

March 11, 2017

# Spektral Quartet

## Morton Feldman: String Quartet No. 2

### SPEKTRAL QUARTET

Clara Lyon Violin  
Maeve Feinberg Violin  
Doyle Armbrust Viola  
Russell Rolan Cello

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Running time is approximately six hours with no intermission.

Presented in conjunction with the exhibition *Merce Cunningham: Common Time*, on view through April 30, 2017.

Special thanks to the Poetry Foundation for the generous gift of copies of Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* (1964) for today's concert attendees. To learn more about Frank O'Hara or to subscribe to *Poetry Magazine*, please visit [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org).

Additional thanks to Ryan Dohoney at the Bienen School of Music of Northwestern University.

Spektral Quartet received generous support and guidance for *Morton Feldman: String Quartet No. 2* from the Elizabeth F. Cheney Foundation, Tom Chiu, Ryan Dohoney, Andrew McCann, and Max Tamahori.

Lead support for *Merce Cunningham: Common Time* is provided by the Harris Family Foundation in memory of Bette and Nelson Harris; Caryn and King Harris, Katherine Harris, Toni and Ron Paul, Pam and Joe Szokol, Linda and Bill Friend, and Stephanie and John Harris; Cari and Michael Sacks; and Helen and Sam Zell.

Major support is provided by the Walter and Karla Goldschmidt Foundation, Abby McCormick O'Neil and D. Carroll Joynes, anonymous, and the Nancy Lauter McDougal and Alfred L. McDougal Exhibition Fund.

Additional generous support is provided by the Irving Harris Foundation, Joyce E. Chelberg, NIB Foundation, Robert Lehman Foundation, Jennifer and Alec Litowitz, and Carol Prins and John Hart/The Jessica Fund.

Special thanks to the exhibition chairs, Sara Albrecht and Anne L. Kaplan.

The MCA is proud to partner with the Harris Theatre, Hubbard Street Dance, and the Joffrey Ballet.

*Merce Cunningham: Common Time* is organized by the Walker Art Center with major support provided by the Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Generous support is also provided by Agnes Gund and the Roy Lichtenstein Foundation.



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## ABOUT THE PROGRAM



Spektral Quartet  
Photo: Elliot Mandel

### MORTON FELDMAN STRING QUARTET NO. 2 (1983)

"You are a poetic extremist!" John Cage confronted his friend Morton Feldman with this assessment following the premier performance of his *Five Pianos* (1972) in Berlin, in which both participated. The epithet was not necessarily kind, but it was surprisingly apt. Feldman had long tacked toward the extreme limits of what might constitute a piece of music, particularly in the realms of dynamics and form. Feldman's music hovers on the edge of silence and should be played so as to be *just* audible. It draws us in by gently demanding our attention. In the realm of form, Feldman builds up his music from *instants*—small units of sound composed of a single chord or a repeated gesture of only a few notes. "The instant" was a term Feldman borrowed from existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The composer understood it as an emotionally charged musical moment "philosophers had failed to categorize" that offered up the "abstract experience" that Feldman and his painter friends (Pollock, Rothko, Guston) valued.

Late in Feldman's career, his extremism pushed toward another musical parameter, one of time. He had since the 1960s encouraged listeners to think of his music "as an environment," though his pieces in that decade never extended beyond twenty

minutes. He fulfilled this desire for temporal saturation only in his music of the 1980s when his pieces begin stretching from ninety minutes, to three hours, and, ultimately, to six hours with *String Quartet No. 2*.

Feldman's expansion of his music's duration was bound up with a fundamental ontological question: Was music an art form? He first formulated this question in 1973 as an odd opposition. Was his music to be an "illusion of feeling" or an "illusion of art"? The question of whether music could produce an "illusion of art" occupied him for the rest of his life. In the year prior to the completion of *String Quartet No. 2*, he framed the question in relation to the writings of Marcel Proust and James Joyce:

So I'm at the end of my life, let's say I'm at the end of my life; working since I'm thirteen; I wake up one day and I say to myself, "What the hell am I involved with? Memory forms? Musical forms? . . . I mean what the hell is it all about, all the set poses, the set emotions? Do we have anything in music for example that really wipes everything out? That just cleans everything away, from some aspect of illusion and reality? Do we have anything like Proust? Do we have anything comparable to *Finnegans Wake*? I wonder.

So that's something I think about. And that's where I am now: Is music, could it be, an art form? That it could exist on its own terms, whatever those terms are.

