Brutalising the Banal: The Music of Gerald Barry and the Late Theatre of Samuel Beckett

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Anyone who has ever experienced Samuel Beckett's theatre piece *Play* (1962–3) cannot fail to be taken aback by the assault on language which this work delivers in its opening moments. On stage facing the audience are three grey urns with a head protruding from each one; two heads are female and the other is male. An opening refrain of what can only be described as unintelligible gibberish crescendos as the spotlight brightens on the trio; then suddenly, there is a blackout and silence. However, alien to the conventions of theatre this opening may be, there is a distinct resemblance to the workings of a musical ensemble. The trio of heads forms a chorus and the spotlight is the conductor whose next move—after successfully coordinating the opening gesture—is to cue in each of the heads for their respective solo roles. The type of precision demanded here is truly musical as it is not a 'normal' dialogue being conducted but rather a series of monotone syllabic chantings recited at a pace that renders the text barely comprehensible.

That Beckett had an acute musical sense in his writing is widely acknowledged and, in particular, his late theatre works have attracted quite a lot of scholarly attention on this subject.[1] But while the presence of musical structures in Beckett's work is an interesting topic in itself, a more intriguing prospect for musicologists is the notion of Beckett's 'musical' works having a rebounding influence on composers. In the case of Beckett's homeland of Ireland, the emergence of an ambitious generation of composers in the 1970s transformed the musical landscape of a country that had largely insulated

[1] See for example: Mary Bryden (ed.), *Samuel Beckett and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Franz Michael Maier, 'The Idea of Melodic Construction in Samuel Beckett', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 61 (2008), 373–410; Harry White, *Music and the Irish Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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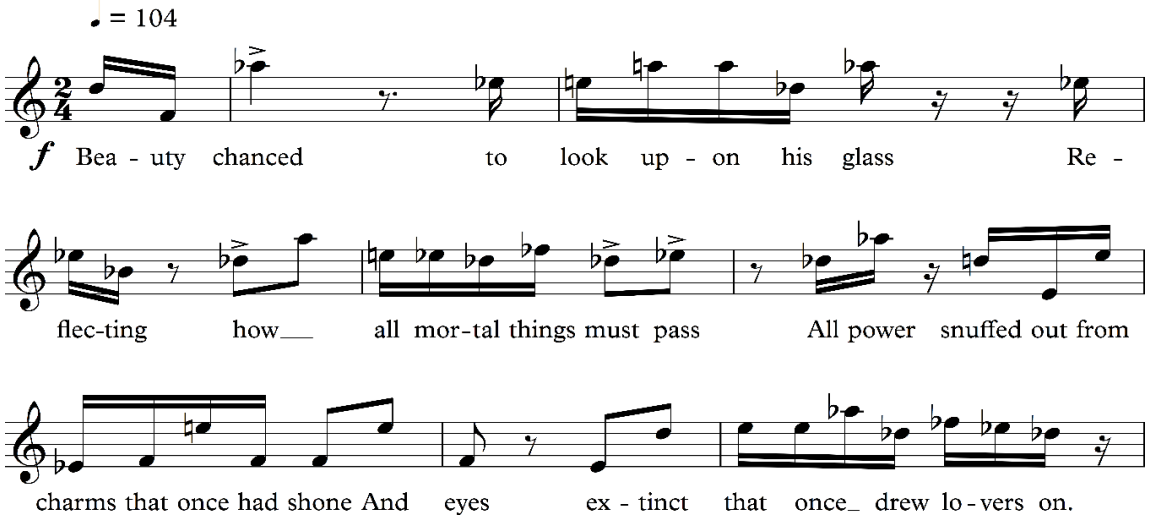
itself from international developments since achieving political independence in 1922. For Irish composers who sought to engage with modernist aesthetics, therefore, Beckett's modernism served as an obvious point of reference given that the post-war avant-garde had not impacted the country to any great degree.[2] In the case of Gerald Barry, undoubtedly the most well-known Irish composer to emerge from this period, the similarities between his distinctive use of musical material and Beckett's approach to language have been remarked upon but have attracted little scholarly attention to date.[3] In this essay, I will discuss some of these techniques and explore what implications they have for interpretation in Barry's stage works.

To take one example, consider Barry's opera *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit* (1991) (Example 1), which is a reworking of Handel's oratorio *The Triumph of Time and Truth.* The parallels with Beckett's *Play* are evident from the opening bars. The combination of a syllabic setting and use of highly irregular rhythmic fragments ensures that both the natural stresses and the rhyming scheme are completely undermined.

[2] For an overview of Irish art music in the 20th century see: Michael Dervan (ed.), *The Invisible Art: Irish Music in the Twentieth*-Century (Dublin: New Island, 2016); Benjamin Dwyer, *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland* (Hofheim: Wolke-Verlag, 2014); Mark Fitzgerald, 'A Belated Arrival: the Delayed Acceptance of Musical Modernity in Irish Composition,' *Irish Studies Review*, 26/3 (2018), 347–60.

[3] See for instance Mark Fitzgerald, 'Barry, Gerald', in *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2013), 61; Thomas Adès, 'Curiouser and Curiouser: Thomas Adès on Gerald Barry's Wonderland', *Guardian*, 2 February 2020, as well as his comments in his interview with Michael, Dervan, 'Building a Blueprint that Turns to Air', *Irish Times*, 27 February 2012; and Richard Morrison, '*The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Linbury, ROH', *The Times*, 16 June 2013.

Example 1. Barry: *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit*, Act 1, Bars 1–8 (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)



As Beckett did with *Play*, Barry utilises a strategy that rides roughshod over the natural stresses of the words and radically obscures their intelligibility. Indeed, on this point, the views of both artists show a remarkable degree of convergence. When the actress Jessica Tandy complained to Beckett that the length of his dramatic monologue *Not I* (1972) rendered the work unintelligible, Beckett famously responded: 'I'm not unduly concerned with intelligibility, I want the piece to work on the nerves of the audience'.[4] Similarly, in an article which addressed his unusual approach to text-setting in his first opera, *The Intelligence Park* (1981–88), Barry wrote: 'It does not disturb me if my setting renders some of the text incomprehensible: it is only so superficially'.[5] In one sense it is perhaps not surprising that both artists appear to care little about the kind of clarity that would lead to a literal reading of the text. A key tenet of so much radical art is that comprehensibility be obscured to provoke critical reflection and possibly prompt the audience to discover a deeper meaning. The most remarkable aspect of Beckett's late theatre (roughly from the 1960s onwards) however, is the marked discrepancy between the text as heard in performance and the text as read on the page. When one examines the nature of the sentences in Beckett's late drama, it is often surprising to discover the elemental simplicity of the language itself. Fragments of everyday turns of phrase, clichés, and other forms of bland dialogue appear at length, devaluing language to the

[4] C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: a reader's guide to his works, life, and thought* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 441.

[5] Gerald Barry, 'The Intelligence Park', *Contemporary Music Review*, 5 (1989), 230.

point where it must compete for prominence with other aspects of theatre such as lighting and direction, therefore inverting the traditional hierarchy of theatre.

A similar stripped-back approach can be said to characterise Barry's music, a feature noted by Thomas Adès who declared that Barry's affinity with Beckett has to do with 're-animating a deeply traditional language […] where you pick up these familiar things, you pick up the old bones and you build a new skeleton with them'.[6] Barry's scores tend to eschew the architectural abstractions of many contemporary composers and instead reveal plenty of familiar material: tonal triads, scales, streams of uniform crotchets that exist alongside other less readily classifiable but hardly radical material. As with Beckett, however, there is a world of difference between the material as it appears in the score and how it sounds when realised in performance.

