Ensemble Vide

Feldman At Sunrise

Britten Studio, Aldeburgh, UK

Seagull screams pierce the darkness. The Suffolk skies will soon shift from night to day, but for now, we accept the brink. Snape Maltings' Britten Studio is dimly lit, but audience members can just make out their neighbours, many of whom are laid on oversized cushions. Some are wrapped in blankets, as though stirred unexpectedly in those worrisome pre-dawn hours. A pillow bears the assertion that "listening is an act of surrender". In this context, at 4:30am, our vulnerability feels assured. Absolute silence prevails as we wait for Ensemble Vide to enter the round, where they will perform Morton Feldman's 300 minute work *For Philip Guston* (1984), as part of Aldeburgh Festival. A pencil scratches.

For Philip Guston is dedicated to its titular artist, who Feldman met via John Cage. The composers and artist became part of the so-called New York School, which included Christian Wolff, Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Feldman and Guston, once close, became estranged towards the end of the latter's life, and *For Philip Guston* was written four years after the artist's death. The elongated – epic, perhaps – memorial is typical of Feldman's experimental approach to duration and is only narrowly overshadowed by *String Quartet II*, which clocks in at 330 minutes.

The meditative nature of *For Philip Guston* – in part due to Feldman's restricted timbre and dynamics (the entire piece does not go above mezzo-piano) – masks the gruelling task that befalls the performers. Percussionist Alexandre Babel, flautist Claire Chase and pianist Anna D'Errico begin without showmanship; the focus is largely on the flute, which uses a narrow selection of notes within the mid range. There is no vibrato; the sound is pure and uncluttered. Light begins to shaft through the large window in the studio. The music expands and contracts, the inhalation and exhalation of the instruments merges with the audience's activity. Legs are crossed and uncrossed. Cushions are soundlessly plumped.

The raspier tone of the piccolo is one of the few indicators of change. The minimal melodies – minimal but not minimalist – form clean lines, punctuated with gentle bell tolls. There is agitation in the stillness; the endless sound is at once cleansing and irritating. Daylight reveals the passing of time. The lure of a watch-check proves irresistible: three hours passed, two more to go. Snores betray their owners, but someone is on guard to prod the slumberous.

The linear structure appears unchanging, yet closer listening reveals its development – so incremental, so subtle, that many pages of handwritten notation pass by before the kaleidoscopic change is observed. The music stems from a unison incipit based on Cage's name: C-G-A flat-E flat, an acknowledgement of the composer's role in Feldman's friendship with Guston. Feldman's tactile approach to instrumentation emphasises the beauty of individual notes. The performers of Ensemble Vide understand this: each section is delicately realised with no breaks. The bottles of water at the performers' feet remain unopened.

When the music reaches its conclusion, some five hours after it began, the pause before the applause is deafening. At first, we feel bereft without the now beloved splodges of sound. But amazement quickly replaces disorientation. The mystery of Feldman's soundscape has unravelled; the sun has risen.

Claire Jackson

Beki Smith