We Broke Up Over Style
Morton Feldman, Philip Guston, and the Aesthetics of Reconciliation
PD Dr. Ryan W. Dohoney, Bienen School of Music
Northwestern University, Evanston, IL/USA)

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In this talk, I reflect on the failed friendship of composer Morton Feldman (1926–1987) and painter Philip Guston (1913–1980). Drawing on Hannah Arendt’s theorization of friendship and its role in aesthetics and politics, I trace the work of mourning Feldman and Guston attempted following the breakdown of their relationship in 1970 following Guston’s turn away from pure abstraction towards a figurative and allegorical style. I focus first on Guston’s paintings from the mid-1970s in which the painter absorbed Feldman and their shared history into his new aesthetic. I then turn to Feldman memorialization of Guston in the 1980s. Focusing on the spectral presence of Guston in his compositions Three Voices and For Philip Guston—I argue that Feldman also turned to the past as he struggled to reconcile himself to Guston’s late style. However, unlike Guston, Feldman deferred reconciliation even though he realized, in the end, that he was changing as his friend had changed. I conclude with some broader reflections on the study of friendship as a critical method for interdisciplinary inquiry.

RyanDohoney is a musicologist and historian who writes on U.S. and European Modernism and Experimentalism in the 20th and 21st centuries. He serves as Associate Professor of Musicology at Northwestern University where he is also faculty member in the programs in Critical Theory and Gender & Sexuality Studies. He is the author of Saving Abstraction: Morton Feldman, the de Menils, and the Rothko Chapel (Oxford, 2019) and the forthcoming Morton Feldman: Friendship and Morning in the New York Avant-Garde (Bloomsbury). He has also written on the philosophies of Adriana Cavarero and Alfred North Whitehead and is currently working on a monograph on Julius Eastman, multi-ethnic experimentation, and the Black radical tradition.

Email: ryan.dohoney@northwestern.edu
Website: https://www.music.northwestern.edu/faculty/profile/ryan-dohoney