Whether or not this constitutes a conscious or unconscious absorption of Beckett's techniques on the part of Barry is not the main concern of this article. Rather, through a comparative analysis of their work, I seek to explore the nature of the formalism shared by both artists in transforming disintegrated materials (language in Beckett's case, musical material in Barry's) into something genuinely new. I also suggest that identifying and analysing these resemblances can open up some interesting avenues when it comes to broaching the question of meaning in Barry's dramatic works, particularly his operas.

1) Beckett and the Limits of Language

I begin by elaborating on the 'banal' quality in Beckett's late theatre. The development of the writer's career can be read as one gigantic and paradoxical effort to escape the referentiality of language. Beckett's problem with language was its inadequacy to express the true nature of existence. As he saw it, words could only express the surface of things, not their essence. But despite his famous hostility towards words, as a writer he was nevertheless condemned to use them. As Stanley E. Gontarski put it: 'Beckett's is finally an aesthetics of compromise, a reconciliation of principle and practice'.[7] The dilemma which prompted this compromise was most clearly expressed in the so-called 'German Letter' of 1937 to Axel Kaun in which Beckett complained that:

> It is indeed more and more difficult, even pointless, for me to write in formal English. And more and more my language appears to me like a veil

[6] Quoted in Michael, Dervan, 'Building a Blueprint that Turns to Air', *Irish Times*, 27 February 2012

[7] S.E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1.

> which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. Grammar and Style! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit. A mask. It is hoped that the time will come, thank God, in some circles it already has, when language is best used where it is most effectively abused. To drill one hole after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through—I cannot imagine a higher goal for today's writer.[8]

These sentiments coincided with a move away from his early Joyce-influenced style that often made its wordiness explicit—something Beckett himself later admitted when he confessed to Charles Prentice that his first novel *Dream* (1932) 'stinks of Joyce'.[9] Gradually his writing underwent a 'decluttering' from the elaborate punning and self-conscious displays of erudition that marked the early poems and the novels such as *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy* towards a leaner, more economic use of language such that by the 1960s Beckett's language is so radically pared back that at times it appears almost trivial. Consider the following extracts from the aforementioned *Play*, which Beckett finished in 1963. First, the text gives the perspective of one of the two female characters:

> One morning as I was sitting stitching by the open window she burst in and flew at me. Give him up, she screamed, he's mine. Her photographs were kind to her. Seeing her now for the first time full length in the flesh I understood why he preferred me.[10]

And, slightly further down the page, the male character interjects:

> What have you to complain of? I said. Have I been neglecting you? How could we be together in the way we are if there were someone else? Loving her as I did with all my heart. I could not but feel sorry for her.[11]

On paper there is nothing remarkable about either passage. The language is typical of the kind of nondescript fiction routinely peddled to what Vladimir Nabokov irresistibly described as 'that limp and amorphous creature known as the general

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[8] M. D. Fehsenfeld and L. M. Overbeck (eds.), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. 1 1929–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 518–20.

[9] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 151.

[10] Samuel Beckett, 'Play', in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, (London: Faber, 2006), 308.

[11] Beckett, 'Play', in *Dramatic Works*, 308–9.

reader'.[12] The plot of *Play* (to the extent that there is one) is based around three characters who recount the intense but otherwise unremarkable details of a love triangle – and its language reflects that. There is no trace here of what may be termed 'individual style'; instead, there is just the ubiquitous language of easily consumable popular fiction.

Play is not an isolated example of a language reduced to impoverishment. *Happy Days* (1960–61) consists mostly of a monologue spoken by a woman called Winnie, who is gradually sinking deeper into the ground while prattling on endlessly about the trivialities of life. Her monologue is almost entirely stitched together from the kind of colloquial idioms used as fillers in everyday conversation by Irish people of that generation.

> Poor Willie – [*examines tube, smile off*] – running out [*looks for cap*] – ah well – [*finds cap*] – can't be helped – [*screws on cap*] – just one of those old things – [*lays down tube*] – another of those old things – [*turns towards bag*] – just can't be cured – [*rummages in bag*] – cannot be cured – [*brings out small mirror, turns back front*] – ah yes – [*inspects teeth in mirror*] – poor dear Willie – [*testing upper front teeth with thumb, indistinctly*] – good Lord! – [*pulling back upper lip to inspect gums, do.*] – good God! – [*pulling back corner of mouth, mouth open, do.*] – ah well – [*other corner, do.*] – no worse – [*abandons inspection, normal speech*] – no better, no worse…[13]

While both *Play* and *Happy Days* present the 'ordinary' quality of their language quite directly, in other works of the late period such as *Ohio Impromptu* or *What Where*, the language is of a less obvious 'everyday' character. Nevertheless, the overall tendency towards a stripped-back, austere language remains one of the hallmarks of Beckett's late theatre.

2) Barry's Musical Material

If Beckett had to struggle to find his way out from under the shadow of Joyce, Barry's early career was not without the presence of similar daunting figures. Two years after graduating with a Master's degree from University College Dublin (UCD) in 1973, Barry enrolled in Karlheinz Stockhausen's class at the Hochschule für Musik in Cologne.

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[12] James Mossman, 'Interview with Vladimir Nabokov, June 1970.' Podcast accessed on 27 March 2018 http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p020y0p0 on 27/3/2018

[13] Beckett, 'Happy Days', in *Dramatic Works*, 139.

Unlike Beckett however, he did not fall under the spell of an older master, as some of his fellow students did with Stockhausen.[14] According to the composer Kevin Volans, Barry made his choices 'sure-footedly' and appeared to have had a clear sense of the kind of music he wanted to write even before he got to Cologne.[15] Nevertheless the path towards attaining a style fully his own did not preclude an initial period of distillation, albeit much more compressed in time-scale and of a less career-defining nature than Beckett's. Of Barry's early works, *Lessness* for solo voice and orchestra, is perhaps the most significant and happens to be a setting of Beckett's short prose text of the same name. Many of the recognisable features of Barry's mature style are evident here, especially in the plodding crochets and syllabic text-setting of the opening. However, the work builds towards a massive climax, culminating in the sudden orchestral eruption that occurs in the middle of the work when the soprano sings the line: 'He will curse God again…' It is a move that Beckett, famously suspicious of too close a relation between words and music, would hardly have approved. This piece, along with a further setting of *All the Dead Voices*, an excerpt from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, was later withdrawn and represents what Vincent Deane described as 'one of the few remaining souvenirs of Barry's youthful hankerings after the fleshpots of Expressionism'.[16]

Barry's rejection of Expressionism did not prevent him from accumulating other soon-to-be unwanted baggage along the way. After Stockhausen, he studied with Mauricio Kagel, developing an interest in the composer's unique brand of music theatre, a genre in which he had previously shown little interest. This inspired a brief flirtation with the kind of absurdist theatrics that Kagel had been developing since the 1960s. An example is the Piano Concerto (1977, rev. 2000) where the principal soloist's part is mostly played by a second pianist hidden amongst the orchestra while the soloist out front is requested to mime.[17]

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[14] Barry mentions Stockhausen's influence on the issue of form in many interviews but avoids going into any specifics. See for instance Michael Dervan, 'Bowers of Bliss, of Blood', *An Droichead* (Summer 1986), 4–6 and Barra Ó Séaghdha, 'Breathing Space', *Graph*, 6 (1998), 16–19.

[15] Hilary Bracefield and Kevin Volans, 'A Constant State of Surprise: Gerald Barry and *The Intelligence Park*,' *Contact*, 31 (1987), 9–19 at 9.

[16] Vincent Deane, 'The Music of Gerald Barry', *Soundpost*, 2 (1981), 12.

