

## THE GRID AS A VISUAL COMPOSITION TOOL IN MORTON FELDMAN'S MUSIC

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**SUMMARY.** This article examines Morton Feldman's use of graphic notation, focusing on the grid as both a compositional device and a visual framework. Feldman's innovative approach reflects his search for a musical language that transcended conventional notation and emphasized sound as an autonomous phenomenon. The evolution of his grids, from early box structures to later flexible forms, illustrates his adaptability and his concern with balancing clarity and openness. By analyzing selected scores, including *Intersection 2*, and *The King of Denmark*, the study demonstrates how Feldman's graphic methods shaped the relationship between composer, performer, and audience.

**Keywords:** Morton Feldman, Graphic notation, Grid, Experimental music, Visual influence

### 1. Introduction

Morton Feldman (1926–1987), one of the most distinctive American composers of the twentieth century, redefined the landscape of Western classical music through the use of graphic notation. His “graphs,” composed on printed graph paper, quickly became central to the New York new-music scene, attracting attention from contemporaries such as John Cage. While initially associated with indeterminacy and chance procedures, Feldman's graphs soon developed into an independent creative practice that influenced both his peers and subsequent generations of experimental composers.

The significance of these works is considerable: during the 1950s and 1960s they represented nearly a quarter of Feldman's published output,

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making them essential to a comprehensive understanding of his oeuvre. His frequent shifts between graphic and traditional notation, as well as the adaptation of grid-based thinking into later conventionally notated works, underline the importance of the graphic period within his broader creative evolution. The grid itself served not merely as a medium of presentation but as a compositional device, bridging visual structures and musical form in ways that resonated with Feldman's close ties to the visual arts<sup>3</sup>.

Despite their historical importance, Feldman's graphs remain underperformed and underrecorded, partly due to their brevity, unusual instrumentations, and interpretative demands. Yet they represent some of his most radical explorations of indeterminate pitch and time, balancing performer agency with subtle layers of compositional control. Far from marginal experiments, the graphs form a cohesive body of work that illuminates Feldman's unique negotiation between sound and image, positioning the grid as both a visual and musical instrument of composition.

### **1. Between Sound and Image: Morton Feldman's Use of Graph Paper**

Morton Feldman was renowned for his innovative approach to composition, particularly his use of graph paper and graphic scores. The motivations behind this choice reflect his pursuit of a distinctive musical aesthetic and his commitment to exploring sound through unconventional formal and structural means. Feldman was deeply concerned with the articulation of sonic space and the unfolding of sound within it. Graph paper provided a framework for mapping these parameters with precision. The grid structure allowed him to regulate the spatial distribution of sounds, shaping passages of varying density and textural weight. Also, he sought to reconceptualize musical temporality. The grid afforded him a means to design and manipulate temporal processes with a degree of flexibility unavailable in traditional notation, thus enabling radical experiments with duration and continuity.

By employing graph paper, Feldman offered performers scores that were less prescriptive in terms of pitch and rhythm. The measured space of the grid served as both a planning tool and a source of interpretive freedom, enabling musicians to perform the work with a degree of creative agency uncommon in conventional notation.

Feldman's practice was profoundly shaped by his engagement with modern visual art, particularly Abstract Expressionism. His close associations

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<sup>3</sup> Friedman, H. *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*. Exact Change, Cambridge, MA, 2000, p. 147.

with painters such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko<sup>4</sup> informed his turn to the grid, which may be read as an effort to integrate visual structures into musical composition and to establish a dialogue between sound and image.

Ultimately, Feldman's adoption of graph paper underscores the originality of his compositional thought. By embracing unconventional media, he carved out a distinctive path within twentieth-century music, establishing a notational environment that uniquely embodied his artistic vision<sup>5</sup>.

