

Abstracted Landscapes in the Music of Barbara Monk Feldman

The compositions contained on this disc, like many of Barbara Monk Feldman's works, have a strong connection to specific locations, and take their inspiration from landscapes the composer has known and experienced—not as literal depictions in sound, but as abstracted impressions of the colors, textures, and atmospheres evoked by these special places. Monk Feldman, like her late husband Morton Feldman, maintains close friendships with painters, and connections to the visual arts run strongly through her work. In an article, she comments on the way a painting—a work of art that seemingly exists outside of time—balances the illusion of depth on a flat canvas, with the construction of temporal experience, the “rhythm of our seeing, or the time it takes for the eye to travel the canvas.”¹ Music, on the other hand, exists solely in time, but can create the illusion of plasticity comparable to that of the visual arts. It can also balance the strictly perceptual sense of time in performance, with a different sense of time as these perceptions enter our memory. Particularly when a composition deals with unmeasurable aspects of musical events—free-flowing and unmetered rhythm and a focus on tone color, rather than melody or harmony—it has a different working in our memory, remaining intangible and approaching this sense of plasticity. As Monk Feldman writes, “What we are looking for are those aspects of composition that occur when the musical idea is still largely undefined—when it is still on the edge of becoming an idea.”²

The Chaco Wilderness

The Chaco Wilderness and String Quartet No. 1 both take their inspiration from the high deserts of northern New Mexico, where Barbara Monk Feldman lived from 2000 to 2012. Specifically, these compositions reference the area around Chaco Canyon in the northwest part of the state, the site of abandoned ancient Native American settlements perched at the bottom of the rugged cliffs of this harsh but beautiful landscape. In program notes for the quartet, the composer has compared these cliffs to a “gravitational sculpture,”³ addressing the close ties her music has both to nature and the visual arts. Monk Feldman founded the “Time Shards” concert series at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, and like O’Keeffe’s work, the music takes its inspiration from nature, but from this initial impulse reaches out toward abstraction. As in O’Keeffe where natural subjects are highly stylized—the familiar sun-bleached bones of her paintings seem to be as much about the light, shadow, and color of curving lines, as they are about the depiction of a pelvic bone—in Monk Feldman’s work the melodic figures, while beautiful and expressive, are the starting point for more intensive exploration of instrumental color, texture, and registral shapes and contours.

In *The Chaco Wilderness* (2005) each movement bears a title pointing to an abstract, yet compelling image as a point of departure for the music—images that evoke the visual play of color and light and their interaction with elements of narrative that have become frozen in time or fragmented into isolated moments. The first movement is entitled “a letter of green.” The score notes that the clarinet, vibraphone, and especially the guitar are “unsynchronized” from one another, while the flute and piano remain more closely linked together in time. This free coordination, with little

¹ (“Music and the Picture Plane: Poussin’s ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’ and Morton Feldman’s ‘For Philip Guston,’” (in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 32 (Autumn 1997): 135–52, quote on p. 137)

² *Ibid.*, 139.

³ Program notes from the John Donald Robb Symposium at the University of New Mexico, March 22–31, 2012.

sense of meter or even pulse, places the work in the realm of the spatial, where events seem to be occupying the same space, but are less fixed in succession, and approach the plasticity of the visual arts. The piano works with ascending triplet figures, which are recognizable, yet continually varied, and echoed in the vibraphone for subtle differences in instrumental color. Sustained high notes emerge in the flute like moments of light, and the tremolos and swells in the vibraphone, guitar, and clarinet, create rippling echoes through the landscape of the work.

The longer central movement titled, “a sentence of blue,” revisits ideas from the first movement. A brief introductory passage for the whole ensemble settles around the pitch B, playing with different timbres and articulations of the same pitch, creating a feeling of depth and shifting perspectives through layered attacks, dynamics, and colors. After this, the instruments are featured more in turn, beginning with a solo passage in the guitar, with independent, freely-paced rhythms. These figures seem almost plaintive in comparison to the preceding material, but slowly, from the distended focus on individual timbres, the work moves back toward greater overlap between the instruments, while always remaining understated and reposed.

