

# DESCRIPTION-AS-ANALYSIS AND ORCHESTRATION-AS-FORM IN FELDMAN'S *COPTIC LIGHT* (1985)

Thomas Johnson  
Skidmore College

SMT/AMS Annual Meeting  
November 4, 2018 | San Antonio, TX



# *Coptic Light* (1985)

- Listening: BLOCK 1 out of 38
- Ames (1997): “This neglect [of his works] undoubtedly resulted from the fact that although Feldman had a unique and influential style, he avoided rigorous compositional procedures.  
The music simply does not lend itself to tidy analysis.”
- This paper is about the many challenges of analyzing Feldman...

# *Coptic Light* (1985)

- EXAMPLE 1: 8-bar BLOCKS in *Coptic Light* with repeated sections shaded.

Block: 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
First bar: 1	9	17	25	33	41	49	57	65	73	81	89	97	105	113	121	129	137	145
Measures rep.										6	6							8

Block: 20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38
First bar: 153	161	169	177	185	193	201	209	217	225	233	241	249	257	265	273	281	289	297
Measures rep.	5	5	4	4		5	7			8			6	8	6	6	8	8

# Block 1

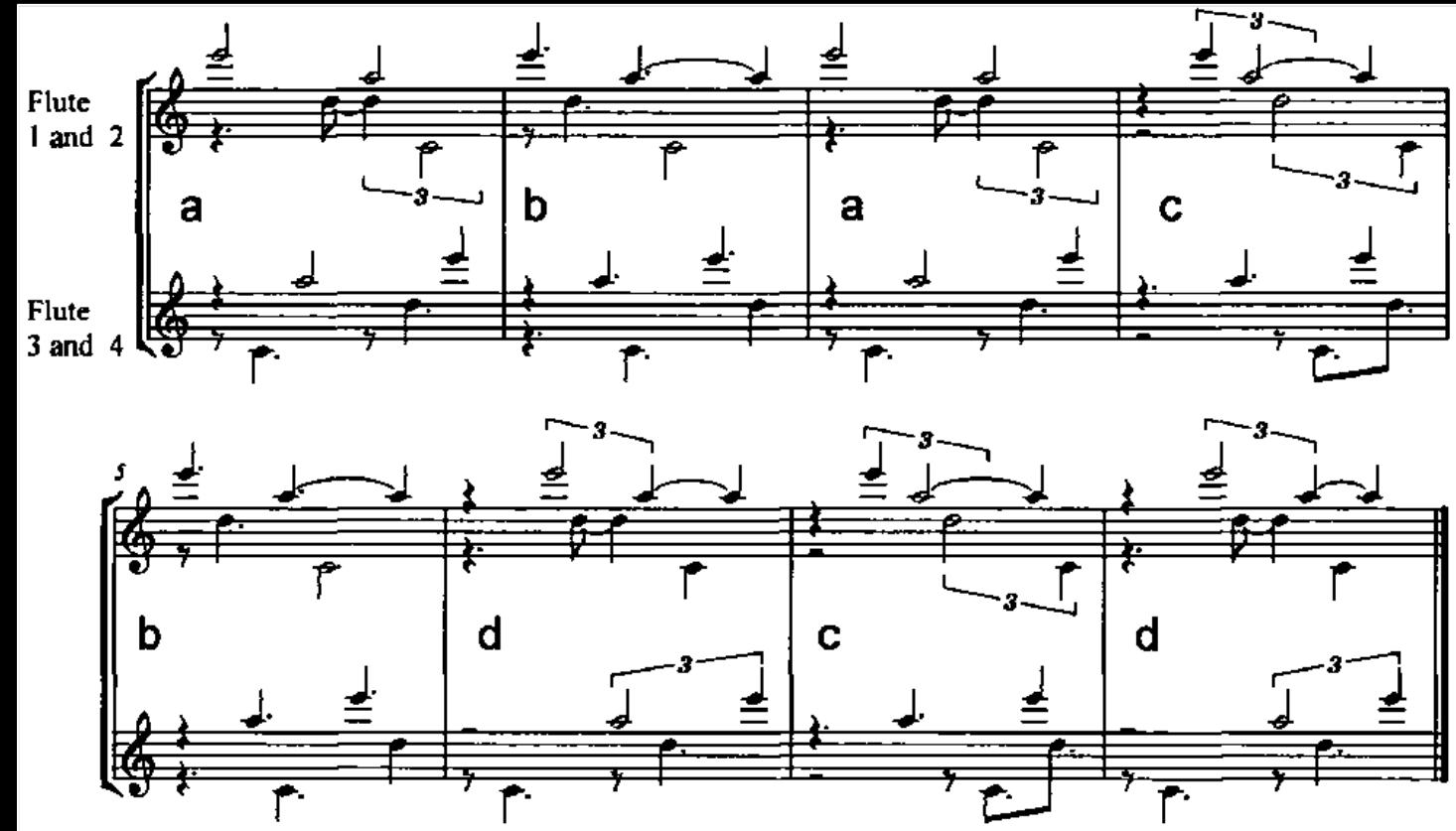
- DUKER (2011): Flute parts with patterns noted.