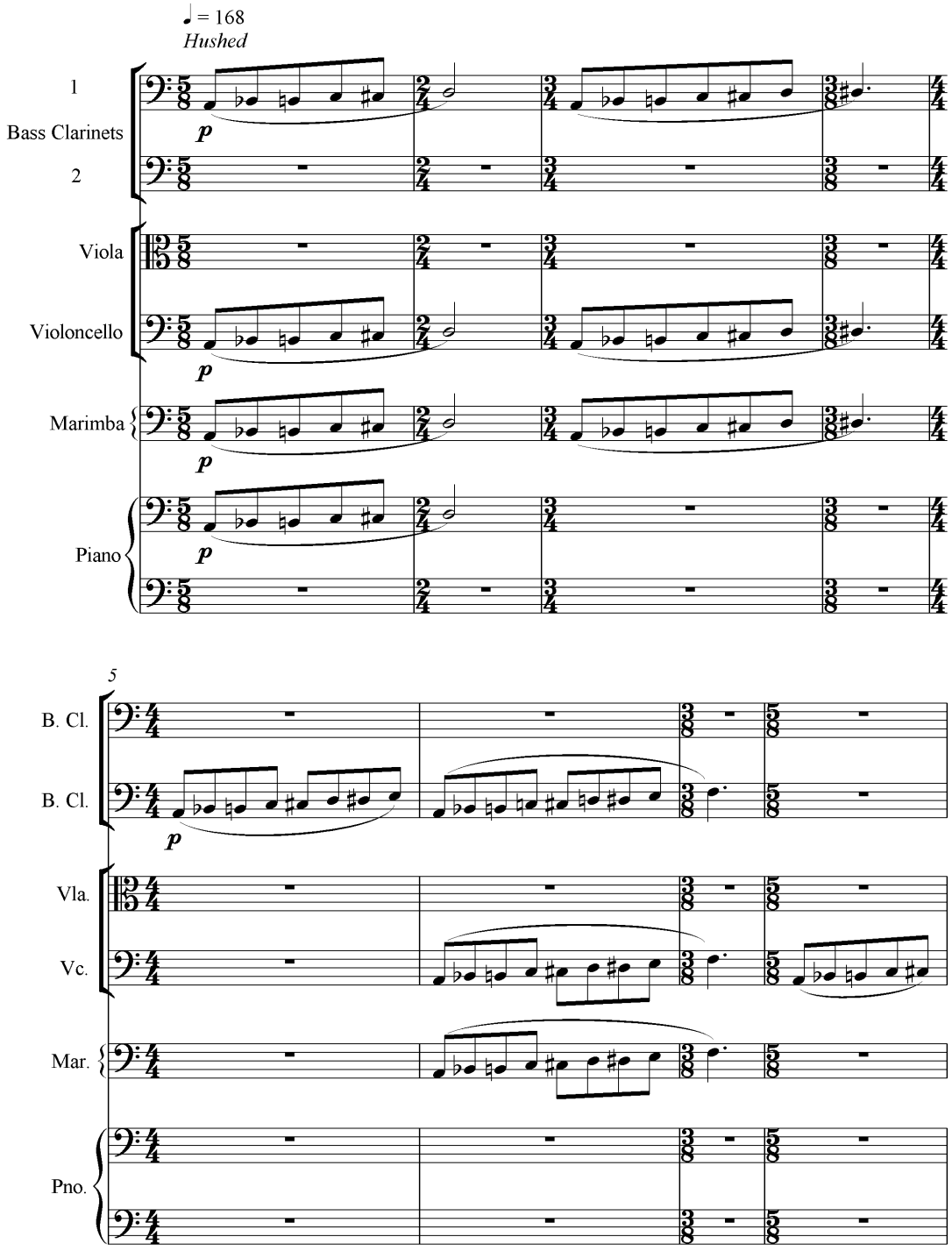
[17] This piece was revised in 2000 and renamed as *Kitty Lie Over Across From The Wall*. In the revised version the theatrics are dropped. Also, in the piece *Beethoven WoO 80*, five singers and three pianists perform a set of theatrical cameos based on Beethoven's C minor Variations. The performers are in full costume and the piece is an extravagantly choreographed parody of operatic conventions; at one stage the mezzo-soprano sings her part upside down. This work has since been withdrawn. For a description of this piece see Kevin Volans and Hilary Bracefield, 'A Constant State of Surprise', 9.

These antics, though, proved to be only a passing phase, part of the process of trial and error, which any young composer has to undergo in order to find their own compositional voice.[18] When Barry reached that stage of artistic maturity in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he had pared his language back to the absolute essentials, such that it resembles the bare building blocks of music. A few examples illustrate this tendency. Let us begin with the opening of '___', a piece for chamber ensemble that just has a symbol for its title (Example 2). The material here—a series of ascending chromatic scales in unison doublings—shares that Beckettian quality of being both abstract and familiar at the same time. It is abstract in the compositional sense in that it is simply an object of musical grammar in which musicians routinely encounter when studying music theory or practising an instrument. At the same time, these are also the factors that make it instantly familiar to the point of banality. In a typically deflective programme note, Barry tells us that '___' was inspired by those moments in Tchaikovsky's orchestral music where sweeping scales lead up to a climax.[19]

[18] It seems that Barry made a conscious effort to eliminate these theatrical elements and distil his music down to the essentials in the ensemble pieces '___' and *Ø*. However, in his more recent work, particularly the opera *The Importance of Being Earnest*, these Kagelesque techniques have resurfaced. A notable example is the use of props such as a megaphone and the rhythmic smashing of plates in Act II.

[19] Kevin Volans, *Summer Gardeners: Conversations with Composers, Summer 1984* (Durban: Newer Music Edition, 1985), 1.

EXAMPLE 2. Gerald Barry: '___', Bars 1–8 (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)

