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Author(s): Catherine Laws

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THE MUSIC OF BECKETT'S THEATRE

Catherine Laws

Beckett's knowledge and understanding of music is apparent in both his textual references to specific musical works and the actual use of music in several of his plays. This paper considers aspects of the musicality of Beckett's language and his use of music, examining the ways in which, in certain plays, music plays a role in the exploration of subjectivity and representation. Additionally, the relationship between music, image and action in Beckett's work has implications in terms of genre and shares certain of the concerns of composers of experimental music theatre from the mid-1950s onwards.

Many of those involved with Beckett's work, whether practically or theoretically, have commented on its 'musicality'. Interviews with actors and directors more often than not include some reference to the musical nature of Beckett's texts. To catalogue all such instances would be pointless, but George Devine's comment to Alan Schneider seems to sum up the prevailing attitude: "One has to think of the text as something like a musical score wherein the 'notes', the sights and sounds, the pauses, have their own interrelated rhythms, and out of their composition comes the dramatic impact" (Schneider, 249). No doubt much of this derives from the terms in which Beckett attempted to convey his ideas; Ruby Cohn (amongst others) has commented on Beckett's tendency to use musical terminology (especially Italian terms) in rehearsal (Cohn, 153), while Billie Whitelaw also described Beckett's preference for directing her by 'conducting' the lines (Ben-Zvi, 6). According to Deirdre Bair, Beckett even went so far as to use a meeting with Stravinsky to question the composer about possible means of notating the tempi of his plays and the length of pauses (Bair, 581).[1]

It might be possible to dismiss all this as metaphorical conceit, were it not for the implication that the 'musicality' is closely bound up with Beckett's approach to

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language, subjectivity, and the performative nature of both. Many practitioners, for example, clearly relate the musical effect to Beckett's determination that his characters and their words or actions cannot be explained and that actors should avoid imposing an interpretation upon the words. Peggy Ashcroft, for example, reported that in rehearsal for *Happy Days* "Beckett would answer questions like 'Why does she gabble as she does at a certain point?' by saying 'Because it has to go fast there.'" (Worth in Ben-Zvi, 12). For some actors this approach is problematic, preventing them from feeling in control of their character's identity. For others, though (and especially for those who have become particularly associated with Beckett's work), understanding the text in the traditional sense is irrelevant; David Warrilow states: "I know that if an actor gets up onstage and starts to play the meaning of the thing it dies, it just dies. Meaning is whatever happens in the viewer's experience of it" (Kalb, 229). In this respect the use of musical terminology provides a directorial method which treats the characters, words, and stage directions as given, the only remaining question being the effective portrayal of their structural relationships. Again, Beckett's own approach would seem to endorse this; Roger Blin said that Beckett treated *Fin de Partie* "as a kind of musical score" (Bishop, 233), and Beckett's notebooks for the play reveal such thinking to be absolutely fundamental to its structure (Gontarski, Lawley).

Walter Asmus has commented on Beckett's general determination to match particular movements to particular themes or even words (and, further, to any incidental sounds or pauses), the movements being choreographed as precisely as possible (Asmus in Oppenheim 1994, 44). Beckett expressed his views on this most succinctly in the 1960s: "Producers don't seem to have any sense of form in movement, the kind of form one finds in music, for instance, where themes keep recurring. When, in a text, actions are repeated, they ought to be made unusual the first time, so that when they happen again – in exactly the same way – an audience will recognize them from before" (Knowlson 1992, 13-14). Thus the plays demand great sensitivity to intonation and rhythm, repetition and variation. Asmus describes this as a part of Beckett's general "striving for an identity between form and meaning that would prevent, ultimately, their being differentiated one from the other" (Asmus in Oppenheim 1994, 44).

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Despite all this, it is only fairly recently that much serious critical attention has been paid to the relationship between Beckett's work and music. At the start of the 1990s, for example, despite the wealth of Beckett criticism it was still difficult to find more than brief passing comments on this particular area. The situation has changed, and a more thorough and complex understanding of the subject has begun to develop. Surprisingly, though, the topic of the musicality of Beckett's theatre has proved somewhat problematic, even taking the recent developments into account. Little real attention has been paid to the question of quite how or why such an apparently musical effect is achieved, and how it may or may not differ from the approaches of other authors. Many critics have commented in passing on the musicality of Beckett's works, while others have employed musical terms in their descriptions. This latter tendency usually amounts to little more than a metaphor, but some more detailed analyses have suffered from an incomplete understanding of musical terminology. Similarly, analogies between composers' attitudes to the realisation of their works and Beckett's own directorial techniques and authorial control over productions have not been aided by confusion of the concepts of interpretation and rearrangement in music.