The image shows a musical score for two flute parts. The top staff is labeled "Flute 1 and 2" and the bottom staff is labeled "Flute 3 and 4". The music is in common time. The score consists of four measures. The first measure of each staff contains a single note. The second measure contains a note followed by a休符 (rest). The third measure contains a note followed by a休符 (rest). The fourth measure contains a note followed by a休符 (rest). The notes are marked with vertical stems and horizontal dashes. The休符 (rest) is marked with a vertical stem and a horizontal dash. The notes are grouped into four pairs, labeled 'a', 'b', 'a', 'c' in the top staff, and 'b', 'd', 'c', 'd' in the bottom staff. Each group of notes is enclosed in a bracket with the number '3' above it, indicating a three-note pattern. The休符 (rest) is also grouped into pairs and labeled 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd' in the top staff, and 'b', 'd', 'c', 'd' in the bottom staff. Each group of休符 (rest) is enclosed in a bracket with the number '3' above it, indicating a three-note pattern.

# Block 1

- DUKER (2011): Flute parts with patterns noted.

- Oboes: c,c,b,d',d',b,a,a
- Violins: b,d,c,a,a,c,d,b



# Block 1

- HANNINEN (2004): Population of dyads.

pcs $\{A, C, D, E\} = [0, 2, 4, 7]$	$\{A, E\}$	Vn 1, 2 (8)	Fl. 1, 3 (8)	Ob. 2, 4 (8)	Cl. 1, 3 (8)
	$\{C, D\}$	Vla, Vlc. (8)	Fl. 2, 4 (8)	Ob. 1, 3 (8)	Cl. 2, 4 (8) Timp. (8)
pcs $\{B\flat, C\flat, D\flat, E\flat\} = [0, 1, 3, 5]$	$\{B\flat, E\flat\}$			Bsn 1, 3 (8)	Trp. 1, 3 (8)
	$\{C\flat, D\flat\}$			Bsn 2, 4 (8)	Trp. 2, 4 (8)

- Covers most of the winds and strings
- Analyzes lots of pitch content
- Attempts to capture overall impression of this swirl of sound

# What is the “it” of *Coptic Light*?

*Having an avid interest in all varieties of arcane weaving of the Middle East I recently viewed the stunning examples of early Coptic textiles on permanent display at the Louvre.*

*What struck me about these fragments of coloured cloth was **how they conveyed an essential atmosphere** of their civilization. Transferring this thought to another realm, I asked myself what aspects of the music since Monteverdi might determine its atmosphere, if heard 2000 years from now. For me the analogy would be one of the instrumental imagery of Western music.*

*These were some of the metaphors that occupied my thoughts while composing Coptic Light.*

*An important technical aspect of the composition was prompted by Sibelius's observation that the orchestra differed mainly from the piano in that it has no pedal. With this in mind, I set to work to create an **orchestral pedal**, continually varying in nuance. This “chiaroscuro” is both the compositional and the instrumental focus of Coptic Light.*

What is the “it” of *Coptic Light*?

Form and Narrative, less granular

Essentially, a rounded binary...

# Orchestral GROUPINGS

- EXAMPLE 3: Groupings and idiomatic gestures

(1) Winds+Harps	(2) Strings	(3) "Stacks"	(4) Pianos	(5) Timpani
4 Flutes 4 Oboes 4 Bb Clarinets 4 Bassoons 4 F Horns 4 Trumpets 4 Trombones Tuba 2 Harps	18 Vln. 1 16 Vln. 2 12 Vla 12 VC	4 Vib./Marimba 10 CB	2 Pianos	Timpani

