AMONG THE VOICES VOICELESS: SETTING THE WORDS OF SAMUEL BECKETT

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"Among the Voices Voiceless" is a composition for flute (doubling piccolo), clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), viola, cello, percussion, piano, and electronics, based on the poem "What would I do without this world faceless incurious" by Samuel Beckett. The piece is a setting for disembodied voice: the vocal part exists solely in the electronics. Having no physical body, the voice is obscured as the point of empathy for the audience. In addition, instrumental solos compete for focus during the work's twenty minute duration. In passages including a soloist, the soloist functions simultaneously as antagonist and avatar to the disembodied voice. Spoken word recordings and electronic manipulation of instrumental material provides further layers of ambiguity. The companion critical essay "Among the Voices Voiceless": Setting the Words of Samuel Beckett proposes the distillation of Beckett's style into the elements of prosaicness, repetition, fragmentation, ambiguity, and symmetry. Discussions of Beckett's works such as Waiting for Godot and Molloy demonstrate these elements in his practice. This framework informs the examination of two other musical settings of Beckett's poetry: Neither by Morton Feldman and Odyssey by Roger Reynolds. Finally, these elements are used to analyze and elucidate the compositional decisions made in Among the Voices Voiceless.
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PART I

CRITICAL ESSAY
Introduction

“Among the Voices Voiceless”: Clearing New Musical Paths

At the beginning of this project, I embarked upon a search for texts to use in a song cycle for chamber ensemble and vocalist. It was a project within my comfort zone, following in the models of many of the composers who have most influenced my work such as *Pierrot Lunaire* by Schoenberg, *Le Marteau sans maître* by Boulez. I decided that I would fashion a response to these important works. However, during my search I encountered the poem “What would I do without this world faceless incurious,” by Samuel Beckett. It was at that moment that the concept of the project began to change irrevocably.

For the past several years, I have been searching for a way forward in my work. My aesthetic typically exists in an “in-between” space: embracing what I feel to be the attractive color and harmonic interest of so-called modernist music with elements of pacing and lyricism gleaned from early tonal models. However, I have been increasingly dissatisfied in this direction, and have felt the need to expand my craft. Beckett’s writing presented an invitation to explore the musical interests that have been at the periphery of my aesthetic. “What would I do without this world faceless incurious” is short; it is not long enough to sustain anything resembling a traditional song cycle. The poem focuses on inward reflection, and invokes a profound sense of stasis. This relates to my own perception of treading over the same worn musical paths. The poem also presented an opportunity to explore musical ideas that arise naturally out of Samuel Beckett’s aesthetic. With this realization, my framing of this project shifted to a very different one: *Among the Voices Voiceless* for chamber ensemble, disembodied vocalist, and electronics.
Setting Samuel Beckett to Music

Embarking on a setting of Beckett text presents a host of challenges. Catherine Laws explains that text setting strategies generally fall into two camps: (1) Writing music to serve the meaning of the words and their construction, and (2) Fundamentally changing the meaning and structure of the text, bending it to the creative impetus of the composition. Laws illustrates the problem behind these methodologies:

From either of these perspectives, however, the choice of a Beckett text seems strange; the increasing concentration of Beckett’s work is such that no individual aspect of meaning or expression can be separated from another. To highlight a chosen dimension can only be detrimental to the piece as a whole, and the rhythm will destroy rather than enhance the text. Thus the first method is invalidated, and yet to choose a Beckett text for the second approach seems merely perverse: if the words are to be set in such a way as to create an entirely new work, then why choose a text that is already so complete?

This problem is not unique to Beckett. No original work of literature will survive musical adaptation unscathed. Beckett’s work in particular, owing to its distinctive voice, necessitates a thoughtful compositional process. Attempting to compose in the style of a romantic Lied, for instance, will sound trite at best, and absurd at worst. The two styles work at cross-purposes. In music, meaning will be added or removed as the text is absorbed into the music, losing its own pure literary identity. Susanne K. Langer describes this as the “principle of assimilation”: the dominant component artwork absorbs the facets of the subordinate into itself. Langer puts it simply: “When a composer puts a poem to music, he annihilates the poem and makes a song.”

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2 Ibid., 57.
4 Ibid., 149-168.
Given these difficulties, a composer attempting to set Beckett must decide how to engage with the author’s voice in a way that respects the original material but is still authentic to the composer’s own musical ideas.

*Samuel Beckett’s Style*

Samuel Beckett’s language is idiosyncratic. Setting his text authentically requires an examination and assimilation of Beckett’s own style and aesthetic. I have identified five principal elements in Beckett’s work that provide a framework for analysis and application in musical environments: (1) *prosaicness*, (2) *fragmentation*, (3) *repetition*, (4) *ambiguity*, and (5) *symmetry*. I view these elements as categories: they are umbrellas under which exist a variety of technical strategies for achieving the desired result. Similarly, the defining lines between these elementals are not always clear-cut. For instance, fragmentation, simplicity, and repetition are intrinsically linked to one another: a fragment is often simple, and ripe for repetition. Symmetries, depending on type, may involve repetition. Thus, these elements are symbiotic and combine like pieces of a puzzle. However, considering each in isolation leads to a greater degree of freedom in deciding exactly how to approach the enigma of Beckett in a musical environment.

The first element, *prosaicness*, is the most straightforward of the four. Beckett relies on the simple and ordinary, both in the construction of the language and in the actions and situations of his characters. Hugh Kenner notes: “The central Beckett situations are
outrageously simple”\textsuperscript{5} This can be seen across a wide variety of his fiction and drama. *Molloy* features two characters, recounting recent experiences after the fact;\textsuperscript{6} *Waiting for Godot* features two main characters essentially standing and talking for two acts;\textsuperscript{7} *The End* follows the basic day-to-day living of a destitute man.\textsuperscript{8} These are not stories that are predicated on action or traditional narrative. Rather, they speak to our shared experiences, the lowest common denominators of human existence.

In addition to basic settings and situations, his language tends towards the minimal. Martin Esslin suggests that the focus on condensation and brevity is a consequence of Beckett’s urge to distill human experience to its basic essence.\textsuperscript{9} This minimalism also ties into a main preoccupation with Beckett: the idea of absence, nothingness, void. Kathryn White explains Beckett’s minimalism: “by adopting a minimalist approach and by stripping language of non-essentials, Beckett is able to implement the use of the ‘non-word,’ illustrating that what is not said becomes as effective as that which is clearly defined, and how you express becomes as fundamental as what you express.”\textsuperscript{10}

Parallels to the concentration of Beckett are found in the works of contemporary composers. “Minimalist” composers, self-described or not, have similarities to Beckett’s use of

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\textsuperscript{10} Kathryn White, *Beckett and Decay* (London: Continuum, 2009), 109.
limited elements and simple devices to express significant ideas. Disparate composers, from Phillip Glass to Salvatore Sciarrino, have adopted Beckett’s simplicity, wittingly or not.