A few critics have attempted to extend the analogies into the realm of specific musical structures. However, such approaches fail to acknowledge the significance of the fact that Beckett does continue to use words and therefore maintains some semantic links not found in music. William E. Grim has compared the structure of *Molloy* to Brahmsian developing variation, while Emmanuel Jacquart discusses *Endgame* in relation to sonata form by establishing exposition, development and recapitulation sections (Jacquart, 77). Both are perceptive with regard to aspects of Beckett's structural thinking. However, the musical analogies are limited by the failure to recognise both the importance of harmonic relationships to these dramatic musical forms and the fact that the semantic tensions of language are wholly different to the structural tensions of tonality. Sonata form, for example, is fundamentally harmonic – it only becomes a musical form through its articulation of the tensions of the tonal system. To remove this element is to leave a skeleton structure (of thesis, antithesis, development and resolution or recapitulation) which returns the form to its origins in early (non-musical) theories of good rhetorical practice.

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Another writer has attempted to relate the chance procedures used in the composition of *Lessness* to avant-garde music of the 1960s. While Beckett might possibly have derived the initial idea from musical works – James Knowlson confirms that Beckett's friendship with composer Marcel Mihalovici and pianist Monique Haas "brought him into close touch with modern music and musicians of the highest quality" (Knowlson 1996, 496) – the approaches have nothing more in common and Beckett did not extend this experiment further (other than in the permutational techniques of *The Lost Ones*). As will later be explored, the musical effect of Beckett's language at times has something in common with the concerns of certain composers of experimental music theatre, but it is a mistake to attempt to extend this analogy into compositional strategy. In this case, the determination to relate Beckett's techniques to what the writer describes as "the composer/serialists of the late 1960s" (Catanzaro, 215), grouping together composers with such hugely varying approaches as "Cage [...] Xanakis [*sic*], Subotnik, and Stockhausen" (Catanzaro, 213), suffers from the lack of any real detail and from the sweeping over-simplification of musical ideas.

Many of these comparisons suffer from an insufficiently nuanced approach to notions of what music is or how it is meaningful and/or has dramatic power. The tendency is to discuss 'music' in a generalised sense, when it is usually quite a specific form of music that is being invoked: that of the Classical tonal tradition. For example, Porter Abbott's recent essay on time in Beckett is extremely useful, and examining Beckett's work in relation to the temporal structures of music may well prove fruitful (Abbott in Oppenheim 1999, 7-24). However, having explored the problems of discussing musical form in terms of narrative, the author chooses to apply Leonard Meyer's theory of embodied meaning in music – a theory that relies heavily upon a narrative-like model, and which is really only applicable to the tensions and resolutions of Classical and Romantic music of the tonal tradition (and even this application is not without its limitations). Meyer's theory is presented as a theory of music in general, and there is a failure to acknowledge that, precisely because of the relative lack of semantic grounding, different musics take on meaning in different ways according to their different ordering of different kinds of sounds in time.

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It seems ironic that in attempting to account for the complex effect of some of Beckett's most innovative and thought-provoking work it is often rather simplistic notions of musical form and meaning that are invoked. There are times, of course, when it is necessary to speak of music as a whole – in order to contrast it with one of the other arts, for example. Part of the reasoning may also lie in Beckett's own well-documented love of Classical and early Romantic composers. Yet many of Beckett's comments suggest that it was often the ruptures within these composers' works which interested him most – consider, for example, his fascination with Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* (which he described to Axel Kaun as a "sound surface, torn by enormous pauses" ("German Letter of 1937," 172)), and most particularly with the brief phrase (quoted in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks Than Kicks*) which cuts unexpectedly into the first movement's texture to provide a sudden pause at the end of the exuberant *tutti* statement of the *vivace* main theme (*Dream*, 106, 229; *MPTK*, 140, 151). It is precisely such elements that an information-theory based model such as Meyer's finds it hard to assimilate, and which are most difficult to account for within generalised accounts of musical significance. The danger here is a mystification of the idea of music, and hence an avoidance of the real question: quite what is musical about Beckett's work, and how does that quality contribute to its effect?