↓ Block 15

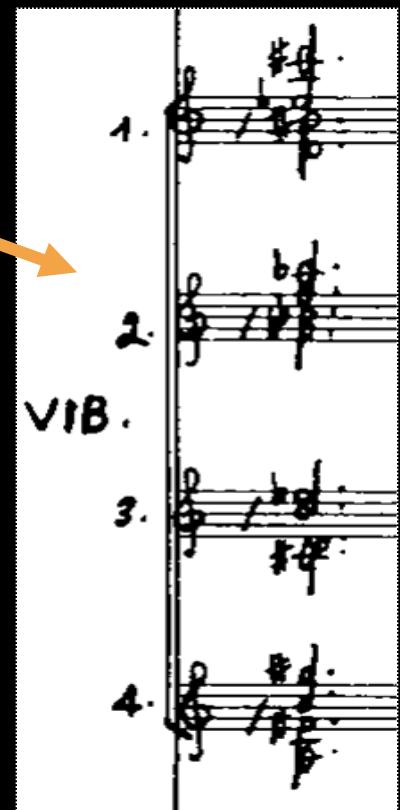


FL.  
OB.



VN.  
VLA.

↓ Block 13



VIB.  
CB.

← Block 6

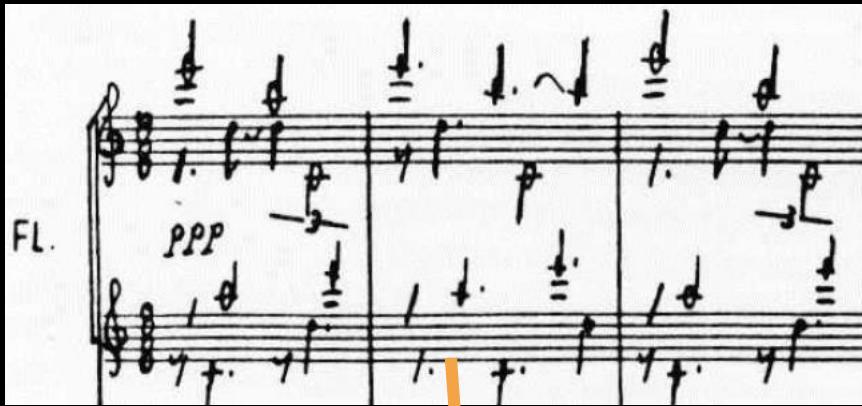
# ♪ Orchestral GROUPINGS

(1) Winds+Harps	(2) Strings	(3) "Stacks"	(4) Pianos	(5) Timpani
4 Flutes	18 Vln. 1	4 Vib./Marimba	2 Pianos	Timpani
4 Oboes	16 Vln. 2	10 CB		
4 Bb Clarinets	12 Vla			
4 Bassoons	12 VC			
4 F Horns				
4 Trumpets				
4 Trombones				
Tuba				
2 Harps				

- LISTEN FOR how the instrumental patterns subtly shift.

