CHAPTER 5

Tracing Space in Time: Morton Feldman's Rothko Chapel*

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Abstract

This study focuses on Morton Feldman's Rothko Chapel as a case of musical ekphrasis, re-presenting Rothko's chapel in Houston, Texas. The study presents an interpretation of Feldman's piece as a reflection of Rothko's aesthetic and social statement embodied in the chapel, by drawing a parallel between the experience of musical temporality in the piece and the chapel's relation to Western spirituality.

Keywords

music – Morton Feldman – Mark Rothko – Rothko Chapel – ekphrasis – musical time

1

In 1971, New York composer Morton Feldman travelled to Houston, Texas, for the opening ceremony of the spiritual center planned and designed by his recently deceased friend, painter Mark Rothko. It was during this visit that the founders of the chapel commissioned a composition to be performed in the space the following year. The resulting piece, Feldman tells in an interview, is a unique work in his repertory. While Feldman's compositions are remarkable in their dialogue with, and influence from, the works of New York expressionist painters circa 1950, Rothko Chapel stands out as the only piece by Feldman that bears a relationship to a specific work of art—Mark Rothko's chapel in Houston.1 Feldman characterizes the piece as “autobiographical,” and speaks in an interview of its connection to Rothko, to the chapel, and to Feldman's life.

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1 Jonathan Bernard's “Feldman's Painters” provides an insightful portrayal of the relationships between Feldman and New York expressionist painters.
The *Rothko Chapel* piece was a very interesting commission because it was the only score where other factors determined what kind of music it was going to be [. . .] When I wrote the *Rothko Chapel* [. . .] I saw the whole life of this guy [Rothko]. So what I decided in the *Rothko Chapel* was to treat it very—not biographical, but my identity was such that I decided to write an autobiographical piece. It was the only piece—and it will never happen again—when all kinds of facts, literary facts, reminiscent facts, came into the piece.²

Lydia Goehr mentions Feldman’s *Rothko Chapel* and its connection to Rothko’s chapel in Houston as an example of musical ekphrasis, the musical representation of another artwork.³ Originally referring to an ancient Greek rhetorical technique described in texts from the Roman period, the term *ekphrasis* was appropriated in the late nineteenth century to refer to works of literature that represent other artworks.

My study begins with a brief review of the origin of ekphrasis and its transformations over time, from its Greek roots until the relatively recent application to musical works. Since familiarity with the object of ekphrasis (the original artwork) is a prerequisite for an ekphrastic hearing of a composition, the discussion of Feldman’s piece in this paper is preceded by an interpretation of the chapel from a visitor’s point of view, drawing from literary theorist Leo Bersani and filmmaker Ulysse Dutoit. Finally, I offer guide points towards a hearing of Feldman’s piece as a musical re-presentation of a visitor’s experience inside Rothko’s chapel.

²  Feldman, “Interview by Fred Orton and Gavin Bryars,” 244.