Generally, then, the more pertinent references to Beckett's musicality have avoided the comparison with specific musical techniques and seem to recognise that the perception of Beckett's texts as musical must be bound up with his formal treatment of content. Probably the most insightful work in this area is found in composer Kenneth Gaburo's discussion of *Play*; Gaburo examines in real detail the ways in which the play's effect is dependent upon the complex rhythmic and temporal interrelationships of the semantic and the non-semantic, sounding qualities of the words. In doing so, he outlines the importance of a musical approach to the performance of the play while still acknowledging the inevitable differences between the text and a piece of music.

Gaburo's work is unusual in that it does not assume that the musical effect of Beckett's plays lies in a drive towards greater abstraction – towards the abandonment of words and, ultimately, silence. For a number of other writers, the musical effect is

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envisaged as a stage in the drive towards pure abstraction and silence. However, there is something unsatisfactory about this position. The process of reduction that is evident in Beckett's work does not entail the gradual abandonment of words or of the need to express, but rather the refinement of that expression towards a more authentic presentation of the paradox of its own impossibility. Despite Beckett's gradual distillation of ideas, fundamental to the whole of his output is the tension between the desire for meaningful expression and the sense of its impossibility, and it is this tension which generates the musicality of effect. As Anna McMullan writes, with reference to the various comments on Beckett's musicality: "these references to music fail to take account of the agonistic relationship between music and meaning in Beckett's drama." (McMullan, 199).

I would suggest, therefore, that the musicality of Beckett's language actually stems from the tension between his repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with a language system which makes impossible the direct expression of ideas and the impossibility of abandoning our primary mode of expression. Beckett's acknowledgement of the restrictions of language engenders the breakdown of conventional structures and the attempt to negate the referential content of words in order to maximise their ability to express ideas. A process of reduction does, therefore, take place, the conventional content of the words being reduced so as to foreground the unique relative position of each word within each text, thereby exploring the fundamental relationship between words and meaning. In many of his works, the referential content is reduced and the construction involves expansion from minimal linguistic units as a result of the compositional implications of both the sounding qualities of the syllables and the minimal semantics which unavoidably remain. Thus the musicality that is initially perceived through the sensual and rhythmic effect is fundamentally a consequence of the composition.

In both *Play* and *Not I*, for example, the speed and fragmentation are such that our attempt to grasp a coherent narrative is frustrated, with the effect of foregrounding the semiotic residues of communication (the sounding qualities of the words, other extraneous vocal sounds, and the physicality of their production). Nevertheless, the elements of alliteration and onomatopoeia, the repetition of key words and the use of

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similar sounding or otherwise related words, and the similar metrical patterns of a number of important phrases ("tiny little thing," "out before its time," "sudden urge to tell," "godforsaken hole," "speechless all her days," and so on), all combine to ensure that certain images and ideas take root but that, additionally, the flow of words has a certain musical coherence; underlying the confusion is a tight structure of repetition and difference. The significance and coherence of these plays depends as much upon the non-semantic elements of their composition as upon the apprehension of narrative elements, and the audience doubles the characters' own attempts to reconstitute those narratives. On this level, too, the experience is often more like that of a musical performance, wherein the relative absence of semantics leads the listener into a more active role in the perception of patterns of similarity and difference, and the meaning of the piece develops out of that web of associations. In both plays, then, the musical effect is intimately bound up with the problematics of communication, subjectivity and representation (i.e. with Beckett's 'aesthetics of failure'). The more the 'characters' attempt to define an objective sense of self by telling its stories, the more apparent the impossibility of stabilising that representation and the more evident the performative condition of selfhood.

In this sense, the musical aspect of Beckett's work is fundamentally bound to the tensions of the language system. Discussion of the 'musicality' of language is usually concerned with heightened poetic effect, with the foregrounding of the rhythmic and sounding quality of the words. With regard to meaningful content, however, this 'musicalisation' is usually an effect of the loosening of semantic relations, intended to increase the suggestive power of the language. Thus what usually passes for the 'musicality' of language is closely bound to the extension of the referential capacity of words and, this being precisely the capacity which music lacks, therefore belongs firmly to the world of literature rather than music. For Beckett, unlike Joyce, the aim is not to extend the implicative potential of words, but rather to pare it down, so as to explore the relationship between referential and non-referential meaning. Additionally, it is precisely this difference in Beckett's approach to language (and the musicality of the result) which makes it so effective in a theatrical context, despite the relative absence of the traditional requirements of such a setting (narrative, character, and loca-

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tion). The attempt to represent a coherent sense of self in language is fundamentally dramatic: the performativity of language and representation is increasingly important to his drama, and the musical effect is intimately bound up with that act of performance.

