?*

TC: One decision was made for us—there weren't parts. We had to perform from the score. The score itself is 124 pages long. In these late works, Feldman is so organized on the page and he often writes in page-long units so that each is a section of the music. At the end of each page, he's done with a section and moves on to something else. The score is so clear and easy to read. Each page has three systems of nine measures. Playing from the score was absolutely the right strategy. But because of that there are many times in the piece when we help each other with page turns. It's definitely the one piece where we choreograph our pagination. Haphazard page sliding isn't going to work, especially in such an ethereal and quiet piece. At every point of the piece there's so much going on mentally.

MM: Page turns are a big aspect of it. I don't know how other quartets do it, but I hear the Kronos Quartet used page turners. The coordination aspect is essential, as is being able to see what other people are doing.

*RD: How did you communicate in performance in as well as work out the complex rhythms?*

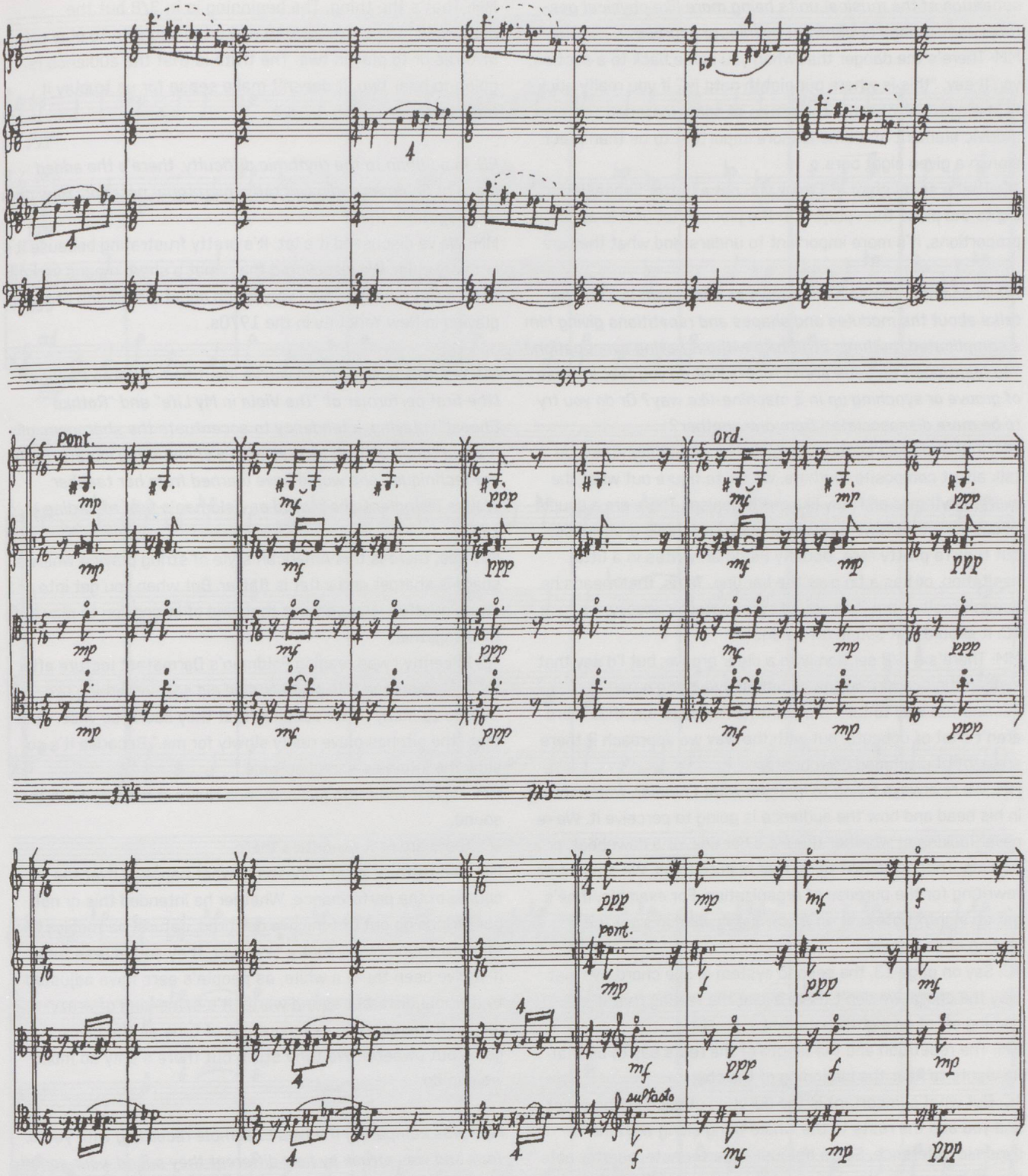
TC: This piece requires maximum strategy. The rehearsal is very important and very intense. What is nice about it is that there are sections that might have multiple solutions but there is usually one solution that is the best and we just go with that.