The last movement is entitled “a poem of white,” and while the progression from a “letter,” to a “sentence,” to a “poem,” suggests increasing lengths, the final movement is the shortest of the set, a brief final epigraph. While the previous movements’ titles highlight their fragmentary nature, and open-ended flow of ideas, the poem is more concise. Compared to the spare textures of the previous movements, the third begins with more activity which ebbs and rises again in waves, eventually fading out to its end. *The Chaco Wilderness* was written for the DownTown Ensemble, who perform it on this disk. Known for their interpretations of new music and collaborations with composers, they bring a sensitivity to timbre and nuance that brings this delicate, yet vibrant score to life.

String Quartet No. 1: Desert-Scape

Monk Feldman has described some of the questions that arose while composing her String Quartet No. 1 (2004), which bears the subtitle, *Desert-Scape*:

“I asked myself what kind of music might reflect the subtlety of the various transformations that occur in natural environments which are undisturbed by civilization? What are the other ‘voices’ one hears in those remote areas where only the sound of the wind breaks the stillness?”⁴

The search for voices in a desolate landscape turns again to the investigation of nature and time. The quartet is in two large sections, although they form a unified whole, running to a length of over thirty minutes. During this expanse of time, development occurs not through standard means of thematic development, or by approaching or departing from a goal or norm, but in a free association of ideas that come and go, and shift immeasurably from one extreme to another. Monk Feldman describes the significance of one of the most striking features of the work and its connection to the landscape:

“A slow wide vibrato that affects the tuning is one of the principal means of variation: this vibrato color and tuning is sculptured into other more conventional string quartet sounds—tone clusters moving in pulses of five beats, sustained pitches in registers isolated from other notes or clusters, contrapuntal sections of

⁴ Program notes to the John Donald Robb concert.

noise resulting when the performer is instructed not to press the string firmly down on the fingerboard. In one sense I thought of the variation of the string quartet color as a metaphor for the various qualities of smoothness and roughness one encounters in a desert landscape, where, despite the harshness of the environment, one often comes across a delicate flower.”⁵

This demanding range of vibrato techniques is evident from the very opening of the work, skillfully executed by the FLUX Quartet on this disc. It begins with each instrument using a different type of vibrato: the viola starts with a normal vibrato, followed by the first violin with a slow, wide vibrato and the second entering at the same time with a non-vibrato glissando. The cello adds a pizzicato figure, and shortly after, high harmonics to the overall texture.

Against these shifting vibratos, different figures come in and out of focus. The subtle variation of vibrato is echoed by different kinds of tremolos, and rapid alternation between two pitches. These vary freely from between five and eight notes per beat, at the choice of the performer, adding a sense of freedom, unpredictability, and immeasurability. The tremolos introduce noise into the piece, and still other performance techniques build on this new timbre, emphasizing the surface noise of the hair of the bow on the strings, or on the bridge of the instrument (playing *sul ponticello*), producing at a times a scratchy, whispering sound, and at others, a haunting ghost-like voice when the violin reaches for high harmonics. Like our tendency to anthropomorphize the howling of the wind, or babbling of a brook, these sounds seem to speak, but with non-human voices.

From this texture, short sustained melodies emerge in widely spaced double-octaves, evoking empty space and austere simplicity. In contrast to this, other melodic lines enter which occupy a narrow, cluster-like register. These figures are often played on the string with only one finger, although not as a glissando, but rather, releasing and reapplying pressure on the string, adding a sense of roughness, unevenness, and difficulty equally appropriate to depicting a sense of the desert. In fact this piece is full of contrasts from the wide to narrow registers, from completely still, sustained pitches, to the slightly undulating vibratos, to sweeping glissandi, and with every gradation in between.

If the first part of the piece is an exposition of these contrasting ideas, and ways of mediating these extremes, the second part seems to hint at different directions. Beginning from a unison B, the instruments move through different timbres and microtonal inflections. The rough, narrow melodic figures also return, and begin gradually accumulating from solo lines to a dense clustered tangle of voices. From these elements, familiar from the first section, other kinds of figures arise in the viola, which seem to slow down the tremolos and double stops heard previously into repeated notes and arpeggios of a more purely melodic character. Toward the middle of the movement, there is another moment of clear direction, where the sustained notes push gradually higher, to the uppermost register of the ensemble. All of this, however, happens at a glacial pace, as if operating in geological time.

The desert is a place of scale and changing perspective, from solid rocky cliffs to boulders, down to the gravel and smooth sand of the desert floor, all contrasting impressions, yet born of the same substance. In these changes of state, brought about by the unseen force of the wind, one seems to witness instantaneously the gradual effects of time acting on material. Similarly, in the

⁵ Ibid.