The second stylistic element is **fragmentation**. This element complements Beckett’s simplicity. One means by which Beckett creates his unadorned style is through the act of fragmenting text and speech. Fragmentation taken to an extreme becomes disintegration, which is an important trope within Beckett’s work. Beckett’s characters frequently exist in a spiral into oblivion, becoming unraveled. *The End* provides an early example: the short story is entirely focused on the unraveling of a man just released from an unspecified facility. By the end of the story, he is living in filth and imagining death.11

Thirdly, **repetition** also contributes to the overall simplicity of Beckett’s work. Repetition defines Beckett’s space perhaps more than any other element. Repetition and reiteration occur throughout Beckett’s output, manifesting both on the local level and on the structural level.

One example that demonstrates these first three stylistic categories is his poem *What is the Word*:

```
folly—
folly for to—
for to—
what is the word—
folly from this—
all this—
folly from all this—12
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This opening excerpt captures the basic *modus operandi* of the poem. Small fragments are presented, repeated, and built upon. The largest sentence in the poem comes at the end,

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12 Ibid., 50.
containing fifteen words. However, the majority of the poem continually cycles back in on itself, rebuilding its meaning in small fragments and new fragments being recombined continually. The aesthetic effect is one of obsession and rumination: the content seems insignificant but the patterns of language itself crystallize into meaning.

*Ambiguity*, the fourth category, is crucial to Beckett’s writing. It is also the broadest and most difficult to describe. The three elements already discussed can contribute to a sense of ambiguity: as both a consequence and intention of Beckett’s simplified means of expression, his writing leaves out information that one would normally expect, creating a synergy between prosaicness and ambiguity through de-contextualization. Likewise, repetition of fragments (as seen in the “Texts for Nothing”) obscures meaning. However, there are a number of devices that Beckett uses that do not fall cleanly into those categories. Beckett uses at least three consistent strategies to create ambiguity in his work, all of which are essential to Beckett’s identity: de-contextualization, disembodiment, and negation.

Beckett purposefully obscures information in his works through strategies intended to de-contextualize details from their temporal and narrative placement. S. E. Gontarski summarizes:

One invariably finds in Beckett’s undoing a movement toward simplicity, toward the essential, toward the universal... Revision is often towards a patterned disconnection, as motifs are organized not by causality but by some form or recurrence and (near) symmetry. This process often entails the conscious destruction of logical relations, the fracturing of consistent narrative, the abandonment of linear argument, and the substitution of more abstract patterns of numbers, music, and so forth, to shape a work.13

This disconnection can be achieved by giving incomplete or conflicting temporal cues. Even though indications of precise time may be given, a clear sense of causality between events is often missing or obscured. This shatters the illusion of a predictable, cohesive flow of time. Steven Johnson identifies this temporal non-linearity as being integral to the overarching sense of uncertainty throughout Beckett.\textsuperscript{14} Beckett also intentionally withholds details regarding place, setting, and plot. One notable example of ambiguity through de-contextualization is the play \textit{Waiting for Godot}, in which the two characters Vladamir and Estragon converse in an unremarkable location. Beckett’s description of the setting is spartan: “A country road. A Tree.” Little context is given: the information revealed is that the two are waiting for someone named Godot. Emphasis is removed from context, it is the objective reality of action that is important. “Who,” “where,” and “why” are less important questions than “what.” \textit{Waiting for Godot} is merely pretext; the content of the play is the patterns and events that fill the void of waiting.

The unidentified setting does however contribute to the tenuous continuity in the play. In Act II, the single tree functions as an indicator of elapsed time.

\begin{verbatim}
VLADIMIR:  Do you not remember?
ESTRAGON:  I’m tired
VLADIMIR:  Look at it.
    \textit{They look at the tree}
ESTRAGON:  I see nothing.
VLADIMIR:  But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it’s covered with leaves
ESTRAGON:  Leaves?
VLADIMIR:  In a single night.
ESTRAGON:  It must be Spring.
VLADIMIR:  But in a single night!
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{14} Steven Johnson, "It must Mean Something: Narrative in Beckett’s Molloy and Feldman’s Triadic Memories," \textit{Contemporary Music Review} 32, no. 6 (Dec 1, 2013), 639.
ESTRAGON: I tell you we weren’t here yesterday. Another of your nightmares.
VLADIMIR: And where were we yesterday evening according to you?15

This example illustrates Beckett creating ambiguity by destroying temporal context. The first act of the play is indicated to have occurred the day previous to Act II, but the tree and the characters constantly call this reality into question. How much time has actually elapsed? Vladimir and Estragon each seem to have conflicting views as to the day. Estragon’s statement that the pair were not there yesterday seems to coincide with the emergence of leaves on the tree, yet it is worth bearing in mind that Estragon is a character who is established to have an unreliable short term memory. The same seeds of uncertain past, present and future are continuously sowed, that the audience is unsure about what is illusion and what is real.

Disembodiment of the voice is a technique that Beckett uses in his theatrical works, including his radio dramas. Mary Bryden notes “In the case of the voice, Beckett’s work resists any notion of a unified vocal identity...This is so even in his theatre, where the use of recorded, disembodied voices imparts complexity to the vocal event.”16 One example is Krapp’s Last Tape, which features a man playing back past recordings of himself on his tape recorder. The disembodiment in this case provides a means of interacting with human memory.17 In his radio drama Words and Music, Beckett experimented with further layers of disembodiment. The play features the character “Bob,” (written into the script as “Music,”) who literally speaks in music.

15 Beckett, Waiting for Godot
17 Andrew G Jenkins, “‘Close Your Eyes and Listen to It, What Would You Think It Was?’: a Study of Sound Technologies in Samuel Beckett’s All that Fall, Embers, Krapp’s Last Tape and That Time” (master’s thesis, Wake Forest University, 2011), 27.
His counterpart, “Words,” speaks in florid poetic language.\textsuperscript{18} Not only is speech disembodied, but so too is music. Music and words become abstractions of themselves, removed from their typical contexts.

Finally, Beckett uses symmetry of various types to build form and structure in his works. In place of traditional storytelling, reference to repeated events and symmetries hold the structure together or highlight important ideas and patterns. Actions in a Beckett work can recur in parallel at different points in the structure. \textit{Waiting for Godot} is a well-known instance of these symmetrical parallels. There are two acts in the play: however, advancement of plot is not a principle factor in their delineation. Rather, they are different expressions of the same activity: waiting. This creates an overarching sense of stasis, even paralysis. This symmetrical design led critic Vivian Mercier to note that “…since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice.”\textsuperscript{19}

Another example is in the novel \textit{Malloy}. The novel is written in two parts, each from the perspective of different characters. Yet, the characters are suspiciously similar their journeys, each embarking on a self-reported quest. One is lead to question if the characters are indeed reliable narrators of their experience. The two parts of the novel are self-written reports of two characters Malloy and Moran. The first part is the account of Moran, who is living in his mother’s room. He sets off on a quest for his mother – and in the end he finds himself in a ditch. The second part focuses on Moran, an investigator tasked with finding Malloy. His story,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Kerrith Joy Quigley Livengood, "What a 'thump' Means: Morton Feldman's Treatments of Samuel Beckett's Texts, and, \textit{This Report must be Signed by Your Parents for Orchestra}" (PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2012), 6-7.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Vivian Mercier, "The Uneventful Event," \textit{The Irish Times}, Feb 18, 1956.