MM: It requires a vigorous approach to how we're going to do something because your brain and body stop working at times so you have to know exactly what you're going to do. The original line-up [Tom Chiu, Cornelius Dufallo, Kenji Bunch, Derrett Adkins] did a great job working out an understanding of the rhythms, deciphering things and organizing the quartet business. But we rework it every time we perform it. Every time we come to it there's something new. You feel like the piece grows on you and you start seeing connections between different material and you apply those lessons, even to other pieces like *Clarinet and String Quartet*. There's a cross-pollination of style.

TC: The quartet does require us to have a specific strategy for each section.

MM: There's not time to be like, "I'm feeling it this way." We appoint a leader for each kind of material, depending on who has what voice. It's often based on who leads a section, who has the melodic material. There's definitely traditional quartet playing that factors in. With someone holding an instrument at their shoulder, it's easier to cue or lead something than for the cello. We do a lot of converting tempo and rhythm. If we can't do the math perfectly—we're not robots—it's all about relationships. We go off of previous material that we know in our bones and make a small adjustment, a tiny bit faster, and organically feel that. That's the kind of stuff that we drill.

*RD: That's something I've been thinking about as well because there are so many gradations of tempo that you have to feel them. I've played some of the later piano pieces and had that*




*Morton Feldman, "String Quartet #2", p. 13.* © Universal Edition, Wien/London

*sensation of the musical units being more like physical gestures that expand or contract by minute degrees.*

MM: There's the danger that when you come back to a section, you'll say, "this is where our eighth note is." If you really stick to that you can obscure the return of some material. The motivic element of a time is more important to us than precision in a given eight bars.

TC: That's so much of it. I think you get a better sense listening to the piece than playing in the piece. A lot of it is about proportions, it's more important to understand what they are.

*RD: In one of Feldman's interviews at Darmstadt in 1984 he talks about the modules and shapes and repetitions giving him a complicated rhythmic structure without having syncopation.[4] You mentioned that you aren't robots, but do you feel a sense of groove or synching up in a machine-like way? Or do you try to be more disassociated from one another?*

MM: In the module sections [marked by repeat signs] we do talk about composite rhythms, we try to figure out what the overall rhythm is and play like one organism. There are a couple of sections that have a straight-ahead rhythmic grooviness, but they're pretty rare. Usually Feldman writes in a little hesitation, or has a tie over the bar line. To us, that means he doesn't really want it to sound syncopated or groovy.

TC: It should just sound off balance.

MM: There's a 5/8 section with a clear groove, but I'd say that syncopation comes out as something we bring out.

TC: Another way to take the point further is to say that there aren't a lot of upbeats, but with the way we approach it there are a lot of displaced downbeats.

MM: We're always trying to imagine what Feldman was thinking in his head and how the audience is going to perceive it. We're never looking at whether there's a bar line, or a downbeat, or a pick-up. That's the last thing that occurs to us. We do a lot of rewriting for the purpose of organization. For example, if he's got an eighth-note rest on a downbeat, we don't get the feeling of an upbeat.

