

In my paper I would like to develop the above statement, quoted from an article with the same title as that of this conference, namely «Musik als Text». Generally, Dahlhaus' attitude to the textual character of music seems to offer a very useful methodological key for an approach towards avant-garde solutions, despite their anti-traditional demeanour. Some exemplary compositions by two representatives of the so-called New York School, Morton Feldman and Earle Brown, will serve as a point of departure for the question under consideration. The works of theirs which I have chosen are particularly important for the avant-garde transformations of musical text that have taken place in the second half of the 20th century. Such transformations raise substantial questions concerning the status of musical text in the innovations of the avant-garde. Whether and to what extent it would be valid and justifiable to speak about a new kind of text in the compositions by Feldman and Brown is far from being solved, and these questions still remain open to discussion and interpretation.

Among the many radical transformations accomplished by the avant-garde in the second half of the 20th century, the most spectacular appear to be their notational innovations. In order to understand and explain the status of the musical text resulting from these unprecedented changes, it is not sufficient to adduce their external appearance: it seems to be much more important to grasp the internal motivation which is crucial for the existence of the musical work itself, that is, for its identity as a whole, and also for the deployment of its components.

The creative personalities of Feldman and Brown took shape in the 1950s under the strong influence of John Cage (his enthusiastic disciples at that time included Christian Wolff). They all adhered to a common aesthetic programme, which may be summarized in the following statement of Cage's: «Where people had felt the necessity to stick sounds together to make a continuity, we [...] felt the opposite necessity: to get rid of the glue so that sounds would be themselves».² The result of this belief in the independent existence of sounds in a musical work was an attempt to abandon rational control of the material and also to abandon the idea of music as a quasi-logical continuity. «Only by unfixing the elements traditionally used to construct a piece of music could the sounds exist in themselves», stated Feldman.³

Apart from the influence of the ideas of John Cage, both Feldman and Brown were inspired by modern American painting, and especially by such representatives of the New York school as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clifford Still and Alexander Calder. The way these abstract expressionists treated paint as a substance, and their approach to coloristic qualities, free from any correspondence to reality, became a model for the projection of sounds in their pure, physical aspect. While Morton Feldman found in the paintings of that school an impulse towards a «more direct, more immediate, more physical world of sound»⁴, for Brown it became a model for creative spontaneity, mobile form, and for radically ingenious notation.

As in Cage’s experience, the basis for Feldman's and Brown's experiments was the idea of indeterminacy, upon which they grounded their own structural, sonorous and notational solutions. Let us attempt to examine the individual approaches to that idea in some selected works of theirs.

One of the best and most instructive examples of the aesthetic and notational premises adopted by Morton Feldman is provided by his cycle Projection (1950-51), consisting of five pieces with different instrumental set-

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4 See ibid., p. 46.
In that cycle he wished to advance far beyond rational rules for organizing his material; and in order to achieve this, he submitted two main parameters to indeterminacy, that is, pitch and duration. In his aleatoric concept, however, the element of chance was conceived in such a way as to concede unlimited creative freedom to the performers, and to subordinate the essential structure of the musical work to their actions. For this reason he used a special notation in the form of graphical symbols which were ambiguous, even though apparently reduced to the minimum. Consequently, instead of precisely defined pitches he specified dispositions of register (high, middle and low), in general, relative terms in his Projections, and the pitches were to be realized in detail by the performers in accordance with their own preference and imagination. The type of notation used in the whole cycle may be illustrated by an extract from Projection 2 for flute, trumpet, cello and piano (Ex. 1). In the parts of all the instruments relative pitch is represented by the vertical positions of the rectangles: high, middle or low); their length, on the other hand, indicates duration. The small lozenge (◇) indicates a harmonic on either instrument. The Arabic numerals later in the piano part define the number of sounds to be played simultaneously.

Despite specifying only general dispositions of register, Feldman wished the two parts to be synchronized. This was to be done in accordance with vertical slashes through the time axis (the intervals between them occur regularly at a speed which corresponds to a metronome mark of MM = 72).

The relativization of pitch reflected Feldman's opposition to the principal role of this parameter in traditional techniques of composition. The fact that Feldman was able to confer an indeterminate status on pitch had an important consequence: successions of sounds became free of syntactic constraints, while dynamics and tone-colour, although unspecified, were elevated to being the principal parameters of the whole cycle.

It is significant that all the sections of the cycle are designated as projections. This description reflected a new principle, that of creating a sound-space that consisted of a free progression of sounds in time. Such a concept of syntax produced novel aural effects: what Feldman proposed did not result in a chain of implications and realizations, but — on the contrary — in a suspension of any expectation. Monotonous fluxes of sound, with subtle sonorities juxtaposed with long rests in a manner appropriate to contemplative hearing, focus the listener's attention on the passing of time and on sonority per se, through substantial sections of the music: «My compositions [wrote Feldman] are not <compositions> at all. One might call them time canvases in which I more or less prime the canvas with an overall hue of music. I have learned that the more one composes or constructs the more one prevents Time Undisturbed from becoming the controlling metaphor of the music.»

A large part of Feldman’s experimental works consisted of piano-pieces. In his composition Piano (Three Hands) from 1957 he used full rhythmic indeterminacy based on so-called free rhythm notation. A similar idea underlay his Last Pieces for piano from 1959 (Ex. 2).

