

MIT Student  
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## Morton Feldman's String Quartet No. 2

The second quartet is well known for lasting six hours and demanding extreme endurance from its players. What seems to be less discussed than length, however, is the actual content of the music, or the underlying philosophy of it, or even the intention of the composer. Although I did indeed appreciate hearing the piece in concert, I was left with more questions than answers.

This could be due to my hearing only the middle third of the piece. A classmate tells me that the beginning followed a clear and directed process of additions, with different pitches being steadily added to the opening unison and different extended techniques and rhythms being added as well. On the contrary, the music I heard between hours two and four seemed much more stationary. There were of course a few distinct sections with distinct techniques, distinct rhythms, and distinct melodic cells, but overall I could discern no sense of progress or destination. Now I cannot claim that this is an overt problem with the piece without having heard the beginning or the end, but it does leave me wondering: what is the purpose of this middle section? Why are these two hours necessary to the music? I can partly answer these questions myself. The entire piece is slow, quiet, and contemplative so asking questions about what or why might just miss the point entirely. Maybe the music progresses purely for its own sake and serves only the composer's desire to capture transcendence through prolonged aural focus.

The piece's simplicity, built up through dynamic stasis and short repetition of complex musical cells, reminded me of both the hypercomplex music of the Boulez crowd and the ultrasimple music of the Minimalists. Listening somewhere between the low-level measure-to-measure developing variation and the high-level stasis gave me the best experience, however. Here, somewhere between the complex and the simple, the music took on a comforting omnipresence. I was able to hear just the shape of each cell instead of listening to every note, which felt something like reading words after having previously read only individual letters. One thing this mode of listening did was to heighten my perception of certain formal elements of the piece. There was one iconic cell, for example, that seemed to come back every forty minutes or so, breaking out of the underlying texture each time, giving me a guide to some sort of imperceptible temporal structure of the piece.

Another interesting thing about watching this piece live was seeing its physicality. The movement of the players added the notion of fatigue to a piece that has no aural manifestations of such a concept. Each player would shake out his exhausted hands when he finally got a small break after many minutes of uninterrupted playing. The piece to the players must be even more meaningful than it is to the audience, as the music does not simply wash over them but must be sorely wrung from their overexerted bodies. One feature that the audience has more control over is the physical space itself. Moving around the hall and experiencing the

music from different directions and proximities was an interesting Ivesian experiment in the effect of spatial perception. Sitting close to the musicians allowed me to focus much more on the content of the music, especially since I could follow along on the violinist's score, while lying down at the back of the hall allowed me to experience the music as more of a static space-filling noise. Interestingly, despite the potential afforded by experiencing the music from different vantage points, most of the audience chose to sit in one place rather than move around. This was probably in part the fault of the seating plan of the hall, which, although somewhat innovatively arranged in circular arcs instead of the usual rows, left unfortunately little room for meandering.

My overall experience of the piece was definitely good. However, I remain puzzled by the music and would definitely have to hear it again before I could make any judgment of it from a more musical, and less philosophical, standpoint. As the violinist hinted when he visited our class, a live performance of this piece is more a sound installation than a concert, so maybe my desire to find meaning and intent in it is futile. But without anything like meaning or intent propelling the music, maybe calling it music is also futile. Perhaps listening to it is meant to be more an intellectual exercise, or a means to achieve alternate states of mind. Or maybe the piece, in a way like 4:33, builds on its own lack of content, and exists for the intriguing purpose of reminding us what is not there.

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