TC: Say on page 13, the second system is one chord. We just play the chord; we don't try to evoke the feeling that it's coming off of an eighth-note rest.

MM: The repetition and the length of the rests say to us that he wants to hear the beginning of the chord.

TC: But what's important is the duration of each sound event and you add the rests to the whole thing along with the dynamic difference. So its not just "quarter note, quarter note." It's off balance.

MM: There's this weird western classical music thing —a feeling of anxiety as you come off the beat. The piece has so little anxiety in it that we want to take the anxiety out of it. When cuing, we breathe in on an eighth note which allows us to count the rhythm internally from that note.

*RD: I like that you describe it as taking the anxiety out of it; as that's something of the emotional narrative of the piece. The beginning material is so anxious and that affect is something you might resist throughout the piece, its return.*

MM: That's the thing. The beginning is in 3/8 but the gesture is in two. We have to make the decision to play off of three or to play in two. The truth is that the audience is going to hear two. It doesn't make sense for us to play it feeling three.

*RD: In addition to the rhythmic difficulty, there's the added issue of Feldman's idiosyncratic microtonal notation. How do you negotiate that?*

MM: We've discussed it a lot. It's pretty frustrating because it's not very clear. We discovered that what a sharp means versus what a flat means is also very much about a tradition of string playing in New York City in the 1970s.

*RD: Yes, this is something you've identified in Karen Phillips' [the first performer of "The Viola in My Life" and "Rothko Chapel"] playing, a tendency to accentuate the sharpness of leading tones as well as play with a shimmering vibrato. Both are techniques she would have learned from her teacher Walter Trampler (who played on Feldman's first recording in 1959).*

MM: Yes, there is this American style of string playing where a sharp is sharper and a flat is flatter. But when you get into a string quartet you can't use that kind of intonation to play in tune together.

TC: Recently I was reading Feldman's Darmstadt lecture after Kronos premiered this piece and he did say something like, "I write so many minor seconds that they sound so wide." And that "the pitches move really slowly for me." Because it's so slow the intervals sound so wide.[5]

MM: I love it when the piece sounds really in tune, to be in that sound.

TC: There are real sonorities there.