6 See Nyman, Experimental Music, p. 58.

5 Apart from Projection 2, the individual works in that cycle have the following settings: I — cello; III — two pianos; IV — violin, piano; V — three flutes, trumpet, two pianos, three cellos. Another cyclic piece from that period by Feldman (Intersection, 1951-53) consists of four parts (I — orchestra; II, III — piano, IV — cello).
The aesthetic and technical premises of Earle Brown from the early fifties show that he was trying to achieve a balance between two opposite principles, determinacy and indeterminacy. «What interests me [he wrote] is to find the degree of conditioning (of conception, of notation, of realization) which will balance the work between the points of control and non-control.» Gradually, indeterminacy came to prevail in that dialectic; and Brown developed it in an individual, idiomatic way. Like Feldman, Brown was strongly influenced by the mobile sculptures of Alexander Calder and the abstract paintings of Jackson Pollock.

Indeterminacy in Brown's compositions from the early fifties is manifest in two areas, form and notation. His main creative idea, common to both areas, was the result of a new phenomenology: the belief that the fundamental physical aspects of a musical composition are irrational and hence unmeasurable. In the commentary to his set of seven pieces completed in 1954 and entitled Folio, Brown wrote:

«Time is the actual dimension in which music exists when performed and is by nature an infinitely divisible continuum. No metric system or notation based on metrics is able to indicate all of the possible points in the continuum, yet sound may begin or end anywhere along this dimension.

Similarly, all of the other characteristics of a sound — frequency, intensity, timbre, modes of attack-continuation-decay — are infinitely divisible continua and unmeasurable.»

In Brown’s concept of mobile form based on graphic notation, there are two different, although closely connected, aspects to be distinguished: the score itself and the approach to it required on the part of the performers. Thus on the one hand Brown points to «a [mobile] score subject to physical manipulation of its components, resulting in an unknown number of different, integral, and [valid] realizations». On the other, he writes about «a conceptually [mobile] approach to basically fixed graphic elements; subject to an infinite number of

performance realizations through the involvement of the performer's immediate responses to the intentionally ambiguous graphic stimuli relative to the conditions of performance involvement.8

All the specific aspects of the mobile form exemplified in Brown's Folio have one common trait, which relies upon the creative imagination of the performers, and more precisely on «human will and capacities for responsible action (both technical and aesthetic) as a parameter acting and reacting upon the physical parameters which the composer has described in the score.» 9

By these means, Brown wished to create an alternative to form, based on rational and constructivistic foundations, including the principle of cause and effect. His notions of open form grew from his belief in the potential of the human mind, in other words, from a conviction that the performance of music depends on a particular level of creativity, which situates music itself in a privileged place among the arts.

A crucial role in Brown's project was played by notation, regarded as a stimulus to set free the imagination of the performers. The notation used in Folio displays different degrees of indeterminacy. In October 1952 for piano (Ex. 3), the parameters of pitch, dynamics and duration are written conventionally. Yet the lack of metrical signs and rests allows the performers freedom as to the total duration of the piece and its internal rhythmic relationships.

In November 1952 (subtitled Synergy) for piano and/or other instruments or sound-producing media (Ex. 4), the graphical symbols are limited to dynamics, pitch (specified only in relative terms) and durational propor-

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8 Ibid.
The latter constitute open time-fields, left free to the performers, and more precisely to their sense of the flow of sound.

The most radical solution is represented by his *December 1952* (Ex. 5), which is subtitled in the same manner as *November 1952*. This is the earliest score ever to use abstract graphical signs, and they recall the paintings of Piet Mondrian. Like the mobile sculptures of Calder, *December 1952* is a work whose form is


potentially unlimited. It is only in performance that shapes and configurations of elements emerge, and these are impossible to predict or determine in advance. The highly idiosyncratic character of the graphic notation used by Brown in December 1952, and also — in an exaggerated form — in Four Systems of 1964, was a result of the abolition of all conventional relationships between notational signs and sounds. All notational symbols, with more or less clearly determined denotative meanings, were replaced by a graphic metaphor, suggesting a work merely in general terms as it unfolded through time.

The radical approaches of Feldman and Brown confront one with a central question: is it legitimate (and to what extent) to consider their music as \(\text{?}\)? Dahlhaus, quoted above, answers this question in the negative, and he does so convincingly. There are two reasons for his answer. First, there is a lack of what Dahlhaus calls «logical and syntactic» principles of construction; secondly, there is a deficiency of expressive premisses. His negative judgment flows directly from his basic criteria, which are themselves grounded in the classical tradition. Therefore, if we wish to seek traces of (textual) character in these works, we have to reconstruct their musical sense ourselves. There is an evident transformation taking place in that realm, in which musical sense ceases to be «objectively given» (gegenständlich gegeben), and becomes potential and open. Apart from questions concerning the nature and the identity of the sense of the music, one is confronted with the problem of layers in musical works. Feldman’s and Brown’s compositions furnish evidence of an extreme reduction of what Dahlhaus called the «multi-layer character» of music. The double layer-components he distinguished (the acoustic substratum [Sonanz] and the layer of meaning) are apparently losing their complex nature in the works under discussion. Both composers consciously reject the postulates underlying expressive and syntactic conventions, the latter of which is «logical» according to Dahlhaus’s criteria; and they replace them with chance, used as a device for liberating sound from the necessity for transmitting sense and meaning in a traditional way. This would seem to represent a search for a new, purely phenomenological sense for music, which has as its purpose not a logical order (syntactic regularity) with specific, implicit meaning, but a metaphorical representation of being itself: Da-Sein.