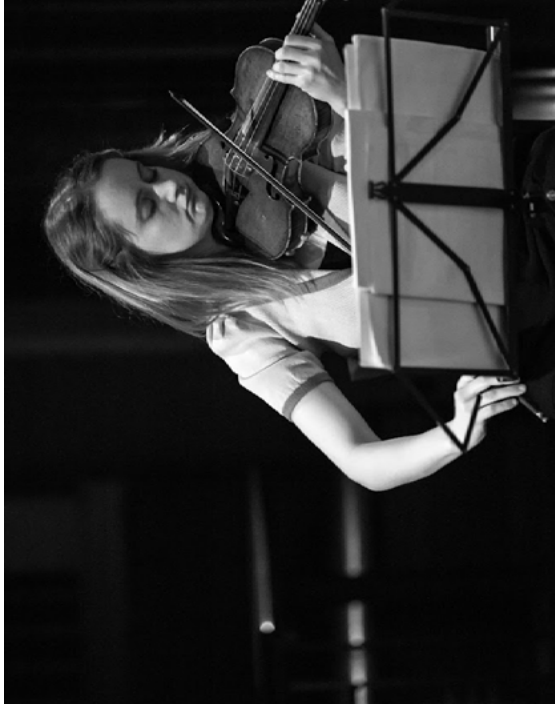
Here the question of art becomes a matter of memory and forgetting, of "wiping everything out" or, as Feldman later put it, of "formalizing the disorientation of memory."

For a piece of chamber music, Feldman's *String Quartet No. 2* is—by comparison with a quartet of Haydn or even late Beethoven—Proustian in scale. Though certainly less of a time commitment than reading the whole of *In Search of Lost Time*, an experience of the second quartet in a single sitting in effect restages Proust's drama by musical means. More environment than monument, the music of the quartet works through a quiet logic of repetition and transformation that acts directly on our memory. Over the course of six hours we are gradually attuned to the soundscape of the quartet, which is bountiful in its variety, subtlety, and pathos. For example, after the initial anxious music of the beginning moments, the music unwinds and dilates. About forty minutes into the piece, a gorgeous and achingly sad chorale emerges and keeps us company for about four or five minutes. It then vanishes as other fragments we've heard before return. The sense of loss is, at least for me, profound. This music, unlike other blocks of music, never returns in the identical form in which we first hear

it. Instead, every hour or so we're offered a shadowy version of the music, a grayed-out reprise of the beauty we experienced earlier. As in Proust, we are offered sensations that recall our earlier delight but never offer us the same experience again. We come only to an awareness of the impossibility of recapturing lost time. It is a simple lesson, both edifying and melancholic.

At the risk of over-determining the listening experience you might have of String Quartet No. 2, I've hoped to offer a sense of how you might chart a path through the piece. I encourage you to come to know it as you might another person. As with a new friend, you'll be drawn to some sounds more than others, take more interest in one aspect than another, recognize something that you love or hate. It is a wonder that music can do this *at all* and that Feldman's "memory forms" gathered in String Quartet No. 2 seem to achieve this drastic human presence in a way unique to late modernity.

Ryan Dohoney  
Assistant Professor in Musicology  
The Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University



Spektral Quartet  
Photo: Elliot Mandel

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Matthew Duvall, *Whisper(s)*  
Photo: Elliot Mandel

# WHISPER(S)

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## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

### SPEKTRAL QUARTET

is an ensemble-in-residence at the University of Chicago that formed to actively pursue a vivid conversation between the exhilarating works of the traditional canon and the music being written today.

Their most recent recording, *Serious Business* (Sono Luminus, 2016), received a nomination for the 2017 Grammy Award in the Best Chamber Music/Small Ensemble category. It is the foursome's most ambitious recording project to date, and features premieres by three composers, Sky Macklay, David Remnick, and Chris Fisher-Lochhead, and Haydn's Quartet Op. 33 No. 2, nicknamed "The Joke." Their multiple-city tour in 2016, which featured Beat Furrer's String Quartet No. 3 and *Bagatellen*, a new work by Hans Thomalla, was critically acclaimed by *The New York Times*.

Spektral Quartet champions public performances of classical music in the sphere of everyday life by prioritizing immersion and inclusivity through close-proximity seating and intimate, unconventional venues. Major upcoming projects include the quartet's Italian debut in Rome, a recording of new works by composer Anthony Cheung, and a new initiative in collaboration with multidisciplinary artist Theaster Gates on Chicago's South Side. Spektral Quartet's 2016-17 season features new pairings of works by Ravel, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn with the voices of emerging

composers and new commissions by George Lewis, Augusta Read Thomas, Samuel Adams, and Tomeka Reid.

Among the ensemble's forward-minded endeavors, their project Mobile Miniatures invited more than forty composers from across the United States, including David Lang, Augusta Read Thomas, Nico Muhly and Shulamit Ran, to write ringtone-length pieces available for download on mobile devices. As part of their commitment to new music in Chicago, their debut recording in 2013, *Chambers* (Parlour Tapes+), features all works by Chicago-based composers. Their discography also includes a recording with Third Coast Percussion of *Selene*, an octet by Augusta Read Thomas for the album *Of Being Is a Bird* (Nimbus Records), and *From This Point Forward* (Azica Records), an exploration of nuevo tango and Latin jazz with bandoneon virtuoso Julien Labro.

It is central to Spektral Quartet's mission to cultivate a love of, and curiosity for, unfamiliar sonic territory and exceptional works of the past among the next generation of string players. Currently ensemble-in-residence at the University of Chicago, the quartet has also participated in residencies at the New World Symphony, Stanford University, Northwestern University, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the Walden School, among others.



Spektral Quartet  
Photo: Drew Reynolds