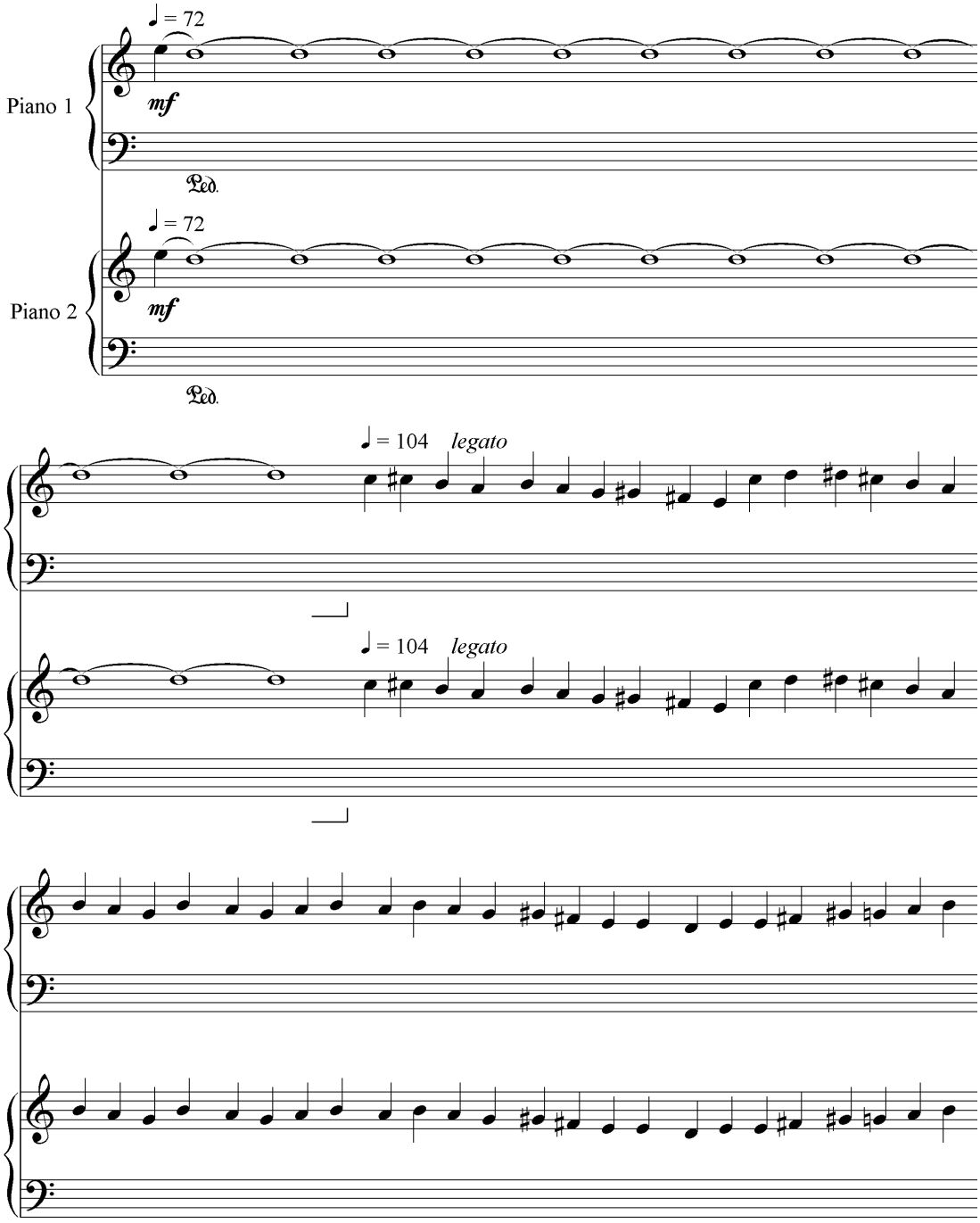


A similar strategy is at work in Ø, Barry's other graphically titled work of 1979 for two pianos (Example 3). An examination of the score reveals a simple melody which, after a lengthy pause on the second note, meanders mostly in step and almost uniformly in crotchets.

In the process of creating this melody, Barry took the Irish folk tune 'Bonny Kate' and inserted two pitches—one a tone above and the other a tone below—on either side of each note from the original tune.[20] As can be observed, the melody contains a number of oblique tonal references, such as the prominence given to the note 'E' which acts as a kind of centre and is consistently approached via the 3–2–1 degrees of the E major scale. Despite these allusions, the material assumes a certain strangeness the longer it continues to circle around itself. There is an impersonal detached quality to the melody due to the levelling out of all phrasing, the lack of cadences, and the fact that rhythmically, it is devoid of interest. In sum, there are none of the conventional life-breathing devices that composers have traditionally relied upon to animate the melodic surface of their music. To further underscore this point, the line is doubled in unison by the second pianist.

[20] For a discussion of this technique in relation to *The Intelligence Park* see Bracefield and Volans, 'A Constant State of Surprise', pp. 14–16. The major exception in the derivation process occurs in the case of the note E heard twice at the midpoint of each successive statement of 'Bonny Kate', where Barry places two more E's on either side of the 'Bonny Kate' note. This variant of the procedure endows the note E, which previously had been the supertonic of the folk tune, with a hierarchical significance as a pitch centre.

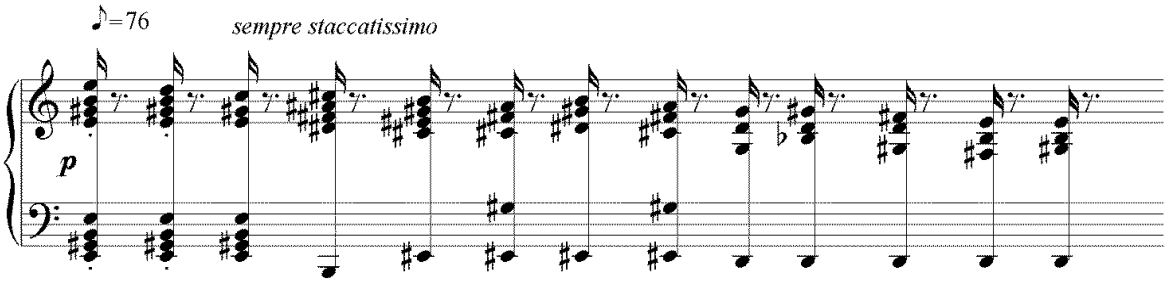
EXAMPLE 3. Gerald Barry, *Ø*, Opening Page (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)



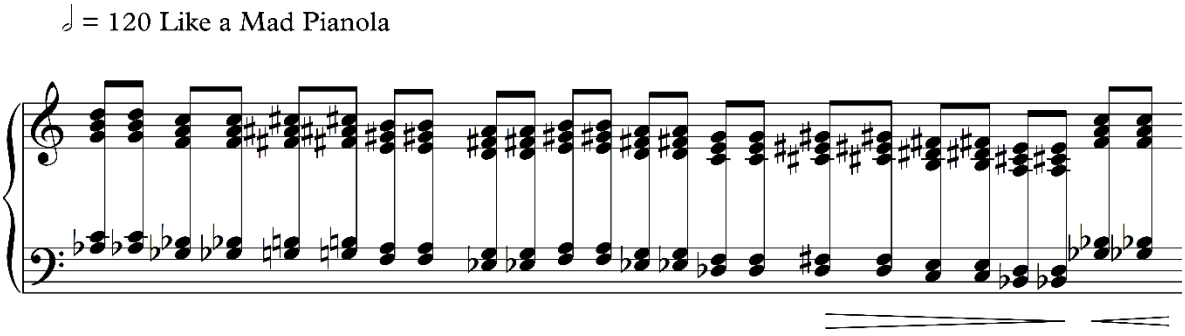
Two years later the same melody from *Ø* appeared in a piano piece *Sur les Pointes* with chords added underneath (Example 4a). An examination of these chords reveals a mixture of tonal triads and other less classifiable sonorities, the first three being based

on a bare E major triad. From page 9 onwards in the score (there are no bar lines), the harmony is even more basic. The melody is uniformly harmonised with major triads in the right hand and major thirds in the left hand, mostly in groupings of two quavers each (Example 4b). As with the previous discussion of the melody, the harmony here appears devoid of vitality in every sense. There is no semblance of movement in the inner parts; instead, there is just the mechanical application of chords in what essentially amounts to a thicker form of monody. The sole variation of the harmony in this section occurs when the chords are changed to minor triads in both hands so that they form seventh chords when combined with the melody (Example 4c).

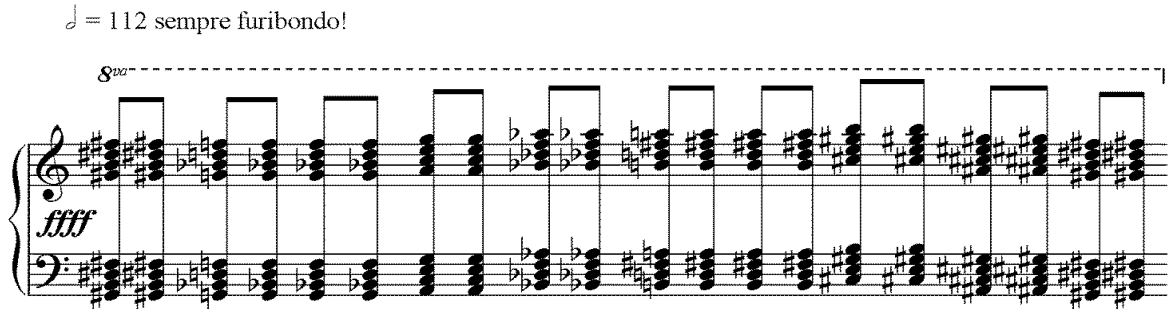
EXAMPLE 4A. Gerald Barry, *Sur les Pointes*, Opening (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)



EXAMPLE 4B. Gerald Barry, *Sur les Pointes*, Page 9 (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)



EXAMPLE 4C. Gerald Barry, *Sur les Pointes,* Page 15 (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)



These examples illustrate the way in which familiar material is presented in a blank, matter-of-fact manner, devoid of any compositional flesh or expressive function. In the same way that the material of Beckett's late theatre consists of a fragmented language of jaded memories, clichés, and everyday small-talk, I also argue that much of the content of Barry's music, which is abstracted from the supposedly 'dead' language of tonality, shares this quality. There is the same banal ordinariness about so much of it, the sense that he is working with material that has come down to him in a second-hand condition.