\end{itemize}
too, seems to break down. While at first appearing only related by coincidence of circumstance, these two sections are linked in themes and actions. Ciaran Ross notes, “the two parts of the novel strategically oppose and complement one another, offering us two antithetical versions of the same story, where within each part, the doubles mirror and replicate.”

Samuel Beckett uses these five elements of prosaicness, fragmentation, repetition, ambiguity, and symmetry to create and enhance the themes of his work. Beckett’s characters seem to exist in a withdrawn psychological state, characterized by indecision and ambivalence. The very nature of existence and reality are questioned. Ethel Cornwall effectively summarizes the result:

Unable to accept the responsibility or the isolation of human consciousness, Beckett’s narrator retreats to an inner corner which can be escaped only through insanity or death; the Beckett hero toys with both possibilities without adopting either, and remains torn by ambivalence, waiting for the end, telling himself stories, playing games, inventing characters to pass the time until that longed-for release from his unbearable, "unmakeable" self.

All facets of both existence and non-existence seem unbearable to the “selves” that inhabit Beckett’s literary world. While such images are difficult to intentionally portray in music, the five stylistic elements I’ve discussed can be integrated easily, providing the means to connect to Beckett’s implicit explorations of in-drawn mental states.

**Overview of Critical Essay**

Using the above discussion of Beckett’s style as a framework, I will examine two prominent musical works built from Beckett texts: *Neither (1977)* by Morton Feldman and

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*Odyssey* (1996) by Roger Reynolds. My discussions will center upon the manner in which both composers interact with the stylistic elements of Beckett’s writings, and the compositional models they suggest. First, I will examine Morton Feldman’s realization of Beckett’s “Neither,” with particular emphasis on his use of repetition. Next, I will explore how Roger Reynolds constructs a narrative around several works, reflecting Beckett through his use of fragmentation and ambiguity through disembodiment. Both of these composers are attentive to the unique voice of Beckett and use clear musical means to convey this correspondence. Having established the context of Feldman’s and Reynold’s settings of Beckett, I will detail my own musical setting the poem “What would I do without this world faceless incurious.” I will explicate the specific musical decisions that have been influenced by Beckett, and the way in which Feldman and Reynolds have influenced my approach. Last, I will summarize the results of the composition process, and extrapolate this project’s influence on my future work.
Morton Feldman’s *Neither*

*Origins and Context*

*Neither* (1977) is a one-act opera written by Morton Feldman, with a libretto by Samuel Beckett. *Neither* is an example of direct collaboration between Beckett and a composer. The text was written specifically for Feldman’s opera at his request. Feldman’s account suggests an initially awkward meeting, with Beckett hesitant to collaborate.

“He said to me, after a while: ‘Mr. Feldman, I don’t like opera.’ I said to him, ‘I don’t blame you!’ Then he said to me ‘I don’t like my words being set to music,’ and I said ‘I’m in complete agreement...Then he looked at me again and said “But what do you want? And I said ‘I have no idea!’”

Beckett was eventually won over by Feldman, and jotted down the first two lines of what would become the text to *Neither*, stating that there is “only one theme in his life”:

To and fro in shadow from outer shadow to inner shadow
To and fro, between unattainable self and unattainable non-self.

*Neither* is an excellent example of a work in the first camp of Laws’ dichotomy of text setting: it attempts a direct realization of the meaning and content of the source text, the core of which is present in the paradoxical dichotomies suggested by Beckett’s theme. Feldman has written about his interpretation of the poem and the impetus for his music. According to Feldman, the very first line “to and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow” provides, effectively, a summary of the meaning of the entirety. As Feldman recounts: “I’m reading it. There’s something peculiar. I can’t catch it. Finally I see that every line is really the same...

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23 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 557.
thought said in another way. And yet the continuity acts as if something else is happening. Nothing else is happening.”

Feldman’s interpretation is of a constant vacillation and deep obsession with an idea, the same thoughts turned over ambiguously in various guises. This summation encapsulates the stylistic elements discussed in the previous section. Each line is like a repetition, and at the same time one is symmetrical with another.

Feldman’s compositional style is highly attuned to the world of Beckett. His music relies on the same elements, notably repetition and ambiguity. In this particular work, Feldman’s simplicity of materials, repetition and proportional symmetries provide the principle means of interacting with Beckett’s text.

*Neither* exists in a similar paradoxical world as many of Beckett’s works, defying expectations of genre norms. This ambiguity exists at the most fundamental level: the very designation as an opera is contradictory. This is an opera without stage direction, consisting of a lone soprano singing on stage, at a single location, in front of a large orchestra. Even the vocal content itself is un-operatic: lyrical vocal melodies are largely abandoned for single notes or small gestures restrained in pitch language. The role of the orchestra is expanded to be a significant character of its own, with expansive interludes without voice. At times the voice abandons the text completely, only vocalizing. Feldman’s admission that he disliked writing for voice, and particularly disliked opera, would seem to explain these musical decisions. However, these aspects of *Neither* are as much a part of capturing the essence of Beckett’s text as much as they are hallmarks of Feldman’s aesthetic.

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Vocal Material in “Neither”

Feldman’s vocal treatment of Beckett’s text is a defining aspect of this composition, demonstrating four of Beckett’s stylistic elements: prosaicness, fragmentation, repetition, and ambiguity. Feldman’s solution to the issues in Becket’s text is, paradoxically, to ignore the text. Instead, he treats the vocal setting in a sterile manner, focusing on structure and pattern rather than dramatic import. Feldman writes that he immediately felt that the first line of the poem fell into a grid. In his analysis, he realized that the poem seemed to have metric stability and periodicity. However, the term “grid” also has meaning specific to Feldman: it describes his own manner of working within a grid structure.

Feldman’s use of grids has its origins in Feldman’s earlier graphic scores, which were literally notated on grids. Feldman used this notation to free himself to “project sounds in time.” In his later music, creating grids became a way for Feldman to deploy and extend his principle musical materials, which he refers to as patterns. According to Feldman, a pattern is a complete, self-contained musical idea that does not require development, but rather, extension for a particular length of time. To extend his patterns, Feldman’s general practice was to create a grid of empty bars on his manuscript paper. The endings of systems, or pages, suggest a change in musical materials.


28 Feldman, Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman, 142.
In Feldman’s setting, words are treated as units according to their placement in his rhythmic grid. Within these macrostructures one word or syllable is presented at a time, creating an isolated gesture that repeats periodically. Through his treatment of words as onsets of sound within a rhythmic framework, Feldman removes emphasis from the traditional text setting concerns of natural declamation or comprehensibility. This is evident in the text setting of the first few lines of the poem, six bars before rehearsal mark 14.29 Each attack of the soprano is monolithic, defining the span of time between iterations. The words themselves are treated inconsistently with regards to specifically laying out where their syllables fall. Words such as “inner” are treated as if they were monosyllabic, written as a single sustained note. Yet in the same section, “impenetrable” is separated distinctly into a sextuplet. Musical Example 1 illustrates these ambiguities.

Musical Example 1. Neither — Soprano Line, 3 bars before rehearsal 16