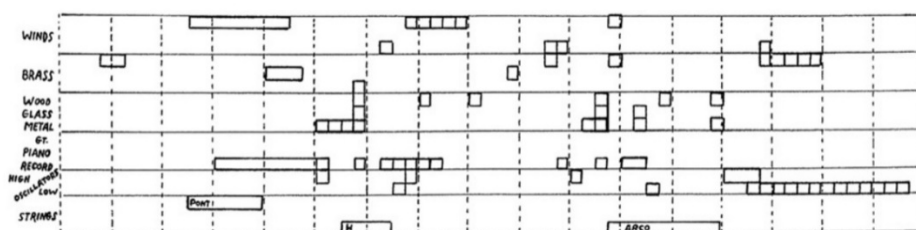
## 2. Distinctive Elements of Feldman's Notational Language

### 2.1. Boxes, Frames, and Cells in Feldman's Graphic Scores

Feldman's preferred graph paper was transformed into grids of squares or cells, within which he drew rectangular frames to contain his symbols. These frames, sometimes explicit and sometimes only implicit, structure both the layout of the score and its interpretive possibilities. Labels and symbols are closely tied to the grid: labels, usually placed around the frames, guide interpretation and facilitate reading, while symbols inside the frames denote musical events such as sounds or sound-producing actions.

Up to *Marginal Intersection*, the grids are divided into rectilinear units known as "boxes." Typically three cells high, each box contains twelve cells, though exceptions exist—for instance, *Marginal Intersection* employs two-cell-high boxes of eight units. Solid horizontal lines mark the upper and lower edges, while dotted vertical lines define the sides. A legend, often at the beginning of the score, assigns boxes to timbres, instruments, or instrumental groups, a system usually repeated across subsequent pages.

E.g. 1



Excerpt from the score of *Marginal Intersection*, page 3

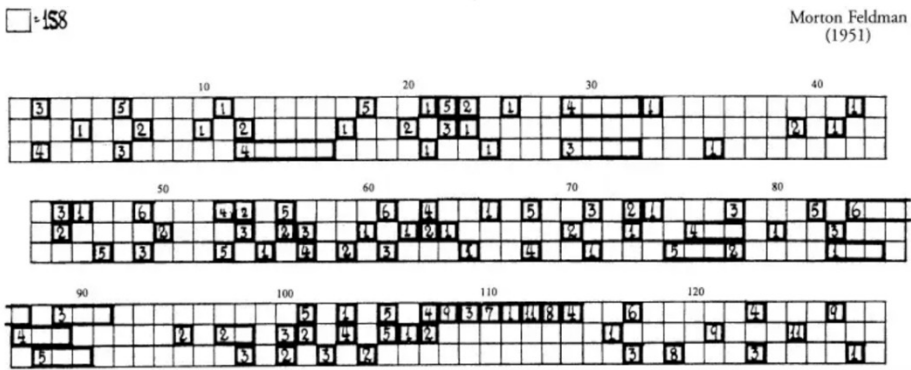
<sup>4</sup> IMMA. *Vertical Thoughts: Morton Feldman and the Visual Arts*. Irish Museum of Modern Art, 31 March-27 June 2010. <https://imma.ie/whats-on/vertical-thoughts-morton-feldman-and-the-visual-arts/>

<sup>5</sup> Thomas DeLio. *The Music of Morton Feldman*, Ed. Excelsior Music Publishing Company, 1995.

In Feldman's grids, the horizontal axis functions as a temporal guide, with symbols placed along it to locate sequences within defined spans of pulse. Unlike traditional metrical groupings, all pulses are treated equally, and the horizontal placement of a symbol generally indicates the onset and duration of a sequence in relation to the cell's pulse. Although proportional notation offers considerable flexibility, Feldman employed it with restraint, favoring clarity and performer spontaneity.

In later works, such as *Intersection 2* (for piano) and *The Straits of Magellan* (for flute, horn, trumpet, electric guitar, harp, piano, and bass), Feldman added vertical divisions marking each cell individually, giving the grid a more tabular appearance.

### E.g. 2



### Excerpt from the score of *Intersection 2*, page 1

In the case of the score excerpt above, each box corresponds to a measure of  $MM^6 = 158$ , unless otherwise specified. The vertical axis of each system indicates pitch registers—high, middle, and low—while the numbers specify how many sounds are to be played. Performers are free to choose dynamics and to make rhythmic entrances either at the beginning or within the given span. Sustained sounds, once initiated, must be held until the end of the notated duration.

Labeling of individual rows became standard in works for more than two instruments, sometimes associating multiple rows with a single instrument, as in *Atlantis* and *Fragment, Graphic, Orchestra* where the piano occupies three rows.

<sup>6</sup> Maelzel's metronome

### E.g. 3

[illegible]

**Excerpt from the score of *Atlantis*, page 1**

## 2.2. Symbols within the Grid

Feldman used symbols within his grids to indicate musical sequences, ranging from simple shapes to more complex composite forms. While early graphs relied mainly on squares and rectangles, later works introduced narrower signs, diamonds, and verbal cues, with *Intersection 2* and *Intersection 3* marking a gradual shift toward both greater variety and, eventually, simplification<sup>7</sup>.