However, it is not just Beckett's approach to theatrical language which is interesting from a musical point of view, but also the use of music in certain of his plays. As I have explored elsewhere, in much of his early work Beckett deploys particular musical works in his exploration of the limits of rational thought and self-knowledge; in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks than Kicks,* in particular, he examines particular modernist literary concerns, often using images of music as a means of exposing their limitations (Laws, 2000). At the same time though, here, as elsewhere, Beckett exploits the relationship between music and memory; many critics have commented on the ways in which the recollection of these pieces serves a nostalgic or sentimental function, providing an almost Proustian link back to a poignant moment from an earlier life. Most of this critical commentary assumes two things: firstly, that the music is an ultimately consolatory and sometimes even conciliatory force; and secondly, that Beckett's use of and attitude towards the music and the act of listening remains constant throughout his output, notwithstanding the move between genres and the different ways in which it is presented and/or referred to. However, while the recourse to music reappears throughout Beckett's work, and while Beethoven and Schubert remain the most frequent sources, the development from the references to musical works that are found in earlier work towards the incorporation of actual music in some of the late plays involves a more ambiguous and ambivalent attitude to the music and the associated acts of listening.

In particular, the use of the Beethoven and Schubert pieces in the television plays *Ghost Trio* and *Nacht und Träume* gives an entirely different status to the act of listening, one which forms an essential part of Beckett's exploration of fractured subjectivity. The music here acts neither as background music nor as a semiotic indicator of any underlying psychology: it is not film or television music in any usual sense. Instead, its presence is deeply disconcerting. In *Ghost Trio*, for example, Beckett subjects the "Largo" from Beethoven's *Piano Trio* Op. 70 No.1 to the same process of

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dissection and re-composition that he applies to the visual aspects of the play. Beckett's snippets of Beethoven by no means mirror the structure of the original movement. Instead, he reorders the temporal occurrence of the extracts, cuts into statements of the main theme by always omitting the first bar, and omits entirely any reference to the second, more lyrical theme except in its final manifestation in the coda (Laws, 2002). The oddities surrounding these choices confirm that the situation is not simply one in which a Figure listens to the "Largo" and the camera at times moves close enough for us to listen with him. If this were the case, we would surely hear the extracts in the same order as they appear in the Beethoven; after all, we do not see the figure physically stop and start the recording (like Krapp). In fact, while one might assume that F 'hears' Beethoven's music, there is nothing to confirm whether or not he is actually 'listening' to it on the cassette; if anything, the structural use of the Beethoven excerpts would seem to undermine any clear relationship between the cassette and the aural experience. Similarly, the relationship between the Voice's commands and the starting and stopping of the music is unclear – the entries of the Beethoven are never in response to a direct command from Voice – and even the relationship between the camera movement and the volume of the music, which at times seems so simple, is undermined at the points when the camera remains steady but the music grows in volume.

Cumulatively, these techniques have the effect of destabilising the location and origins of the music and undermining the distinction between interior and exterior; the status of the music is as ambivalent as that of the Figure, the Voice, and the action, and all are deployed in the process of attempting to grasp hold of the subject by imagining and re-imagining its production. Beckett posits the expressive, consolatory aspect of the music as a potential form of transcendence, but ultimately what is revealed is that this aspect of the play, as much as any other, is constructed through a process of presentation and re-presentation. In this way, the redemptive German Romantic spirit of the music is drawn upon but resituated, playing a fundamental role in the wider exploration of the relationship between body, imagination and subjectivity. In the television plays, then both the use of the music and the performativity of the act of listening are more complex than in the earlier work.