3) Words as 'Dramatic Ammunition'

If this material can be described as 'banal', the focus of inquiry shifts away from an examination of what the material is to how it is used. Clearly, artists such as Beckett or Barry are not interested in restoring such material to their origins. Barry no more intends to restore tonality than Beckett intends to write airport fiction. Thus, the conversation concerns the question of form, a problem which Beckett himself addressed with an unusual degree of frankness in an interview with Tom Driver in the 1960s:

> What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from

> the material it accommodates. To find the form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.[21]

Beckett was referring to his search for solutions to accommodate the kind of second-hand material that comprises so much of the content of his late works. The dilemma he faced was how to avoid the form becoming identical with the content. Because his material is so fragmented it risks collapsing the work into a similar state of fragmentation and rendering it meaningless. For Beckett, form must be imposed so that the material, although in a state of disintegration, can speak again for a second time. This is what he alluded to when saying that the form 'exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates'. Despite the fragmentary surface and his famous reticence when asked about the meaning of his plays, it is clear that meaning, or more accurately, the possibility of arriving at a coherent interpretation, remained a crucial concern for Beckett throughout his late period.

Given these concerns, what formal solutions did Beckett discover? For the purposes of this discussion, I have isolated three overarching strategies that Beckett employed in his late works to transform a disintegrated language. The first is his resort to a rigorous objectivity in articulating the language of his late theatre, extending control to details such as tempo, tone, and rhythm. In *Play*, this can be observed in the way that he directed the words to be delivered at a rapid tempo, stripped of any emphasis or inflection. This treatment reduces the language to what Beckett called 'dramatic ammunition'; words become less meaningful as individual utterances and only accumulate meaning in the total effect that results.[22] Other works exhibit a different approach. In the dramatic monologue *Not I* (1972), where the text is quite broken, short staccato phrases are piled together and separated by momentary pauses. Whatever the precise nature of the treatment in Beckett's late theatre, rarely is a sentence spoken in a naturalistic tone. 'Colourless' is a term one often finds in his performance directions – and it is ultimately this objectivity, this desire to reorder language through a rigorous control, that endows it with a renewed force and allows it to transcend its apparent ordinariness.

The second strategy is the use of silence to invest an everyday form of dialogue with a degree of resonance that far exceeds the significance of the words as they appear on the page. Perhaps the best example of this is *Come and Go* (1965), which Beckett described

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[21] Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Picador/Pan, 1980), 441–2. Beckett is referring to his novel *How It Is*. In an interview with Tom Driver he is reported to have said that previously art had struggled to contain the 'mess' within the 'form'. Now, however, the 'mess' must be admitted because 'it invades our experience at every moment. It is there and it must be allowed in'.

[22] Ackerley and Gontarski, *Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 446.

as a short one-act 'dramaticule'. The dramatic scenario here is strikingly simple: three women of indeterminable age sit side-by-side on a bench in the centre of the stage, until one gets up and leaves temporarily. The remaining two close the gap and one whispers a secret to the other that is greeted with an appalled reaction. The cycle is then repeated in a perfectly symmetrical pattern when the departed lady returns.

The play is one of Beckett's displays of virtuosic understatement where a seemingly impoverished content is redeemed by the precision of the dialogue's structure. Long stretches of silence coupled with the colourless objectivity of the women's conversation invest the unknown secret with a renewed intensity, as one is left to ponder the magnitude of what has been said. The use of silence here is very different from Beckett's earlier theatre works where, for instance, it occurs because a character cannot find the right words to express their predicament or is struck-dumb by an interlocutor. Those silences can be understood as active responses emanating from characters with some residual degree of consciousness. In the later plays, however, the characters resemble hollowed-out forms bereft of the capacity for self-reflection; the silences which underscore this are interwoven into the drama, becoming a structural component on a par with language itself.

The final strategy is Beckett's use of repetition in dismantling narrative. The critic Vivian Mercier famously described *Waiting for Godot* as 'a play in which nothing happens—twice'.[23] Mercier was referring to the fact that its second act is a subtle reprise of the first. In Beckett's later works this tendency becomes even more extreme. In *Play* Beckett does not bother subtly rewriting anything: the second part is an exact repeat of the first, as in the musical form of a *da capo* aria. Nothing could be more indicative of an assault on the sovereignty of the word than a play which repeats itself. But repetition also occurs on a more local level: in *Come and Go*, the entire structure hinges on a single exchange that is repeated but subject to minute variations each time. For instance, on hearing the secret each woman responds with a slightly different line:

> Ru (about Vi): Does she not realise?
> Vi (about Flo): Has she not been told?
> Flo (about Ru): Does she not know?[24]

These variations are strictly non-developmental; although different on the surface, each sentence is essentially the same in terms of its meaning and it is easy to imagine them being reordered without any perceptible loss. Thus, repetition in late Becket serves

[23] Vivian Mercier, 'The Uneventful Event', *The Irish Times*, 18 February 1956.

[24] Beckett, 'Come and Go', in *Dramatic Works*, 354–55.

to create a structure that allows other typically peripheral elements of the theatre such as gesture, lighting, and stage imagery to emerge and challenge language's dominance, while also aiding in the process of its reanimation.

4) Barry's Strategies of Brutalisation

Having already made the case for certain parallels between both artists in terms of their material, the question now is: does Barry use strategies similar to Beckett's in terms of how he uses those materials? I begin with the first strategy: objectivity, and discuss it in relation to the musical examples introduced earlier. It is often remarked that the parameter of music that most resembles speech is melody, and it is melody which forms the basis of nearly all Barry's music. Yet it is difficult to describe his music as 'melodic' in the sense usually meant by this term. When a piece of music is referred to as 'melodic' it generally connotes lyrical or expressive qualities. Barry's melodies are quite the opposite. As we have already seen, the melody in Ø studiously avoids phrasing or cadence; the rhythm consists solely of a single unit, which is not unusual in Barry's music. In terms of dynamics, the music is flat; there are no crescendos or decrescendos; as Mark Fitzgerald wrote, Barry's music 'exists in happy ignorance of the nineteenth century'.[25] The combination of these factors gives the melody a detached, impersonal quality similar to the 'colourless' delivery of lines in Beckett's late theatre.

When this same melody reappears in the piano piece *Sur les Pointes* (Example 4) the treatment is altogether more brutal. In the latter stages of the piece, Barry ratchets up the tempo to minim=120 and combines it with a dynamic marking of *fff* which is further increased to *ffff* for the final 'sempre furibondo' section (See previous Examples 4b and 4c). The treatment here mirrors some of the more extreme experiments of Beckett and is very comparable to the assault on language that occurs in some of his late theatre works such as *Play* and *Not I*.