Quartet we hear gradations of pitch and noise, static and vibrating sounds, and motion from the slightest vibrato to the widest glissando: ideas that meet our senses as distinct, but are ultimately unified, revealed to be different scales of motion unfolding at different rates of time.

Soft Horizons

The score to *Soft Horizons* (2012), for piano, is inscribed with the location of Gaspésie, Quebec, in Monk Feldman's native Canada. As with the desert, the paradoxes of scale are palpable in the maritime landscape of this location, where the St. Lawrence River widens out to meet the Atlantic, the river gradually becoming the ocean in one direction, while the varying light—either reflecting off the water's surface, or mixing with the rising fog—creates another illusion, blurring the distinction between the surface of the water and the distant horizon, and between the water, air, and land.

Describing another work of hers, *The Northern Shore* (1997), which responds to the same stimulus, Monk Feldman explains that her intention is never to write programmatic music, but rather to respond more metaphorically:

“At the Gaspé peninsula . . . the opposite shore appears across the water as a mirage that is either enhanced or diminished by the intensity of the light on the water during the day. I kept the memory of this light in my mind during the composing of *The Northern Shore* . . . some aspect of the light and horizon might be intimated in the way differing registrations of the violin are sustained in relation to the percussion and piano.”⁶

Soft Horizons—written for Aki Takahashi, who performs it with the most delicate attention to color and attack—returns to this same play of light and register, dissolving any fixed point of reference into a misty floating world of sound. A twenty-minute-long work for solo piano, it explores the full range of the instrument, and in doing so creates its own audible illusion, gently playing with the inherent limits of human perception.

As in *The Chaco Wilderness*, the piano works with a prominent ascending triplet motive, intermingling it with isolated notes in different registers, and quintuplet figures, often featuring repeated notes. Repetitions are sometimes exact, but most often they are subtly varied in their presentation. The extreme registers make it difficult to determine intervals precisely, and they begin to erode the perception of pitch in favor of similarities in contour and broader gestures. The loose rhythmic flow of the piece also defies precise perception—the time signature changes almost every bar, and with the interplay between triplets and quintuplets, the frequent use of rests and off-beat but unaccented attacks, the music again approaches a state of plasticity in time. Against this background, the hands sometimes come into unison rhythms and a central register—a simple enough occurrence, but which in the context of such immeasurable and unpredictable music, seems boldly melodic. These brief moments of directed motion, however, are also perceptual illusions and dissolve into the fog almost as soon as they occur.

The German composer Walter Zimmermann was a friend of Morton and Barbara Monk Feldman, and speaking as a European outsider trying to come to terms with the independence and diversity of American composers, he made the analogy to *Desert Plants*. The landscape of American composers, which could seem so vast and barren at first glance is revealed to be

⁶ Barbara Monk Feldman, liner notes to *The Northern Shore* (Mode Records CD 244).

teeming with individual life. Perhaps responding to Morton Feldman's comments on the role of loneliness and isolation in the creative process, he marvels at how composers thrive under "a situation where they are challenged to think about the nature of their integrity, and because of their integrity become alienated . . . how to survive under hard conditions and the resulting beauty and vigour of this existence."⁷ A recording like the current one, highlighting one voice in the American desert, surely helps us appreciate the austere beauty of this world.

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Barbara Monk Feldman was born near Montreal in Quebec, Canada. After completing a Master of Music at McGill University in Montreal in 1983 she continued studies in Europe for a period at the Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg, Germany. Her Ph.D. in Music Composition is from the State University of New York at Buffalo where she studied with Morton Feldman, to whom she was married in 1987. At S.U.N.Y. Buffalo she also completed all but the dissertation for a Ph.D. in Music Theory. She was guest lecturer for performances of her music at the Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt during 1988–94. She has taught at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Northwestern University in Evanston, and at the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico. Her article "Music and the Picture Plane" has been published in the *RES Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* (1997) and in *Contemporary Music Review* (1998). Her music has been performed in Europe, Japan and North America, including the ICA in London, New Music Concerts in Toronto, the Festival Nieuwe Muziek in Middelburg, The Netherlands, the Other Minds Festival in San Francisco, and MaerzMusik in Berlin, and has been recorded for radio by BBC London, BRT Brussels, CBC Montreal and Toronto, HR Frankfurt and WDR Cologne.