# Orchestral GROUPINGS

- EXAMPLE 4: Flutes' path towards prototypical grouping



← Block 1



← Block 2

Block 3 →

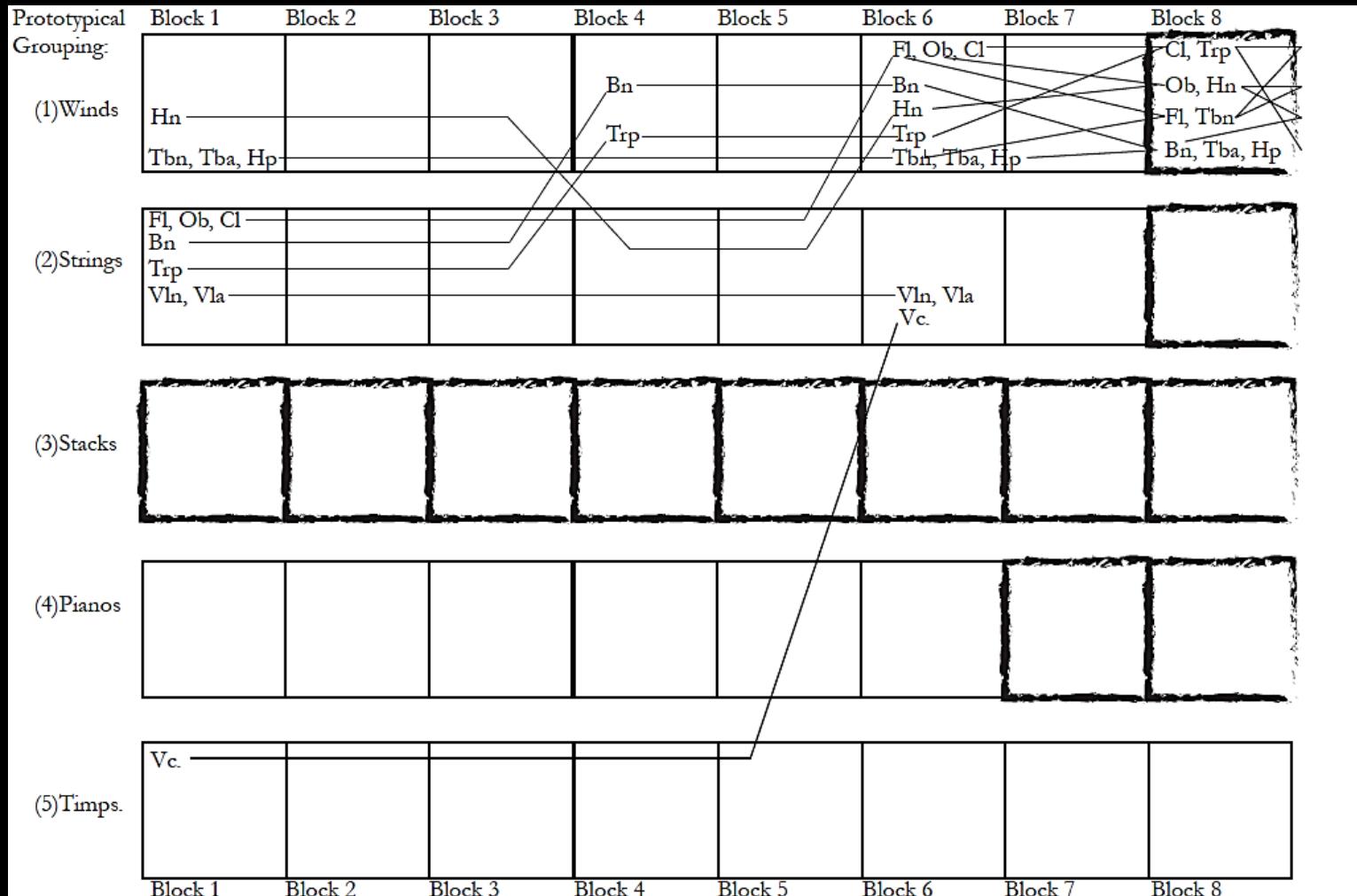


Block 16 →



# Orchestral GROUPINGS

- EXAMPLE 5: Paths taken as GROUPINGS emerge



# Part 1: Through BLOCK 19

- Prototypical groupings continue.
- Stuck in narrative rut, though taken to extreme in BLOCK 19
- Johnson (2013), narrative in *Triadic Memories*
  - 1. Aimlessness
  - 2. Pervasive uncertainty
  - 3. Process of disintegration
  - 4. Enfeebling slide towards paralysis

## Part 2: BLOCKS 20–32

- Strings turn towards winds/stacks GROUPINGS

Block 27

Block 21

- Rhythmic Acceleration:
  - Winds offset attack points
  - High strings move to IC 1&2
  - Time signature gradually contracts from 8/8 to 7/16
  - Pizzicato strings, hocketing in winds

# Coda: BLOCK 33 to the end

- Jolting near-patterns become more motor-like. GROUPINGS collapse
- Opening E-A violin dyad returns; recapitulatory sounding!

Musical score for Flute (FL.) and Oboe (OB.). The score consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Flute, and the bottom staff is for the Oboe. The music is in common time. The notation is rhythmic, with various note heads and stems. The Flute part features a series of eighth-note patterns, some with grace notes. The Oboe part follows a similar pattern. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines.

Musical score for Violin (VN.) and Cello (VLA). The score consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Violin, and the bottom staff is for the Cello. The music is in common time. The notation is rhythmic, with various note heads and stems. The Violin part features a series of eighth-note patterns, some with grace notes. The Cello part follows a similar pattern. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines.

# Form of *Coptic Light*

Intro.