Passages like this one demonstrate how Feldman’s music invokes Beckett-like construction. The text is repetitive and fragmented, while the actual content of the words is masked: the widely spaced presentation stretching the intelligibility of soprano. Coupled with the relatively high tessitura of the voice, the enunciation and pacing of the words is extremely difficult to comprehend as syllables and phonemes blend together. This issue is compounded in

later lines, when the single notes become extended into a chromatically ascending melisma, adding another element to distract from the text itself. Compounding this, Feldman adds significant orchestral interludes interrupting the soprano. A sixteen-line libretto is transformed into a forty-five minute work.30

Without a reproduction of the libretto, it is doubtful that an audience member could absorb the text of the poem over that duration. Feldman is effectively de-contextualizing the operatic singing voice, removing its agency through lack of action and musical material. This soprano is an opera character in name only: by rendering the soprano stationary and incomprehensible, she practically ceases to exist. The soprano’s voice becomes disembodied, floating over the orchestra.

The very ambiguity that Feldman weaves into his text setting becomes compounded as the work continues and expands. With limited vocal intelligibility, Feldman is easily able to transverse the fluid space between song and vocalise. It is the dichotomy that speaks most to Beckett’s global predisposition towards destructive fragmentation: the undoing of a coherent identity. Musical Example 2 illustrates a vocalise passage in Neither.

![Musical Example 2](image)

*Musical Example 2. Neither — Soprano, one bar before rehearsal 76*

Because of the significant extension of most spoken syllables, one already perceives

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30 Livengood, What a “thump” Means: Morton Feldman’s Treatments of Samuel Beckett’s Texts, and, “This Report must be Signed by Your Parents” for Orchestra, 75.
more of the sustained vowel component of the soprano rather than textual meaning. Due to this characteristic, one scarcely notices the difference between naked vowel and text fragment: the elimination of text is in effect masked from its limited initial comprehensibility. This is rhetorically powerful: it mimics the imagery suggested in the poem. A vocalise is like a shadow of normal singing, the shape of a word with its content removed.

*Time, Structure, and Symmetries in “Neither”*

Morton Feldman and Samuel Beckett have a shared interest of time and its perception. Like Beckett, Feldman’s work explores temporality as an iconic feature. His music is known for a handful of features: extreme length, extreme softness, and extreme efficiency of musical material. Jonathan Kramer, in his book *The Time of Music*, argues for a classification of musical temporality titled “vertical time.” He explains: “Vertical music denies the past and the future in favor of an extended present. The past is defeated because the music is in certain fundamental ways unchanging, nonlinear, and ongoing. It appears to have come from nowhere other than where it presently is.”[31] This is more than a mere slowing down of the sensation of musical time, but a cessation of it that requires a listener to approach the phenomenon with an entirely different set of expectations. This type of music, at its most extreme, has little sense of both traditional phrase structure and building musical direction. This temporal discourse is often most associated with minimalist composers, such as Glass and Reich. While the designation of minimalist is open to debate, Kramer argues that Morton Feldman exemplifies the use of

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vertical time in music: “The composer whose music perhaps epitomizes vertical time was Morton Feldman. While Cage has remained concerned with the composition process, which can be linear even when the resulting music is not, Feldman simply put down one beautiful sound after another. Feldman’s aesthetic had nothing to do with teleology…” 32 By disconnecting his work from traditional narrative arcs, Feldman’s compositional process itself embodied vertical time.

As Kramer indicates, development is not the dominant structural feature of a work exploring vertical time. Rather, the juxtaposition of various blocks of static material combine to create the music’s structure. Neither exemplifies this concept. As previously mentioned, Feldman worked in grid-like blocks of material that he then compiled into the final composition. In Neither, it is the recurrence of these formal blocks that define the formal structure. Kerrith Livengood identifies seven different categories of material: (A) layered sustained clusters, (B) low regular pulse, (C) three-note motive, i.e. <304>, (D) two-note minor second motive, (E) nine-note theme (F) fragmentary tune based on seconds, and (G) Repeated single A-flats in English horn (that occur twice). 33 This is a very specific accounting of the material types in the work. However, I propose that a more meaningful distinction is broader one. Neither is at its heart a dichotomy between two elements: (A) material that remains relatively static (repeated notes or minimal gestures) and (B) meandering chromatic material. A material is the majority of the work: Sustained or pulsed chord clusters and simple repeated motives define this material.

32 Kramer, The Time of Music, 386.
33 Livengood, What a “thump” Means: Morton Feldman’s Treatments of Samuel Beckett’s Texts, and, “This Report must be Signed by Your Parents” for Orchestra, 79.
The \( B \) type is defined in contrast to \( A \): It is the material that Livengood calls the “nine-note motive,” however it accounts for a material that is also inspired by this motive. Figure 1 illustrates the dispersion of the two material types over the course of \( Neither \), and Musical Example 3 illustrates the nine-note motive that defines material B.

![Figure 1. Binary representation of form in Neither](image)

**Musical Example 3. Neither — Material Type B - Florid**

Figure 1 shows the broad formal structure, divided by this binary framework. The totality of form in \( Neither \) is defined largely through contrast; meandering chromatic lines stand out from their relatively static surroundings. Thus, there exists a pendular motion back and forth between the static materials of \( A \) and the chromatic wanderings of \( B \). However, these materials are not as different as they seem. Its aural impression may be of linearity and contrast, but these materials are intimately related. Musical Example 3, for instance, is an expansion of a single F-natural. The other notes fill in the chromatic cluster up to A-natural. The durations of the first group of four and the second group of five are asymmetrical. This is further obfuscated by slurs that are grouped by six. Each phrase is thus a different permutation.
of the repeating cycle of nine pitches. These rhythmic tricks obscure the sameness of the material.

As Laws notes, “Feldman’s approach to the text, then, was to attempt to render in musical terms the pendular motion of a single insubstantial idea, viewed in varying contexts.”

The idea of a pendulum is an excellent metaphor to view the large-scale oscillations in Feldman’s form. The piece shifts back and forth between these patterns, creating repetitive and symmetrical parallels between materials throughout the piece. Yet, these are the same idea: static clusters, viewed from a different angle.

Feldman’s usage of elements of prosaicness, repetition, ambiguity and symmetry allow *Neither* to embody Beckett’s poetic ideas. In particular, *Neither* illustrates techniques of expansive but related time structures, use of repetitive elements, and de-emphasis of textual importance. These are productive models for musically realizing Beckett texts, and have influenced my own project, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

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Roger Reynolds’ Odyssey

Roger Reynolds, Samuel Beckett, and “Odyssey”

Roger Reynolds has composed four settings of Beckett’s texts, and is deeply attracted to his work. This is not surprising: both Roger Reynolds and Samuel Beckett share a deeply rooted drive to discover new modes of expression, both preoccupied with the question of form in art. Beckett states, “there will be new form...to find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the role of the artist now.”35 In Beckett, form, while considered independently in many compositions, is always merged with content.36