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Whether in the musicality of his language or in the use of actual music in his plays, therefore, much of Beckett's drama involves a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between music, subjectivity and the production of meaning. At times, this seems to take on implications in terms of genre. Comparing, for example, Beckett's *Quad* with composer Mauricio Kagel's *pas de cinq: wandelszene*, in which five performers walk along lanes constructed to form a regular pentagon, it is hard to see why one work should be considered a play and the other music theatre. *pas de cinq* does have an overt level of musical sophistication that *Quad* does not; while both involve performers walking to a pulse, the figures in *pas de cinq* have different speeds, and their precise rhythms are notated musically. Conversely, it is *pas de cinq* which also has the more obvious dramatic elements, in traditional terms: firstly, the lanes of the pentagon are varied with platforms, slopes, and/or ramps, and the surfaces are covered with varied flooring materials (producing different sounds); secondly, the performers can be costumed and, in addition to carrying walking sticks, may use other props – Kagel suggests dark glasses, lamps, chairs, books, mirrors, cigars, cards, etc. (Kagel, 3); and thirdly, (and perhaps most importantly), Kagel states that "dramaturgical relationships are to be created between the performers." (Kagel, 2).Thus, while the pieces share the geometrically formalised patterns of movement patterns, the rhythmic walking, and the absence of language, it is the composer, rather than the dramatist, who relies more on characterisation and dramatic interaction. However, despite the very different theatrical effect of these pieces, both share an interest in exploring the non-verbal theatre that arises out of nothing more than the constraints of the formalised, rhythmic walking patterns, and their visual and aural effect.

Similarly, the musicality of the language of Beckett's later plays at times seems comparable to the treatment of the voice found in the works of certain composers from the mid-1950s onwards. The determination by many composers that traditional methods of word-setting (and particularly opera in its typical form) had become redundant, along with a developing interest in the musical potential of 'non-singing' vocal sounds, led to the composition of a still expanding body of works which make use of 'extended vocal techniques', incorporating speech, humming, whispering, screams, laughter, cries, and other vocal sounds, alongside sung tones. Many composers in the

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1960s and 1970s, in particular, moved away from the idea that the setting of words to music should provide an additional layer which supports the dramatic or poetic ideas of the text, and colours them appropriately; too often, this resulted in pieces wherein either the music became subservient to the text and its dramatic narrative or the music became too prominent, obscuring the poetic complexity and/or the dramatic framework of the text. Instead, composers such as Berio, Stockhausen, and Ligeti (amongst many others) became interested in a more purely musical theatre, making use of the full range of sounds that the voice can produce, exploring the innate theatre of those vocal articulations, and paying increasing attention to the musical aspects of language. Berio's work is particularly interesting in this respect, employing the study of phonetics in the compositional exploration of the boundaries of sense and sound; this allowed for a more sophisticated approach to the complex web of similarities and differences in the ways in which words and music convey meaning. Works such as *Sequenza III* (1966) and *O King* (1967), for example, dissect the phonetic and semantic elements of simple texts, fragmenting the words, breaking down any semantic cohesion, and playing with the different articulatory, sounding, and meaningful possibilities of the components. The effect is sometimes purely musical, with sung tones or even short phrases appearing momentarily, and sometimes more purely semantic, with odd words or syllables suddenly spoken clearly. Either way, primarily the listener is drawn into the sensual as well as the structural drama of the gradually evolving phonetic, musical, and semantic relationships.[2]

The body of works which explores the theatre of the voice and the relationship between words and music in this way is in many respects very different to Beckett's late plays; in terms of musical and thematic content, compositional structure, and many of the aesthetic concerns, the works often have little in common. However, Beckett's use of fragmented narrative elements, of speeds of articulation which make ordinary comprehension difficult, and of structures of repetition and association which rely as much upon the metrical stresses and sounding qualities of the text as the grasping of individual key words, shares with the work of Berio (for example) an understanding of the dramatic tension between phonetics and semantics in the verbal production of meaning, and hence the fundamental performativity of language.

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Overall, then, Beckett's late plays open up spaces of discourse and subjectivity beyond those of traditional structures of representation and, as such, acknowledge the role of non-referential elements in the generation of meaning. As a result his use of language is often fundamentally musical. His late texts not only lay bare the workings of language, but come as close as possible to the meeting place between music and language. Additionally, Beckett's use of actual music in certain plays is far more complex than might at first be apparent; often the music is treated in a manner which precisely parallels the exploration of visual and textual representation. Thus the approach to music found in Beckett's late texts ought to position them at the heart of the debate about the relationship between words and music and the ways in which each carry significance.

Notes

1. This fact is not mentioned in the more reliable and detailed biography by James Knowlson. However, Knowlson does mention that Beckett spent a little time with Stravinsky (Knowlson 1996, 500).

2. An overview of these trends in vocal and choral composition as well as more detailed analyses of particular works is provided in Anhalt, while a detailed analysis of the work of Luciano Berio can be found in Osmond-Smith.

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