Perhaps the best illustration of Barry's objectivity is his technique of vocal writing. In essence, Barry does not have one. Or, more accurately put, there is little distinction between his style of instrumental writing and his writing for the voice. As the critic Paul Griffiths stated:

> Our long-established operatic culture has all kinds of codes within which characters can proclaim their devotion, their grief, their desire for

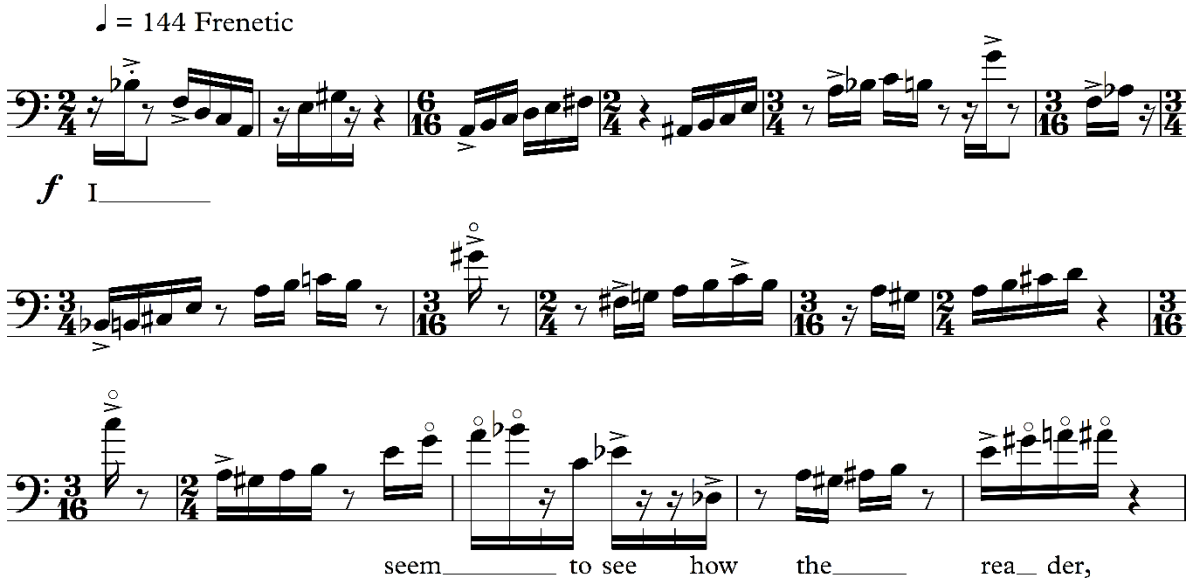
[25] Mark Fitzgerald, 'On Constructing a Sonic Gangbang: System and Subversion in Gerald Barry's *Chevaux-de-frise*,' in Gareth Cox and Julian Horton (eds.), *Irish Musical Analysis* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 303.

> vengeance, or whatever. And those codes have proved surprisingly resilient, capable of surviving through four centuries of operatic development, from Monteverdi to much that is happening now. Barry, however, sets them aside. A high note from one of his characters may indeed convey a moment of intense feeling, but it may equally just be where the vocal line seems to want to go at that point.[26]

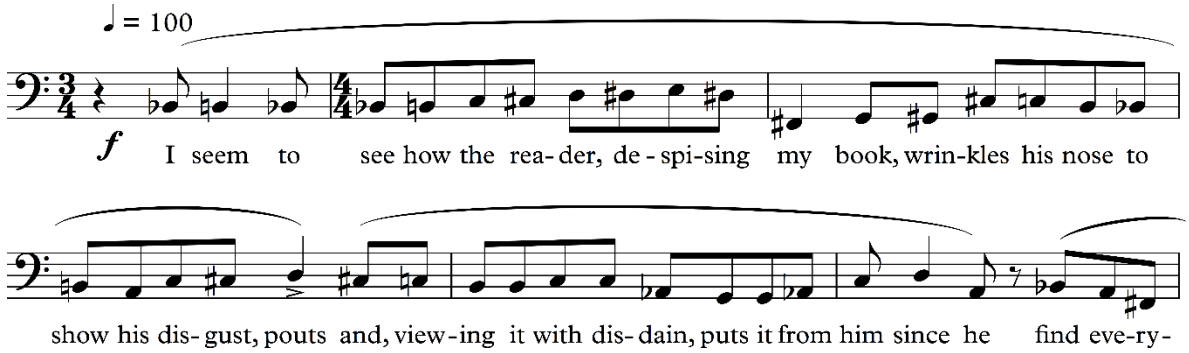
The 'objectivity' of Barry's vocal writing lies in the way that parts are composed without any reference to the traditional forms of phrasing that are synonymous with writing for the voice. Take, for instance, the choice between setting the words melismatically or syllabically. Most composers would generally use a mixture of both, but one of Barry's trademarks is to take an either/or approach: he opts for an exclusively melismatic setting, which stretches the words of the text to an absurd degree, or an exclusively syllabic approach, which subordinates the words to the wild gyrations of the music. Both extremes can be observed in the opening two sections of *The Conquest of Ireland*, a setting of a text by Giraldus Cambrensis (1146–1223), a cleric who accompanied invading armies to Ireland in the twelfth century (Examples 5a and 5b). In the first section Barry uses an exaggerated melisma, with the opening 'I' receiving thirteen bars of broken scale fragments. The outrageous artificiality of this passage produces a comic effect, but this abruptly changes when the music cuts to the next section. Barry shifts to a completely syllabic setting of the same words, beginning in the lower registers of the bass's range and giving the setting a more brooding character. This highly unusual style of vocal writing has implications for musical characterisation in his stage works, which I elaborate on further in the final section of this article.

[26] Paul Griffiths, 'An Unsettling Diagonal: Gerald Barry and Opera', programme note for the London stage premiere of Gerald Barry's *The Importance of Being Earnest* on 26 April 2012 at the Barbican Hall. Accessed 18 October 2013: https://www.barbican.org.uk/media/events/11858geraldbarryforweb.pdf

EXAMPLE 5A. Gerald Barry, *The Conquest of Ireland*, Bars 1–16 (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)



EXAMPLE 5B. Gerald Barry, *The Conquest of Ireland*, Bars 48–53 (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)