**E.g. 4**

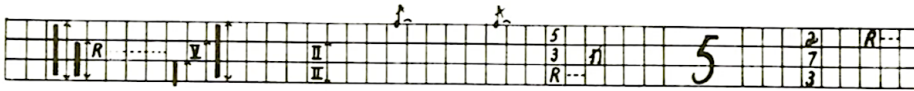
				3			9
		2				4	
	5						

**Excerpt from the score of *Intersection 2***

In *The King of Denmark* (for percussion), Feldman expands the possibilities of symbol placement, at times allowing markings to extend across multiple rows of the grid. A notable example is a composite symbol—an ornament sign combined with an incomplete tie—set outside the grid's frames. Such incomplete ties occur frequently in the score and function as defining elements within his composite notation.

<sup>7</sup> J.J. Nattiez (ed.), *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

## E.g. 5

Excerpt from the score of *The King of Denmark*

In the case of these symbols, the range of registers is no longer confined to low, middle, and high, but may be extended to five distinct levels: very low, low, middle, high, and very high. By allowing the symbols to extend beyond the conventional horizontal line of the grid, Feldman introduces additional flexibility in register allocation, enabling a more nuanced distribution of sound across the vertical spectrum. This expansion underscores his interest in refining the relationship between visual representation and sonic space, while at the same time granting performers greater latitude in interpreting register placement.

The undivided sections of *The King of Denmark* contain standard-sized symbols alongside large numbers that span all three rows of the grid, indicating single sounds to be played across all registers and at any point within the given time span<sup>8</sup>.

Some of Feldman's scores combine traditional and graphic notation, a practice that underscores his concern with how the music is presented and how it may be understood by performers.

## E.g. 6

A musical score excerpt for 'Fragment, Graphic, Orchestra'. It features multiple staves. The top staves show traditional musical notation for Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. Below these are several staves with a grid, each labeled with an instrument: Glock, Vib., CH., C.A., FFL., Wd., Trp., Tbn., and Perc. The grid contains various symbols, including vertical lines with arrows, Roman numerals, and large numbers, indicating specific register placements for each instrument.

Excerpt from the score of *Fragment, Graphic, Orchestra*

<sup>8</sup> Clemens Gresser, *Morton Feldman Says: Selected Interviews and Lectures 1964–1987*. Ed. by Chris Villars., *Music and Letters*, Volume 88, Issue 4, November 2007, Pages 706–708

Thus, the evolution of Feldman's grid-based notation reflects not only his adaptability but also the diversity of strategies he employed to negotiate complexity and the visual organization of the page. Each work demonstrates a tailored approach, in which the configuration of the grid is adjusted to the specific musical context, whether through changes in cell size, subdivision, or the distribution of symbols across rows and registers. The grid, therefore, does not operate as a fixed template but as a flexible framework, continuously redefined in response to compositional needs. This adaptability highlights Feldman's sustained concern with how musical ideas could be both represented and perceived, situating the visual dimension of notation as an integral part of his creative process<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. Conclusions

Morton Feldman's graphic notation represents a decisive shift in twentieth-century compositional practice, reflecting both his adaptability and his original vision of sound. From the early grids and boxes to later, more flexible forms, his notational language evolved in tandem with his exploration of time and space. This development illustrates not only technical ingenuity but also a sustained preoccupation with how music could be visually conceived, communicated, and understood.

By freeing performers from rigid prescriptions of pitch, rhythm, and dynamics, Feldman placed interpretation at the center of the musical experience. His scores opened a space for collaboration, where performers were encouraged to contribute actively to the shaping of sound. This deliberate ambiguity, far from being a limitation, became a powerful tool through which Feldman emphasized listening, perception, and the subjective unfolding of musical time.

Ultimately, Feldman's graphic notation stands as both a compositional method and an artistic statement. Influenced by abstract visual art yet uniquely his own, it redefined the relationship between composer, performer, and audience. The originality of his approach lies in transforming notation into an expressive medium in itself—one that continues to challenge conventions and inspire fresh encounters with the possibilities of sound.

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<sup>9</sup> B. H. Friedman – Ed., *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, Cambridge MA: Exact Change, 2000.

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