A

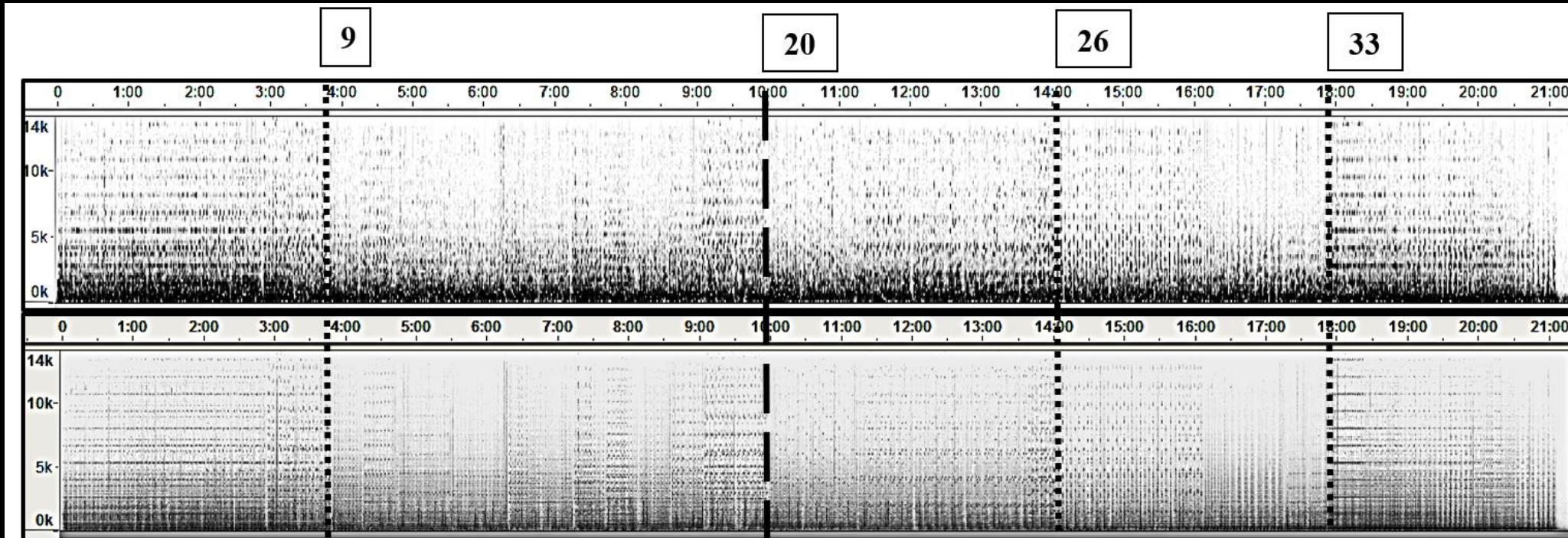
9

B

20

A'

33



# Feldman

- Marilyn Nonken interview (2004)
- Bunita Marcus
  - *Adam & Eve* (1987)



- Bunita Marcus
  - *Adam & Eve* (1987)

Jenny Johnson (2009) about *The Rugmaker*:  
“The opening of *The Rugmaker* washes over me like rain.

I am gripped by its lacy, liquid glissandi,  
its delicate, gossamer, seashell fragment harmonies,  
and its crisp and brittle lattice-like pitch patterns.”

COMMISSIONED BY THE MIDDLEBURG FESTIVAL FOR THE XENAKIS ENSEMBLE

ADAM AND EVE

Bunita Marcus

♩ = 54

GENTLY SHAPED:

FLUTE

VIBRAPHONE I  
(NO MOTOR)  
ped.

VIBRAPHONE II  
(NO MOTOR)  
ped.

PIANO

VIOLIN

CELLO

Thank you

# Selected Bibliography

Duker, Philip. 2008. "Following Echoes: Exploring the Reverberations between Repetition, Analysis, and Musical Experience." PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan.

Hanninen, Dora. 2012. *A Theory of Music Analysis: On Segmentation and Associative Organization*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press.

———. 2004. "Feldman, Analysis, Experience." *Twentieth-Century Music* 1 (2): 225–51.

Hirata, Catherine. 2003. "Analyzing the Music of Morton Feldman." PhD Dissertation, Columbia University.

———. 1996. "The Sounds of the Sounds Themselves: Analyzing the Early Music of Morton Feldman." *Perspectives of New Music* 34 (1): 6–27.

Johnson, Jenny. 2009. "The Luminous Noise of Broken Experience: Synesthesia, Acoustic Memory, and Childhood Sexual Abuse in the Late 20th Century United States." PhD Dissertation, New York University.

Johnson, Steven. 2013. "It Must Mean Something: Narrative in Beckett's *Molloy* and Feldman's *Triadic Memories*." *Contemporary Music Review* 32 (6): 639–68.