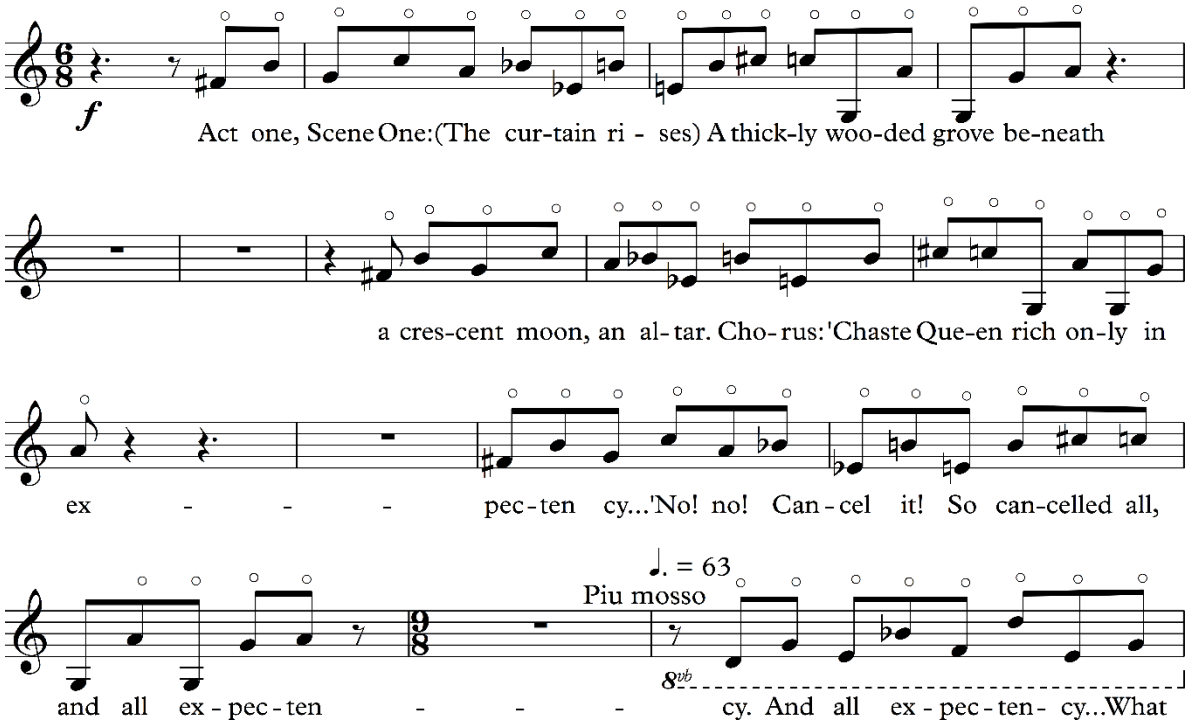


The second strategy that Barry shares with Beckett is his use of silence. In a more conventional musical context, silence is often used for dramatic effect, such as after a climax when there is a period of stillness to generate a heightened sense of anticipation. But in such an instance the resulting silence can be understood to have arisen from the preceding passage. Like Beckett, Barry uses silence structurally, interweaving it into the music without an organic relation to the material that surrounds it. The beginning of *Ø* is a good example; the opening two notes are separated from the rest of the melody by a silence of more than 30 seconds. This silence seems to endow these notes with a unique significance. But what exactly is this significance? It is not a significance that is generated from processes within the material itself as these two notes—an E and a D—are not

necessarily more significant than any other note in the piece. Any significance that they attain is purely a product of the form rather than the content.

Silences are also an important feature of the composer's vocal writing, where breaks in a line may occur mid-sentence or even in the middle of a word. An example of this occurs in Act 1 Scene 1 of *The Intelligence Park* where the composer Robert Paradies is trying, without much success, to write his opera with the help of a mechanical toy theatre (Example 6). The setting is syllabic and in uniform quavers but there are not enough notes in each repeated pattern to accommodate all the syllables. Barry, though, sets the text regardless, adhering to one syllable per note so that prolonged silences break up not only the sentences and but also individual words.

EXAMPLE 6. Gerald Barry, *The Intelligence Park*, Bars 28–43 (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)



Finally, there is the recourse to repetition and circularity. We have already observed that many of Barry's melodies have a meandering quality due to their lack of internal phrasing and cadence. But this feeling of aimlessness is also due to the constant recycling of material. This can be observed in many of the examples discussed so far. In '___' the same material—an ascending scale—is repeated over and over; on each repetition the ascending scale is varied such that it is a different length or utilises a different combination of instruments. In *Sur les Pointes*, the repetitions are of greater

magnitude. The first section of this piece consists of a succession of 335 chords which take up just over nine minutes of the work's thirteen-minute duration. This prolonged sequence of chords (referred to by number as there are no bar-lines) contains a number of large 'cut-and-paste' repetitions. Chords 1–175 form one self-contained sequence with only minor internal repetitions. Chords 176-221 essentially repeat chords 1-131, although several large passages from the original sequence are excluded. Chords 224–307 are a repeat of Chords 1–85 and the final section (chords 308–335) reprises chords 141–168. As in Beckett's works, the repetition is strictly non-developmental; there is no end-goal and the constant recycling of material facilitates subtle variations in tempo, articulation, and dynamics.

5) Interpretation: The Importance of Being Earnest

Given the existence of these structural similarities between Beckett and Barry, what are the implications for interpretation? Is it possible to uncover some of the same themes in Barry's work that critics and audiences have for many years observed in Beckett's? I argue that it is, at least up to a point. It would, of course, be inaccurate to suggest that Barry's work displays the same level of preoccupation with the nature of the self, the anguish of existence, and the fundamental question of being that characterises Beckett's work. At the same time, the confrontation between words and music in his operas—which often appear to be going in divergent directions—produces an unsettling effect that I argue has been overlooked. In particular, it is the style of instrumental vocal writing that is mostly responsible for this. On one hand the delivery of the lines is often so wild and bizarre that the initial impact is distinctly comical. However, this humour tends to act as a foil for more disturbing undercurrents. Bullied by the music, Barry's characters resemble hollow, brittle figures, a condition which is elegantly described by Griffiths:

> With the conventions of operatic vocalising all unwrapped, Barry's characters stand before us in a condition of nakedness that evokes not only shock and bewilderment but also pity. They are no longer in control. The ground on which they might have stood has gone from beneath their feet: the ground of rhythm and phrasing and, most crucially, of harmony. They live in a musical world whose tonality is cracked, besmirched, degraded, ambiguous—a world that is open, therefore, to the expression of uncertainty and irresolution.[27]

[27] As note 26.

It is on this point, the 'expression of uncertainty and irresolution' that reconnects us with the topic of intelligibility that was introduced at the beginning of this article and with Barry's ambivalence regarding the intelligibility of text in his operas:

> For me, one of the most important things in opera is that elusive third element which springs from the wedding of music and text. It does not disturb me if, in the pursuit of this, my setting renders some of the text incomprehensible: it is only so superficially. It may well be that when the characters sing, they are actually thinking, and therefore codes become irrelevant. Grasping the core of a text is not always best achieved by writing music which flows in the same direction. Going against it may be more illuminating.[28]

This 'third element' of which Barry speaks is the interpretive space that emerges when the words—which appear to say one thing—are set to a music, which appears to say something else. It is this 'third element,' created in the conflict between the form and the content, that he shares with Beckett. As Beckett himself declared in his interview with Driver, form exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates; they both pull against each other hard enough to produce this sense of irresolution and uncertainty. Yet although they are in conflict they do not diverge completely; there is always some level of coherence, which prevents the work from descending into chaos and makes interpretation possible.

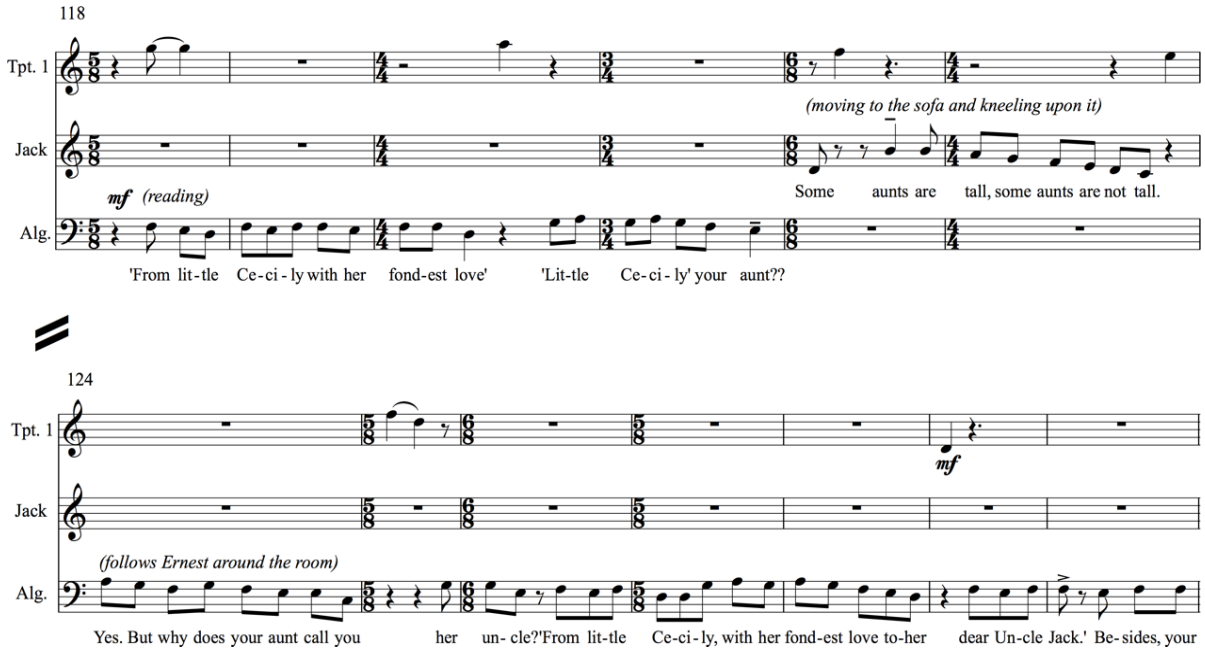
Bearing this in mind, what possible meaning can we find in Barry's music? One of the striking things about his stage works is the impact that these strategies have upon characterisation. The characters who populate Barry's operas often appear to be less differentiated from each another than would usually be the case. The way in which he tends to work with broad brushstrokes, imposing a uniform musical design for long stretches at a time makes his characters appear subservient to the music, rather than the other way around, as convention would dictate. Relieved of the traditional codes for expressing their emotions, their interactions with one another take on an automated, robotic manner without any trace of reflective consciousness.