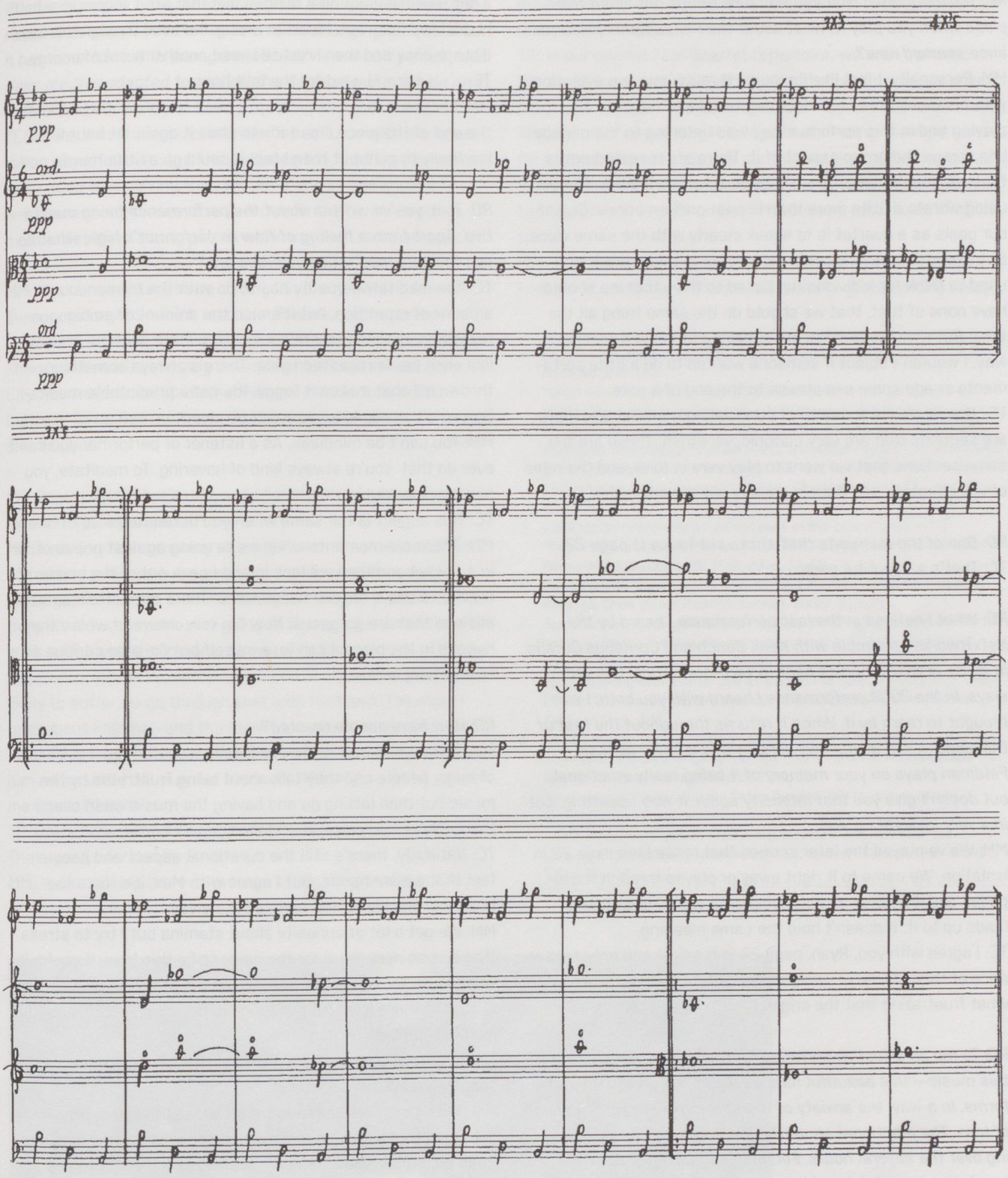
MM: The truth is, what happens is what happens over the course of the performance. Whether he intended this or not, our strings go out of tune, we get tired, natural harmonics start to sound really funky. However, they sound less funky if you've been there a while, as people's ears have adjusted to a whole different sound world. It's some kind of crazy magic. It manages to get more out of tune as the piece goes, but sweeter. We tune stuff, but there's only so much we can do.

*RD: I was comparing the Ives Ensemble recording with yours, Tom, and was struck by how different they sound, your sonorities ring much stranger from the very beginning. Their performance is also short, about 4 hours and 45 minutes.[6]*

MM: I don't know how they pulled that off. We've been settling into something of a groove at 5 hours 45 minutes. No matter what we do now. We did tighten some things up, places where we thought we were getting lazy or indulging ourselves. We checked back with the metronome.

TC: I don't know how the piece could be less than five and a half hours.

MM: If we played a very precise performance it could be five and a half hours.




*Morton Feldman, "String Quartet #2", p. 22.* © Universal Edition, Wien/London

*RD: You mentioned that you find new things out about the piece when you play it, what about the Philadelphia performance seemed new?*
MM: Personally, I feel like I'm going through my own evolution with his music. I've been listening to Karen Phillips' viola playing and in this performance I was listening to the melody line versus the group aspect of it. There are repeated notes that are slightly lengthened that become the melody. I've been using vibrato a little more than in past performances. One of our goals as a quartet is to speak clearly with the same voice. But I've noticed that there's more room in this piece than I used to think for individuality. I used to think that we should have none of that, that we should do the same thing all the time. But now the timbres are speaking to me in a different way. I wouldn't object if someone wanted to do a little portamento or add some sweetness to the end of a note.
TC: The piece has a wealth of contrasting material and there are sections that are very diatonic, very lush. These are the same sections that we want to play very in tune, and the roles of voices rotate and there's usually one melodic voice.