Reynolds is equally concerned with crafting form in his work. In his writings, he draws a distinction between those artists who create based on shared knowledge and experience between composer and audience, and those that seek a brand new art unmoored from a shared language. Roger belongs to this later category of “searchers.” The searcher mediates musical intuition by calling upon tactics and formative strategies that become invitations towards a finite set of possibilities.37 This is Reynolds’ method for dealing with “the mess”: following pathways dictated through pointed decisions about form and content. In his case, the compositional process begins with a temporary separation between a work’s formal boundaries and the specific material it contains. Reynolds first determines the boundaries of the piece in detail, explicitly calculating durations of sections, as well as deciding any other parameters that


are relevant to his musical imagination and intention. This is often based upon a mathematical scheme of proportions. For instance, Reynolds often uses logarithmic curves to generate a guiding series of proportions.

This manner of working shows a certain resonance with Beckett’s uses of structural and technical devices. Both figures reject a realist perspective, and instead abstract in order to reach essence. Reynolds’ *Odyssey* continues this exploration of form, while also channeling parallels to Beckett’s own voice.

*Odyssey*, scored for soprano and baritone, large ensemble, and electronics, is a very different musical experience from Feldman’s *Neither*. Both works have the scale of an opera, but where Feldman leans toward efficiency and minimal material to inhabit Beckett’s expressive world, Reynolds expands. Reynolds constructs an exploration of Beckett, setting three Beckett poems (from *Quatres Poèmes*) and a selection from *Texts for Nothing*. The work is in four sections: (I) “Others,” which uses text from “They come;” (II) “Self,” which uses “What would I do without this world faceless incurious;” (III) “Inquiry” which consists of the text from the ninth of the “Texts for Nothing,” and (IV) “Credo” which sets “My way is in the sand flowing.”

While bringing together so many forces and multiple texts seem to risk smothering Beckett’s intention, Reynolds is sensitive to the dangers of imposing his will too strongly: “One immediately realizes that in attempting to join with a creative visionary such as Beckett, it is not for an instant thinkable to substitute one’s own images for his. After all, the exquisite reduction of his sauces results in a concentration of substance and means that will brook no alteration.
The best one can do, it is clear, is to give Beckett his own space.” Reynolds accomplishes this task by engaging with Beckett elements of symmetry, fragmentation, and repetition. He embodies symmetry through the use of duality, fragmentation and repetition in constructing and editing musical materials, and ambiguity through disembodiment of voice.

**Duality and Symmetry**

Symmetries are the principle thread woven throughout *Odyssey*, taking the form of constant dualities. As Feldman responded to the polarity between self and unself in *Neither*, Reynolds responds to the oppositional dualities present in his Beckett texts. The first such symmetrical duality is the use of two languages: both the *Quatres Poèmes* and the “Texts for Nothing” were both originally written in French and later translated to English by Beckett himself. Reynolds uses both languages simultaneously: the main intention of the work is “to explore the unitary ‘message’ in Beckett’s mind as manifested through a pair of distinctive pathways: French and English.”

![Musical Example 4. Odyssey — mm. 1-6, Soprano and Baritone - French and English](image)

The French and English texts are presented both by the live vocalists and through pre-recorded electronics. Throughout the work, Reynolds uses degrees of correspondence or contrast

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39 Ibid., 205.
between the two languages to blur or delineate the boundaries between them. The first vocal entrance illustrates the possibilities of this technique.

The baritone is singing “Absence” in English, while the soprano sings in French with “L’Absence.” The difference between the two languages is subtle. In French, there is a consonant at the onset of the soprano’s word as well as subtle changes in vowel shading. By directly overlapping, they blend together, emphasizing their correspondence in meaning if not in language. The rhythmic setting highlights the small degrees of differentiation between the languages. Literally, they are both different and the same. This is the very duality that is present in the very opening of “They come.” The fracturing of a single meaning into two languages also implicitly creates a duality between the single and the multiple, which Reynolds builds into the composition. As he explains: “The logical pathway was this: from one mind through two written languages to one executant who becomes a vessel for two spoken languages that reach a single auditor; it manifested a recurring cyclicity of the unitary and the multiple (each, reciprocally ambiguous).”

Another duality that Reynolds explores is the correspondence between speech and sound. When human speech is slowed down through the use of digital signal processing techniques such as phase vocoding (which allows the manipulation of time and pitch independently), the specific details of pitch and overtone remain. Despite being constructed from the same exact spectral material, the stretching in time renders the language

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incomprehensible. This dichotomy is one that Reynolds exploits, most notably introduced in “Part 1: Others” and culminating in “Part IV: Credo”.

Musical Example 5. *Odyssey* — Part I: Others, mm 26-29 – Soprano and Baritone

In the above example, Reynolds creates a “manual” effect of slowing down the human voice. Each syllable is stretched in time. This longer duration is supplemented by the use of glissando and the addition of phoneme modulation. This passage precedes the first appearance of spoken text in the electronics: it functions as a bridge between the realm of pure singing (such as in Musical Example 4), and the electronically rendered speech that follows. The lines between speech and song are blurred: the voices literally instructed to sing as if in slow motion. This effectively mimics the result of time stretching through phase vocoding: both become different and the same.

This concept is extended in the fourth section, “Credo.” The piece concludes with this section, and features the largest amount of processing of spoken vocal material. At the start of the section, Reynolds sets up interplay between ensemble, vocalists, and electronics, each mimicking one another. Material is dividing between the groups as shown in Table 1.

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Table 1

*Sound Materials, rehearsal N, “Odyssey”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrumental Group</th>
<th>Material Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soprano and Baritone</td>
<td>Sustained tones, Glissandi, Whispers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strings</td>
<td>Sustained Glissandi, Harmonics, Sul Pont.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percussion</td>
<td>Drum and Cymbal Interjections, Rolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winds</td>
<td>Sustained Tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics</td>
<td>Time-stretched text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sliding harmonic glissandi in the strings give a remarkably similar effect to the sustained tones of time-stretched speech. Reynolds completes the illusion through the use of percussion instruments. The cymbals and tam-tams used have a noisy spectrum that corresponds to the fizzle of noise that manifests in slowed consonants. Reynolds has used the three groups of ensemble, vocalists, and electronics to extending the ambiguity between what is speech and music.

*Ambiguity through Electronic Disembodiment*

Roger Reynolds uses pre-recorded Beckett text as a significant component in *Odyssey*. This presentation of text through loudspeakers removes it from its source: they become disembodied voices. This creates a duality between the live vocalists and the pre-recorded voices. The vocalists exist in physical space, while the text exists in the imaginary space of the loudspeakers. Reynolds uses pre-recorded text structurally to define particularly dramatic spaces. There is minimal accompaniment of these spoken word sections. They function as dramatic recitations, with ensemble writing acting as commentary and transition between texts. This technique is used most extensively in the third section of the piece, “Inquiry.”
Reynolds describes this section as an “episodic alternations” between text and instrumental materials.\(^{42}\) The text for this section is taken from Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing*. The “Texts for Nothing” are characterized by extreme fragmentation: they are disjointed and sporadic. The several lines of the 9\(^{th}\) text are an excellent example:

> If I said, There’s a way out there, there’s a way out somewhere, the rest would come. What am I waiting for then, to say it? To believe it? And what does that mean, the rest? Shall I answer, try and answer, or go on as though I had asked nothing? I don’t know, I can’t know beforehand, nor after, nor during, the future will tell, some future instant, soon, or late, I won’t hear, I won’t understand, all dies so fast, no sooner born.\(^{43}\)

This text relies heavily upon the stylistic elements of fragmentation, repetition, and ambiguity. It is highly recursive, circling back upon itself with interjections and addenda. This renders the text introspective: its disjointedness suggests stream-of-consciousness, the inner workings of a tormented mind. Reynolds heightens this sense of an internal space through disembodiment. Since the voice has no physically present source, it connects to the shared human experience of our own conscious thoughts. Additionally, each time the text is presented it is paired with its French equivalent. At times they speak together, at times apart. This creates further ambiguity, as each on competes for attention and comprehensibility with the other.

**Algorithmic Fragmentation – Recursion and Pattern through SPLITZ and SPIRLZ**

Reynolds has highlighted the importance of editing in his compositional process. His definition is not the one most people would assume: it is not the removal of errors or optimization of expression. Rather, editing is a generative process that can recontextualize


existing materials through their fragmentation and recombination. In his own words: “We might redefine editing, then, from “a concentration and refinement of viewpoint” to “the proliferation and recasting of materials, done in a certain way.”44 This is critical to Reynolds’ method-focused manner of work, and is an ideal parallel to the recursive and fragmentary games that Beckett plays.

One way in which Reynolds engages in the editing process is by using algorithms to modify already existent musical material. This can be done manually through pencil and paper manipulations of written music, but it can also be applied to sound files as a means of digital signal processing. Reynolds has used two such algorithms in this composition, SPLITZ and SPIRLZ, which were developed in his collaborations at IRCAM. Both algorithms work as a means of shuffling and extending a given musical material through cutting, duplication, and reordering. For instance, SPIRLZ takes a given length of material, resections it into segments starting at the mid-point, and begins to rotate them outwards. Reynolds provides the following illustration of a ten second long, four-note figuration, to which I have added annotations in Figure 2.

These processes align closely with the same recursive patterns and fragmentary behaviors that are used throughout Samuel Beckett’s work. For instance, there is a distinct similarity between this technique and poems such as “What is the word,” discussed on page 6. Both SPLITZ and SPIRLZ create an output that is similar to the original material, but rearranged, creating a sense of symmetry through reminiscent parts.

These two algorithms are used extensively in part I of *Odyssey*. They serve a function of highlighting the dichotomy between self and other. The compositional methods discussed rarely occur in isolation, but are combined in order to create deep allusions to Beckett’s work. The title of the section is “Others,” and features numerous oppositional orchestrational elements. According to the score, this section is “an exploration of multiplicity.” This opening section illustrates the interactions that occur between Beckett style elements. For instance, the employment of *SPLITZ* and *SPIRALZ* is a fragmentation method on its own, but used in this context it also creates ambiguity through the sound source’s disembodiment. Table 2 illustrates the position of editing algorithms in part I, compared to the placement of the source material.

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In the majority of cases, the edited electronic version of a given passage is introduced before appearance of the unedited passage. The effect in performance is subtle, but still significant. Reynolds is thinking about the composition outside of time by separating source material from its extension and variation. These compositional decisions are effective at posing questions about the nature of time and continuity in the work. This is akin to the ambiguity of time and place that underpin works such as *Waiting for Godot*, where the flow of time is unspecific and unbound by logical causality.

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Among the Voices Voiceless: Analysis

Poem and Interpretation

Among the Voices Voiceless is a musical interpretation of the poem “What would I do without this world faceless incurious” or “Que ferais-je sans ce monde sans visages sans questions,” one of the Quatres Poèmes composed in 1948. This is coincidentally one of the poems that Reynolds used in his Odyssey. As was typical for the poems he originally wrote in French, Beckett translated the poems to English himself. This working method was an intentional decision, undertaken in order to free him from the typical thought patterns of the language with which he was most familiar: to “think fundamentally, to write with greater economy.”48 I was immediately attracted to the overarching themes of longing, despair, obsession, and alienation that are suggested by Beckett’s figurative language.

what would I do without this world faceless incurious
where to be lasts but an instant where every instant
spills in the void the ignorance of having been
without this wave where in the end
body and shadow together are engulfed
what would I do without this silence where the murmurs die
the pantings the frenzies towards succour towards love
without this sky that soars
above its ballast dust

what would I do what I did yesterday and the day before
peering out of my deadlight looking for another
wandering like me eddying far from all the living
in a convulsive space
among the voices voiceless
that throng my hiddenness49

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The previously discussed elements of Beckett’s style are also present in this poem. Repetition and symmetry are primary stylistic elements in the poem. The narrator’s continual self-questioning is the defining feature of the poem, an obsessive repetition of the question “what would I do (without)...” acting as both refrain and structural marker. The poem is separated into two uneven stanzas. There are two full repetitions of the question in the first, (with implied secondary questions marked only by the recurrence of “without”) and one in the second stanza. In such a short work, this iterative process is enough to establish a periodicity similar to the ebb and flow of rumination, compulsively returning and re-examining the same mental threads. The poem depicts vividly the sensation of being deeply fixated in thought. The second stanza is the focal point of the poem. The same question is posited, but this time reflexively answered by the narrator.

Ambiguity is an essential secondary component of the poem. Nothing Beckett reveals in the poem points to any specific protagonist or setting. The central question itself is divorced from context, its meaning only emerging through the reader’s empathy with the poem’s speaker. This divorce is intensified by the lack of any punctuation, a trait shared with much of Beckett’s poetry. Thoughts and ideas are free to run together, broken only by the structure of the verses. While line and stanza provide shape, the ideas themselves spill freely through them. Line breaks and semantic units are generally uncorrelated.

The bleakness of the imagery is striking. The language drips with existential angst, while simultaneously seeming aloof and resigned. The first division of the first stanza speaks to the human experience: that the world is impersonal and uncaring, that the nature of our experience is necessarily limited and caged by subjective perception. The second half of the
first stanza likens our emotional engagement, our murmurs of passion, to ballast: something that merely weighs us down. The second stanza provides a fitting answer to the questions of the first: that in fact, the question is irrelevant. The narrator professes being trapped in a recursive loop, in which the external seems to have no bearing. This answer conveys a sense of inherent futility.

Another area of exploration is the duality and conflict of identity inherent in the different versions of the poem. The poem is not a literal translation of the French original; its meanings are tailored to the English language. The original poem is viewed through a secondary lens, giving different perspective to the same ideas. Re-voicing of a single idea also occurs within the poem, and in many of Beckett’s works. This can be seen clearly in a vivid utterance on line 14, “Among the voices voiceless.” In the original French, it reads “sans voix parmi les voix;” roughly, “Voiceless among voices.” This creates a possible contradiction with the English version “among the voices voiceless.” In the French, it is clear that the narrator is voiceless. However, in the English version it is possible to consider “voiceless” to be an adjective modifying “voices” due to the presence of the following relative clause. In this version, both interpretations operate simultaneously in an ambiguous space, where the French is unambiguous. This ambiguity was one of the primary reasons for choosing this phrase as the title of the musical work: it suggests a masking of meaning and intention that is essential to my vision for the composition.