The **DownTown Ensemble** was founded in 1983 by its co-directors Daniel Goode and William Hellermann. The Ensemble has made its reputation performing a number of different types of experimental music, such as traditionally notated and graphic music scores, sound/text music, ritual/intermedia pieces, performance art and Fluxus, improvisation in a number of traditions, large ensemble, scores for variable (unspecified) instrumentation, and interactive computer music. The Ensemble regularly features composers performing and directing their music—often written expressly for the Ensemble. There have been well over two hundred such collaborations since the group's inception. The DownTown Ensemble is a continuing project of the SoundArt Foundation, which also publishes, ten times per year, *The Calendar for New Music*. Since 2004, the SoundArt Foundation has also sponsored the Flexible Orchestra, a large ensemble which does one to two performances per year.

The **FLUX Quartet** has performed to critical acclaim at the Park Avenue Armory, Kennedy Center, EMPAC, Bowerbird, The Kitchen, and numerous festivals worldwide. The group's discography includes recordings on the Cantaloupe, Innova, Tzadik, and Cold Blue Music labels, in addition to two critically acclaimed releases on Mode Records that encompass the full catalogue of string quartet works by Morton Feldman. Strongly influenced by the irreverent spirit and "anything-goes" philosophy of the Fluxus art movement, violinist Tom Chiu founded FLUX in the late 90s. The quartet has since cultivated an uncompromising repertoire that combines late

⁷ Walter Zimmermann, *Desert Plants: Conversations with Twenty-Three American Musicians*. (Vancouver: Zimmermann, 1976), p. xi.

20th-century masters with today's foremost innovators, resulting in premieres of more than a hundred works. The long list of creative artists with whom the quartet has collaborated includes Thomas Buckner, Michael Byron, Ornette Coleman, Julio Estrada, David First, Oliver Lake, Alvin Lucier, Mark Neikrug, Wadada Leo Smith, and Matthew Welch, among others. FLUX discovers future musical visionaries through active commissioning and dedicated residency work at colleges throughout the U.S. and abroad. Also interested in mixed-media projects, the quartet has recently worked with genre-transcending artists such as Judy Dunaway, OpenEnded Group, Matthew Barney and choreographer Pam Tanowitz.

Since her student days at the Tokyo University of Fine Arts & Music, **Aki Takahashi** has been active in performing new music by such composers as Messiaen, Boulez, Xenakis, Takemitsu, and her contemporaries. Her landmark recording, *Aki Takahashi—Piano Space*, featuring twenty contemporary piano works, received the Merit Prize at the Japan Art Festival in 1973. Her series of Erik Satie concerts (1975–77, Tokyo), conceived and produced by Kuniharu Akiyama, triggered a Satie boom throughout Japan. In 1980 she was invited by Morton Feldman to become a Creative Associate of the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts at the State University of New York at Buffalo. John Cage, Morton Feldman, Peter Garland, Isang Yun, and her brother Yuji Takahashi, to name a few, have all composed works especially for her. In a project conceived and performed by Aki Takahashi, *The Hyper Beatles*, 47 composers from around the world were commissioned to create works inspired by various Beatles tunes. Since 2002, Takahashi has presented an annual recital series, Piano Dramatic, in Tokyo.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

The Northern Shore. Marc Sabat, violin; Stephen Clarke, piano; Dirk Rothbrust, percussion; Aki Takahashi, piano. Mode 244.

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman

Engineering and editing assistant: Jeanne Velonis

Recorded June 7–8, 2014 at the Academy of Arts and Letters, NYC.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC

Photo (of pictographs at Chaco Canyon, NM): Randall Roberts

Design: Jim Fox

All works published by the composer.

Piano by Steinway & Sons

This recording was made possible by a grant from the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trust.

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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BARBARA MONK FELDMAN (b. 1953)
SOFT HORIZONS

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1. *Soft Horizons* (2012) 22:07
Aki Takahashi, piano

String Quartet No. 1 (Desert-scape) (2004) 31:03

2. I. 11:34

3. II. 19:22

FLUX Quartet: Tom Chiu, Conrad Harris, violins; Max Mandel, viola; Felix Fan, cello

The Chaco Wilderness (2005) 9:42

4. a letter of green 2:42

5. a sentence of blue 5:24

6. a poem of white 1:30

The DownTown Ensemble: Margaret Lancaster, flute; Daniel Goode, clarinet; Larry Polansky, guitar, mandolin; Joseph Kubera, piano; Chris Nappi, vibraphone

TT: 63:07