

Note to Note with Nils Vigeland

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In June 2010, American composer and professor at the Manhattan School of Music Nils Vigeland took part in the 2nd International Music Festival "Contemporary Past" in St. Petersburg, Russia. To recap on this event, reMusik.org has asked Mr. Vigeland to answer a few questions about his own music and the musical influences of his past.

Mr. Vigeland, you have been an exponent of the music of Morton Feldman for many years. What in your opinion has been the general, audience reaction to his music and how do you think the perception of Feldman's compositions has changed over the years?

It's been very satisfying for me, because I love Feldman's music, to see that it has continued to generate wider interest from many different audiences. Because the music is difficult to categorize it attracts both listeners with a deep knowledge of contemporary music and as well as those who don't. That doesn't happen very often.

In 2010, you made a trip to St. Petersburg, Russia. During the trip one of your compositions was premiered at the St. Petersburg Philharmonic and you gave a lecture and worked a bit with the students at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Your lecture was entitled *Morton Feldman: Notation and Composition*. What notational elements of Feldman, if any, have you incorporated into your own music and how would you summarize Feldman's influence on the American music scene?

I have a number of pieces in which the vertical relationship of the instruments is not strictly controlled, though never as freely as a piece for example like *Crippled Symmetry*. But the larger implication of Feldman's notation is that harmonic fields are much wider than most composers think, that is that the note to note vertical relationship is less important now than ever before. I believe this is true for much music by composers who don't think this is true.

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Can you tell us a little about your experience working with Lukas Foss and what his influence has meant to you as a composer and teacher?

Foss was an immensely gifted musician—he had an enormous knowledge of the classic and modern repertoire, he was a great pianist and original conductor and he pushed himself constantly to renew his own work. But above all as a mentor he was generous to young composers, generous in advice and especially in performing their work. If he was interested in something he was immediately responsive, it made no difference to him if what he was interested was famous or unknown. As I get older, I realize that this openness of response and generosity of spirit is something rarely encountered in people of his stature. I remember him with gratitude.

How would you describe your teaching methodology when working with your own composition students at the Manhattan School of Music?

I try to encourage each student's own direction, trying hard to stay out of the way of what are generally called stylistic issues. This leaves two large areas for discussion generally—notation and the projection of instruments; this latter subject is not simply "orchestration" but rather the independence of parts, of textures. I'm looking for ways to have a common discussion with composers of very different kinds of music.

I recently listened to your solo piano work *Life Sketches* in the hands of contemporary pianist Jenny Q Chai. While listening, I couldn't help notice the influence of modern Jazz harmony at the beginning of Part 1. Could you please describe for us the harmonic influences that you have incorporated into your music thus far and what aspects of harmony you are interested in exploring in the future?

Well, I've never thought of this piece in terms of jazz, but if it's Bill Evans you had in mind, that's OK with me. Getting back to something I mentioned earlier in relation to Feldman, while he was a very vertical composer, one of his discoveries was to slow down the rate of change but allow the parts to fluctuate in their rhythmic relationship. In other words, don't think so much in terms of "chords" but of variability of pacing.

While Part 2 of the same work, *Life Sketches*, is prepared with a small object between the strings of the piano, Vigeland says he doesn't much use "what are called" extended or extra-musical techniques, describing his belief that "the natural sounds of instruments are varied enough and that often their denaturalization robs the instruments of their primary quality."

In your opinion, who have been, or are, the most influential composers in 20th and 21st century American music? How is their work still affecting the work of composers today?

In terms of influence, Copland is still the most influential and while I admire his music, my "American" line is Ives, Cage, Feldman and Reich. And of these, Ives is still the American composer who means the most to me.

More about Nils Vigeland: remusik.org/vigeland