Aesthetic Assumptions

The structural and aesthetic framework of Among the Voices Voiceless is crafted around the stylistic features and imagery of the poem, and around Beckett’s style in general. Elements of the poem served as guidelines for the compositional project: (1) repetition, (2) prosaicness, (3) fragmentation, and (4) ambiguity. First, the work mirrors the use of repetition in Beckett, and also is inspired by the manner in which Feldman, and to a lesser extended Reynolds, engage with stasis in their Beckett-based compositions. Second, simplicity and transparency of musical language invoke the prosaic language of Beckett’s work. Third, narrative continuity is undermined through fracturing and fragmentation of discourse (connected with repetition, as in Beckett). Lastly, the juxtaposition of voice, electronics, and instrumental solo creates ambiguity of focus and direction. These goals guided a compositional process aligned with Beckett’s text, while also being broad enough to give space for my own musical identity.

Among the Voices Voiceless is partly defined by its format and instrumentation. In the work, the voice exists not as a physical entity, but a phantom, only present in pre-recorded electronics. This concept is an extension of the disembodied voices in Reynolds’ Odyssey. Where Reynolds uses electronics to present and manipulate spoken word, I also disconnect the singing voice from a human source. The “Pierrot plus percussion” instrumentation – flute (doubling piccolo), clarinet (doubling bass clarinet), viola, cello, percussion, and piano – plays a role not unlike the chorus in Greek drama, commenting on the poetic discourse with illusory musical images.
Formal Structure

The form of Among the Voices Voiceless is based directly on the structure of the source poem. Figure 3 is a graphic overview of the composition’s structure.

![Formal Outline of Among the Voices Voiceless](image)

This figure illustrates the most important structural divisions of the piece over time, determined by instrumentation and presentation of text. I have separated the text into three sections, corresponding to the iteration of the phrase “what would I do.” On the formal outlines they are labeled I, II and III. Sections in which the poem is largely absent (Prelude, Interlude, Intermezzo) precede each of these major divisions. An interlocking structure results, alternating between musical commentary and poetic delivery. Each of these sections functions as an independent unit, with little repetition of musical ideas between sections. This fragments the narrative discourse of the piece, creating a series of spaces rather than a directional movement from start to finish. “Highlighted solos” are also displayed on the graph. These are sections in which one instrument takes on a primary role. Minimal staging heightens this function: a single microphone is placed at the front center of the stage, and during their solos, the percussionist, clarinetist, and the violist approach the microphone in turn (the pianist is the highlighted soloist in the intermezzo, but obviously cannot change position). The soloist functions simultaneously...
as antagonist and avatar to the disembodied voice, drawing the audience’s attention to a
physical being and away from the voice. At the same time, the soloist’s instrument speaks with
and for the voice.

The most important formal component of the work, the Intermezzo, also plays an
important function in de-emphasizing the voice. The Intermezzo is the largest continuous
section. This is counter-intuitive in that the section presents no text at all. I view this section as
the defining feature of the work. It has been present since the earliest drafts, and embodies the
negation and voiceless-ness present in Beckett’s poem. Voiceless instrumental music connects
with the negative imagery of the poem: silence, void, the emptiness of the sky. The Intermezzo
also embodies the empty space between the stanzas of the poem, the turning point in which
the poem’s narrator somehow reaches an answer to his constant questions. Rhetorically, this
gap is both nothing and everything. It is akin to an important action occurring off-screen in
cinema. While the narrator may indeed be voiceless among voices, I conversely give voice to
the unvoiced through the expansion of this poetic pause.

As mentioned previously, each formal section of the work acts as a distinct and
independent unit. However, each section is intimately related to each other due to interlocking
relationships and similarities between their fundamental building blocks. Beckett creates formal
units by recurrence of words transformed by their context. Feldman likewise structures Neither
through formal recurrences. I invoke recurrence on a conceptual level by returning to the same
essential elements (repetition, prosaicness, fragmentation, and ambiguity) in each section. An
obsessive iteration and variation of materials invokes the recontextualized recurrence of
Beckett’s text; the ebb and flow of these pulsations and iterations create musical shape.
Table 3

*Basic Material Types in Among the Voices Voiceless*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Material Type</th>
<th>Instrumentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prelude</td>
<td>Reduction</td>
<td>Flute, Viola, Ensemble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Soprano</td>
<td>Electronics, Cello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interlude</td>
<td>Clarinet in Bb</td>
<td>Clarinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td></td>
<td>Electronics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermezzo</td>
<td><em>solo, phrasing ad lib. - let breathe</em></td>
<td>Piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Viola</td>
<td>Viola, Soprano</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Simple musical materials refer to the prosaic qualities of Beckett’s language, in addition to baring the essentials of the material by removing artifice. A tapestry of recurring thoughts and obsessions, fragmented and juxtaposed differently in each section, connects with Beckett’s weaving of fragments of language into a quasi-musical discourse. These essential elements bring a degree of similarity between sections that inhabits the treatment of material first and foremost, rather than the material itself, which is distinct in each section. Table 3 illustrates the core material used in each section of *Among the Voices Voiceless*.

Each section of the piece presents a world unto itself, derived nevertheless from the same basic elements as the rest of the work. In the Prelude, I focus on the expansion and contraction of a chord that grows out of a single D natural, a process intended to be reminiscent of the ebb and flow of the tides. Section I is based on a four-note pitch cell that alternately swells and stagnates. The Interlude is an extended clarinet solo with live electronics, a single “wave” of material that reaches its crest at the end. The computer solo amalgamates the vocal material in the piece into murmuring burst of activity. The Intermezzo creates static spaces, which eventually explode into activity, and Section III amalgamates characteristics from the entire piece.

Common threads unite the distinct worlds of the work’s sections. There are correspondences in shape between the materials: ascending gesture, intervals of a seventh connect the basic substance of each section. There are also correspondences in the way the materials grow and develop: they begin their musical journey in a similar rhetorical space. The principle musical motions of “I. without this world,” Intermezzo, and “III. what I did yesterday” illustrate these features. In each of these examples, the music unfolds in a parallel manner. The
main figuration is repeated, with the major seventh being the most evident component. The
details of each are varied — instrumentation, rhythm, ornamentation create very different
affects — but the basic structural features of repetition and wide leaps suggest reminiscence.
This connectedness of material reinforces the literal meaning of the second stanza of the poem.
The narrator is caught in a recursive loop of “searching for another,” never ceasing. The
material in the piece is born of the same essence, iterating the same meaning in different
guises. Every section repeats similar behaviors, programmatically representing the narrator’s
actions yesterday, the day before yesterday, and into the foreseeable future.

Secondarily, a simple harmonic backbone provides background unification for all of the