A prime example is the opening scene from Act 1 of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Example 7) where Algernon is receiving his friend Ernest Worthing, whose real name, as he soon discovers from the name on a cigarette case, is Jack. Jack then confesses that Ernest is the name he uses in the town. On hearing this, Algernon reveals that he is also living a double life, having invented an invalid friend called Bunbury whom he can

[28] Barry, 'The Intelligence Park', 230.

pretend to visit whenever an inconvenient social obligation arises. The exchange between both characters is typical of Barry's style of vocal writing: the setting is strictly syllabic, constructed mostly in quavers, and makes exclusive use of the 'white notes' of the piano. The lines studiously avoid traditionally 'melodic' phrasing and instead the notes circle around each other mostly in step with the occasional leap of a third or a fourth. The setting is oblivious to the natural stresses of the words and the lines of the libretto are split apart by mischievous single note interjections from the trumpet and horn.

EXAMPLE 7. Gerald Barry: *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I, Bars 118–128 (reproduced by permission of Schott Music Ltd.)



The natural response to this scene is, of course, to laugh; the effect is comic and Barry's music seems tailor-made for this sort of farcical comedy. Delving a little deeper, though, one can detect more unsettling tones. Barry's vocal writing strips both Algernon and Jack of any sense of control. With their words subservient to the unpredictable whims of the music, their dialogue borders on hysteria, reduced to an uncontrollable babbling broken only by the stuttering induced by the intrusions of a solo trumpet.

In other parts of the opera the treatment of the text is more brutal, most notably in the celebrated plate-smashing scene between Gwendolyn and Cecily in Act 2. This occurs just before the moment when the two ladies reveal that they are both engaged to 'Ernest'. In Wilde's original, the initial cordiality between the two characters is disturbed

slightly when Cecily reveals that she is Mr Worthing's ward, arousing some petty jealousy on the part of Gwendolyn who laments that she never knew Mr Worthing had a ward and, now that she does know, wishes that Cecily was not so young and pretty. The main function of these lines in the original play is to set up one of Wilde's classic lines about the 'unreadability' of Ancient History were it not for the frequency of love affairs.

> Gwendolen: Well, to speak with perfect candour, Cecily, I wish that you were fully forty-two, and more than usually plain for your age. Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honour. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception. But even men of the noblest possible moral character are extremely susceptible to the influence of the physical charms of others. Modern, no less than Ancient History, supplies us with many most painful examples of what I refer to. If it were not so, indeed, History would be quite unreadable.[29]

In Barry's opera, these lines have an altogether different function. The lines about Ancient History are excised and Gwendolen shouts out her words through a megaphone with each utterance broken on every second beat by the rhythmic smashing of plates. While absurdly comic, this treatment of the text transforms the meaning of Wilde's dialogue; what is ostensibly a moment of petty jealousy in Wilde is turned into an outburst of psychotic rage. Gwendolyn's character is further unhinged by the insertion of a few bars of humming after the word 'physical'—an interruption which is not entirely random. One of the most notable characteristics of Victorian society was its apparent reluctance to discuss sexual matters openly. Inserting this aimless humming between the words 'physical' and 'charms'—the actions of a slapstick character pretending not to have heard something scandalous—obliquely underscores this aspect of Victorian society.

These examples illustrate what Barry means when he talks about grasping the core of a text by writing music that goes in the opposite direction. Beneath the surface laughs, Wilde's play is a savage satire on the stultifying social conventions of late Victorian London, the very dictates which, under the guise of morality, were designed to preserve the middle-class status quo. One of the effects of this was to formalise social relations to an absurd degree, reducing interpersonal relations to a set of rigidly codified rules or

[29] Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 287.

etiquette. In Wilde's play the mocking of these conventions is camouflaged by the cleverness of the comedy. Indeed, a noted feature of its initial reception was the inability of contemporary critics to detect the play's deeper meaning. In Barry's reimagining of Wilde, the music, like the social mores of Victorian society, makes the characters' interactions with each other almost puppet-like; they are pulled about, stretched, and subjected to severe distortion. This makes it possible for us to feel pity for them in much the same way as we do with the hollowed-out figures that populate Beckett's late theatre.

Conclusion

What makes this resemblance so apparent is Barry's assault on the traditional conventions of melody, rhythm, harmony and text setting while using the basic building blocks that go hand-in-hand with those same conventions. If Barry's characters 'stand before us in a condition of nakedness' it is because his musical material does as well. The triadic chords divorced from any semblance of coherent voice leading or the melodic line that meanders aimlessly for long stretches strike us as material that has been uprooted from its traditional surroundings and flung into a more austere and exposed landscape.

Of course, the extent to which this convergence between Barry and Beckett is a case of conscious absorption of technique on the part of Barry is a more difficult question to answer. Like most composers, Barry has never been one to openly discuss his influences in any great detail but his early Beckett settings certainly indicate that he was engaged with Beckett's work at a formative stage of his career. In any case, the fact that both Irish artists developed similar strategies of reanimating an apparently dead language is interesting in itself. With both figures there is the struggle with 'coming after' a figure or movement that had seemed a dead end beyond which no possibilities lay—Joyce in the case of Beckett and European high modernism in the case of Barry.

An even more daring proposition is to argue that Barry, particularly in his operas, represents a continuation of the tradition of Irish modernism that is commonly viewed as having ended with Beckett. While Irish writing after Beckett has generally eschewed overt experimentation in form in favour of an undoubtedly compelling realism, Irish composition during the same period has been preoccupied with questions of form and

how to compose music from the rubble of postmodernism.[30] Due to the fact that Irish composition only began to emerge as a serious force in the 1970s when the moment of high modernism had passed, it may be that Irish composers felt compelled to be either radical or redundant. As the most radical compositional voice to emerge in this period, it is curious that Barry's music has achieved little critical scrutiny from scholars engaged in the wider study of Irish modernism.

A final point worth considering is that the similarities in approach between Barry and Beckett are not just confined to form but also to genre. It is theatre that dominates Beckett's output from the 1950s onwards and it is opera that forms the backbone of Barry's work catalogue. For both artists it is the confined space of the dramatic stage that acts as the site of their most radical experiments, and it seems that it is only when the text (or score) is embodied in dramatic performance that the full physicality of their transgressions against their material become apparent. If Griffiths's description of Barry's characters as living 'in a musical world whose tonality is cracked, besmirched, degraded, ambiguous' could equally be applied to Beckett's late theatre, it is because the brutalisation strategies of both artists leave us with the same predicament: the search for meaning amidst a fractured landscape of material that we thought we previously knew.

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[30] This idea of a tradition of Irish experimentation being displaced from literature into music was first articulated by Raymond Deane in his essay 'Exploding the Continuum: The Utopia of Unbroken Tradition' in *The Republic: A Journal of Contemporary and Historic Debate* (Special Issue: Culture in the Republic: Part 2) 4/4 (2005), 100–115. The idea was further developed by Benjamin Dwyer in *Different Voices*, pp. 70–77.