

Irene Haupt Photography

Composer Morton Feldman will be the focus of Bowerbird's American Sublime festival at venues across Philadelphia.

Storm of new music on horizon

By David Patrick Stearns
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

Like a perfect storm, three big new-music events are simultaneously converging on Philadelphia, all but unbeknownst to one another.

June's unofficial new-music festival has the Opera Company of Philadelphia giving the U.S. premiere of Hans Werner Henze's *Phaedra* June 3-12 at the Kimmel Center, while the company's former chorus master, Donald Nally, unfurls his Month of Moderns Festival with the Crossing choir June 5, 18, and 26 at Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. The synergy continues with Bowerbird's June 4-12 American Sublime festival, devoted to composer Morton Feldman in venues all over Philadelphia. Ironically, the time slots were chosen to avoid competition from high-profile events in the regular concert season.

Any one of these events would have been unthinkable as recently as 1999, when the Philadelphia Orchestra

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Storm of new music is near

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caused a minor scandal by announcing a 100th-anniversary season with nothing but 20th-century music. And these June events aren't the sort of new music that's easily mistaken for old music. *Phaedra*, which will be performed at the Kimmel Center's smaller Perelman Theater, is hardcore Henze.

"Is Philadelphia ready? I think so," said Robert Driver, stage director of the production and artistic director of the company. "You wouldn't believe the number of people who have come to me excited about everything we've done at the Perelman [including Berg's *Wozzeck* and Golijov's *Ainadamar*]. And not all of them young. I had three subscribers — ancient, holding onto each other, literally — ask me to keep bringing in these unusual experiences."

Nally recalled, "I used to sit with Robert Driver and say, 'Can't we please do a piece of new music? Please?' And he would say, 'Ha! Ha! Ha! That's so clever!' "

Yet all along, Driver was warning board members that risks had to be taken, successful or not: "Otherwise we'll drown in our own popularity. People will get tired of *Tosca*. It will happen."

And now, said Nally, "For whatever reason, audiences are saying, 'Lead me to it.' "

Clearly, there has been an evolution, though the Bowerbird phenomenon may be separate from that. The hipster audience cultivated by founder Dustin Hurt since 2005 never feared Feldman, as did their elders. Though associated with New York's extreme avant-garde of the 1970s, Feldman (1926-1987) is now loved for meditative late-period pieces that signified a break from all that. The mystery is why such long, quiet works — his *String Quartet No. 2* lasts six hours — appeal to the fast-moving 21st century.

"The more we go in the direction of Twitter, the more we crave the opposite, which is stillness," said Hurt. "When Feldman died there were only six LPs of his music available. Now there are 100 CDs. The crazy thing is that those who tend not to like his music are classical people. They know the Bartok *String Quartet No. 3* and are trying to place it with the Feldman *String Quartet No. 2*."



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Pianist Marilyn Nonken will open the American Sublime fest with "Triadic Memories."

New-music performances can offer the reward of notoriety. The Opera Company of Philadelphia isn't often the talk of New York opera circles, but it is with *Phaedra*. The Crossing has been tapped for a prestigious premiere of James Dillon's *Nine Rivers* at Columbia University's Miller Theater in the fall.

But few tasks are more daunting than bringing a visionary piece into being. If all three events share an essential quality, it's willingness by performers to leave behind every possible comfort zone — and exult in doing so.

One such zone is money: Box-office response is unpredictable. Though you'd think that Feldman's work might be strangely economical, with chamber ensembles performing multi-hour pieces, "you don't get a string quartet that plays for six hours for not a lot of money," said Hurt.

Preparation is longer, more intensive, and leads to odd places. Independent of each other, Driver and Nally are studying the writings of the ancient Roman playwright/philosopher Seneca, Nally because he commissioned several new works for his choir written to Seneca's words, Driver to obtain perspective on Henze's treatment of Phaedra, the mythical queen who falls violently in love with her stepson. Could it be that this formidable German composer — 84 and the author of about 20 stage works — meant some parts to be funny? In a visit to Henze in Italy, Driver broached the subject carefully: "At the beginning of the second act, maestro, it strikes me as being almost grotesquely humorous, and I was planning to go pretty far in that direction."

The composer approved heartily — though when Driver drew parallels to the Mel Brooks film *Young Frankenstein*, "He didn't know what I was talking about."

The dense, precise score, however, represents a *lingua franca* familiar to singers based in Germany, where Henze operas such as *Elegy for Young Lovers* (to be staged next season by the Curtis Opera Theatre) are nearly standard repertoire. But in the United States, Henze is barely known and hard to parse.

"You open the score and you're hopeless. You open it the next time and it feels like the first time," said Opera Company music director Corrado Rovaris. "But then there's the moment when the magic happens and you realize it's a wonderful piece full of wonderful situations."

With Feldman, Hurt considered utilizing the hugely capable Network for New Music. Yet Feldman's music lies so far beyond notes, with each instrument in a different time signature, that he opted for specialists, including one of the composer's muses, singer Joan La Barbara. Pianist Marilyn Nonken opens the festival with the 90-minute *Triadic Memories*, a work so pared down that it sometimes goes down to a single note played repeatedly. Don't analyze what it means.

"Feldman wanted his music to be beyond metaphor," Nonken said recently at her New York University studio. "Feldman has a quote that when you play a piece, you love the sounds and you let them go. I always think about what's ringing in the atmosphere. It's virtuosic in different ways [than Liszt]. It's like some yoga instructor who can hold an extraordinarily difficult position for 10 minutes."

And what about body functions? Though listeners are free to come and go during *String Quartet No. 2*, musicians reportedly consider catheters.

"Really? They must be amateurs," said Tom Chiu of the Flux Quartet, which closes the festival June 12. "Because playing takes so much mental concentration, the biological need just disappears. When we did the Feldman quartet in late April, we ate a robust, healthy meal 2½ hours before the performance, and that seemed to work rather well."

Besides, the piece isn't always six hours long; it can vary by a full 30 minutes. "You're taking a journey, and it takes you," said Chiu. "It's more refreshing to let it go out of control and bring you along."

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at dstearns@phillynews.com

New Music in June

Phaedra / Opera Company of Philadelphia

Friday, next Sunday, June 8, 10, and 12, Perelman Theatre, Broad and Spruce Streets. Tickets: $30-$130. 215-893-1018 or www.operaphila.org.

Month of Moderns / The Crossing

Next Sunday, June 18 and 26, Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, 8855 Germantown Ave. Tickets: $15-$25. www.crossingchoir.com.

American Sublime / Bowerbird

Saturday through June 12 at various Philadelphia locations. Tickets: Free (Feldman's six-hour-long *String Quartet No. 2*) to $20). www.americansublime.org.