*RD: One of the moments that sticks out to me is page 22.*
TC: That's a beautiful page.

*RD: What I noticed in the last performance I heard by the Ne(x)tworks ensemble with Kenji Bunch and Cornelius Dufallo in 2010, is that it comes back in very interesting, but sad ways. In the 2003 performance I heard with you both, I was brought to tears by it. When it returns throughout the rest of the piece, it's in a shadowy version that's never as lush. Feldman plays on your memory of it being really emotional, but doesn't give you that intensity again. It was upsetting, but in a very interesting way.*
MM: We've played the later section that resembles page 22 in isolation. We came to it right away or played through those pages and it's never as satisfying until you've played what leads up to it. It doesn't hold the same meaning.
TC: I agree with you, Ryan, page 22 is the first and only appearance of this. The later versions are variations of it—it's somewhat frustrating that the original form doesn't return.

*RD: To me an affective narrative for the piece emerges from this music— this beautiful music returns but only in degraded forms. In a way, the anxiety of the opening changes to a sense of loss. The emotional arc of the piece became very depressing over the several hours. Feldman has talked about the quartet as the "disintegration of beautiful material." He gives you these pretty moments that are torn apart as the piece goes along.*[7]
TC: But in the last hour and a half you have all this amazing new material that replaces it. You won't believe how many times in rehearsal we think, "Oh man, this guy is screwing with us again." There are ten minutes where a major second is spelled eight different ways.
MM: There are things that are designed to make you screw up and no matter how well prepared you are, you're likely to make a slip. But the emotional thing—I feel that after four-and-a-half hours I feel worn out, I feel like crying. I've been through this incredible journey and then I realize I need another burst of energy. . .
TC: . . . a second wind for the last hour.
MM: I actually feel this pick-up, a need to concentrate and at the end of the piece I'm ready to start it again. At hour 4 1/2 I'm ready to quit, but then I feel it could go a little more.

*RD: Tom, you've written about the performance being meditative. Apart from a feeling of flow or performer's high, what do you think its meditative qualities are?*
TC: The meditative quality has to do with the tremendous amount of repetition, but it's also the amount of ambiguous repetition. Let's say there's a 12–15 minute section, it's not like each bar is repeated twice. There's always something thrown off that makes it foggy. It's not a predictable meditation so all you do is let yourself be swept up in it.
MM: You can't be mindless. As a listener or performer you can't ever do that. You're always kind of hovering. To meditate, you never get locked in.
TC: This aspect is the same when you listen to it.
MM: There are moments when we're going against one another in a hocket and then we lock in and I peek out of the corner of my eye to see if anyone has noticed. There are certain amazing elisions that are gorgeous. Now I'm very aware of where they happen in the piece. I can lose myself but I'm also curious as to how people react.

*RD: How have people reacted?*
MM: People just love it; they're totally transformed. I get a lot of hugs, people cry, they talk about being frustrated by the music but then letting go and having the music wash over them. We've had drunk and stoned people come.
TC: Naturally, there's still the durational aspect and people feel that we are heroic. But I agree with Max, it's more the beauty of the piece that people take away.
MM: We get a lot of curiosity about stamina but I try to stress that it is so necessary for the piece to be this long. It couldn't be any shorter, but it could be longer. I'm at the point now that to me the more freakish challenge is the mental one. Sure, the next day I'm beat up, I'm sore.
TC: Instead of page turners it'd be better for us to have personal masseurs during the show!
MM: With this most recent concert, it was the first time I managed to squeeze in a show the day before. It was a Silk Road ensemble show in New Haven, Connecticut. I took a train that evening from New Haven to Philadelphia. I felt I was able to handle it emotionally and mentally, but my body took a lot more punishment than normal. We usually take a week beforehand for rehearsals and it is very relaxed. We spend a lot of hours working together but we limit the number of hours we work per day. The day before we don't do anything except maybe a sound check in the hall. This was the first time I bucked that trend and I was in more physical pain than normal. Lesson learned. I'm not going to do that again.

*RD: Some people have an attitude that endurance is what the music was about, but that seems to be changing. Do you think it has more to do with your generation of new music performers? Have players adapted to pull off the demands of notation and performance?*

TC: I think it could be possible that it has to do with our generation of performers, but the audience too, that they're getting more used to receiving this. We don't encourage anyone to write super long pieces, this is music in the hands of a true master. Feldman's long pieces work very well, not everyone's do.

MM: You're not sitting there saying "God, when will this end?" Every note is gold. I think also that there's a community, there's an attitude that we've got to do what needs to be done. There's the reality of being a working musician in New York City, you have to eat, but whatever we can do to make it happen—in regards to the budget, rehearsals—people are open and flexible.

*RD: Do you think that's unique to Feldman's music or does it extend to other projects?*

MM: Knowing the composer is a big factor. If someone comes in with a fantastic attitude and is incredibly nice, fun, and has really great ideas as a human being—if they've written something that's unplayable, I'm going to figure out how to make it work with them. If someone comes with the opposite attitude, negative or nit-picky, and you don't hit it off, you're much less likely to suffer, to go through that pain for them. The more I read about Feldman and the more I know his music, the more I'm willing to go to the mat for him. He's proven that I can trust him as an artist. I'll play for six hours. If that's what he needs me to do, I'll do it.

TC: Every time we get the opportunity we get super excited. That speaks for itself.

MM: You're sitting there with three other people who are as excited as you are. You're in this situation with people you can really rely on.

TC: In our normal Flux Quartet repertoire, we aren't always on the same page depending on the institutional demands on our programs. Not just people in the music world but the art world. The difficulty presenting it is logistical, finding the right venue for that duration of time. We confronted that at Carnegie Hall. Everything we play influences everything else. This music has had a profound impact on both the old and new music that we play.

MM: This piece has changed my life. It's completely changed how I look at music. It affects all aspects of everything I play.

1 Flux Quartet, *Morton Feldman, Feldman Edition 6: String Quartet No. 2*, Mode Records 112.

2 "Don't think of it as a work of art. Don't even think of it as a piece of music. 'Think of it as an environment.' With words like these, far out composer Morton Feldman, of New York City, tries to put at ease those musicians who play his unusual works and audiences who come to listen and try to understand." Ann Holmes, "Far-Out Composer Feldman Says: Think of It as an Environment," *Houston Chronicle*, March 13, 1967, Sec. 2, 4.

3 Clark Lunberry provides a reminiscence of the cancellation in his "Departing Landscapes: Morton Feldman's *String Quartet II* and *Triadic Memories*," *SubStance* 10, 35/2, 2006, 17–50.

4 Kevin Volans, "Conversation with Morton Feldman," in *Morton Feldman Says*, ed. Chris Villars (London, Hyphen, 2006), 213–214.

5 Feldman said, "[Categories] get very hard. Which gets us, believe it or not, to why I use the spelling, the more microtonal spelling in the second quartet. The hardening of the distance, say between a minor 2nd. When you're working with a minor 2nd as long as I've been, it's very wide. I hear a minor 2nd like a minor 3rd almost." "Darmstadt Lecture" in *Morton Feldman Says*, 198.

6 Ives Ensemble, *Morton Feldman: String Quartet II*, hat[now]Art CD 4–144. A review of the recordings by the Flux Quartet and the Ives Ensemble can be found in *dissonance* 85, March 2004, 50.

7 Feldman said, "Now, what my *String Quartet* [#2] is, is a complete disintegration of very beautiful material . . . where things would follow other things which before I found unacceptable and now sounded gorgeous." John Cage, "Conversation with Morton Feldman," *Res* 6, 1983, 112–135, 129.

*The Flux Quartet performing Morton Feldman's "String Quartet #2" in the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral on June 12, 2011.*
Photo: Mike Linksvayer