materials. While not traditionally tonal, certain pitch classes are prominent structurally. A
simple D Major sonority underpins the entire work: In the prelude up until the intermezzo,
pitch class D predominates. The Intermezzo focuses on A, while Section III emphasizes F#. While
the perceptibility of these relationships is questionable, they create conflict between the
surface pitch language of the work and the simple structural elements that support them.

*Developmental Models: Recursion, Fragmentation and Recombination*

Beckett’s use of fragmentation and repetition are models for the development and
extension of material in *Among the Voices Voiceless*. Short, repetitive units are easily absorbed
by the audience, and this allows their context and variation to be the primary driving force of
musical meaning. The Interlude and Intermezzo are two sections which best illustrate this.

The Interlude is a solo for clarinet and electronics. The musical goal of this section is a
gradual expansion from the lowest note of the Bb clarinet to an F#. This is a metaphorical
interpretation of the question “(what would I do) without this wave where in the end body and shadow together are engulfed.” Musical Example 6 illustrates the first seven phrases of the solo, and Figure 4 illustrates the structural background of those phrases.

Musical Example 6. Among the Voices Voiceless — "Interlude," clarinet, first three lines

Figure 4. Pitch skeleton, first 7 phrases

The clarinet material is generated through an intuitive recursive/additive process. The piece starts on the opening D, gradually expanding into new notes and registers. As the clarinet expands, the previously exposed material gets fed forward. This is accomplished using a set of intuitive guidelines: (1) every new note establishes a repeatable fragment including the notes surrounding it. For instance, as soon as B-flat is introduced, the gesture D₃-Bᵇ₄ is considered a repeatable fragment. (2) Once a fragment is introduced, it can be repeated elsewhere in the
solo. (3) The general tendency is to move backwards to the prior fragments and repeat, appending a new fragment at the end. The electronics contributes two additional elements: filtered noise that follows the clarinet, and granulated samples of the clarinet solo that are spatialized and transposed. These contribute to both the metaphor of wave, and also to the increase of density through concatenation of fragments.

The Intermezzo is inspired by Feldman’s expansion of time scale and meandering continuity. It features the piano as a highlighted solo instrument. As this section is my own figurative exploration of the seemingly intractable void of obsession and circular thought, Feldman’s quiet, slow, yet persistent patterns and cycles seem appropriate as a general model.

The construction of the Intermezzo is centered on repetitive cycles of a four-phrase unit presented first in solo piano.

This opening is an exploration of the tetrachord [9TE0]. The pitches are frozen, oscillating between Bb₄ and A₅. Although the pitch language of this cycle is almost entirely immobile, interest is maintained through the subtle variations of rhythmic emphasis. There is an additive process that gives a small amount of momentum to this first cycle. Each phrase consists of two repetitions of the Bb-A motive. These have the duration of 8 beats, with exception of the fourth. The fourth is extended in duration in order to provide a cadential
functioning, signaling a resting point in the rhythm of the phrase. Internally, the location and stress of each oscillation varies in each repetition.

Musical Example 8. Among the Voices Voiceless — "Intermezzo," Macro-rhythmic outline of opening cycle

The first repetition in each phrase gradually increases length by an eighth note (while, naturally, decreasing the duration of the second repetition unit.) This regularity invokes a sense of both predictability and directed rhythmic motion, while the sudden stressed vertical presentation of the set in the fourth phrase creates a sense of culmination of the cycle.

While this opening sets up expectation for a rigid, process-focused section of music, what follows is only loosely related to the original process presented. Rather than a consistent trajectory of development through rhythmic addition, the blocks of materials themselves freely reconfigure as the section continues. Much as Beckett applies continual processes of obfuscation to his successive drafts, I have attempted to break expectation, at least subtly, by setting up a process that remains incomplete.

Despite my interest in toying with narrative disjunction and arbitrary decisions, this section contains a quite traditional dramatic high point, building from rehearsal I. An excerpt from this climax is shown in Musical Example 9. It is a moment characterized by a release of tension through canonized presentations of chromatic, meandering descending lines. This intrusion of directed pitch motion in a section that otherwise is frozen is a metaphor for epiphany. The stasis of contemplation and anxiety has been smashed temporarily by a realization — only to return to stasis once again.
Musical Example 9. Among the Voices Voiceless — "Intermezzo," Climax: mm. 268-269

**Voiceless among Voices: Electronics and the Disembodied Vocal Identity**

As in *Odyssey*, the electronic component of *Among the Voices Voiceless* fulfills multiple roles. First, it allows the ability to create disembodied sound sources, most significantly the disembodied soprano soloist. Secondly, it acts as a tool for extension and reinterpretation of musical materials through the use of a customized granular synthesis engine I designed in Max/MSP. Both of these roles allow engagement with Beckett’s characteristic *ambiguity* and *fragmentation*.

Ambiguity is implicit in the use of disembodied sound sources. As observed in earlier discussion of Reynolds’ work, a sound removed from its source is in some degree inherently disturbing to humans. Our auditory system is designed to alert us to threats and to provide information about our immediate environment. A sonic event that suggests a source that
should be present, but is actually illusory, causes a sense of disconnection in our consciousness. At one point, this might have been an event that generated considerable anxiety, yet the era of technological reproduction of sound has caused us to acclimate to these phenomena.50 Composer Denis Smalley uses the term “source bonding” to describe “the natural tendency to relate sounds to supposed sources and causes, and to relate sounds to each other because they appear to have shared or associated origins.”51 Smalley’s intent is to provide a framework to describe an audience’s relationship with a particular electroacoustic timbre. For instance, the sound of two objects scraping together is still recognizable and attributed to that physical action. Electronically manipulated sounds that produce unnatural envelopes and spectra can still be categorized by their degrees of correspondence to physically produced sound and gesture. We have become comfortable with a disembodied voice representing a body, even if not present. As Connor points out, “voice everywhere finds a way of being at home.”52 By extension loudspeakers themselves are capable of this sonic agency, being capable of representing natural and unnatural vocal sounds. This dilutes the relationship of sound to direct human action.

The soprano existing solely in the electronics accomplishes a number of aesthetic aims. First, there is the misdirection of focus. A live singer usually functions in the role of protagonist: as audience member, we tend to see the singer as the hero in some sort of story. He or she is the focal point of empathy, more than if there were only an instrumental ensemble. In Among

50 Steven Connor, Panophonia, (2012), 1.
52 Connor, Panophonia, 8.
the Voices Voiceless, the logical focus of the audience (that is, the text itself) is deliberately obscured. In Beckett dramas such as Waiting for Godot, important interruptions occur by characters that are seemingly unimportant, who exist largely off-stage. Among the voices voices parallels this idea of off-stage characters. The soprano locked in the illusory space of loudspeakers, and is not heard until three minutes into the work. Expanding upon this concept, the vocalist is actually “singing” for very little of the piece: only the first half of the first stanza, and the second stanza, are even traditionally set to music. This amounts to a sense of misdirection: the most important element of the piece is actually the least present. These decisions emerge directly from poetic interpretation. The poem’s narrator is trapped in a cycle of rumination, and is “searching” in an environment that oppresses and marginalizes it. The narrator is constantly searching while outnumbered (by throngs of voices and whispers) and ignored (the world, incurious). In this case, the ensemble becomes a metaphor for the throng of voices surrounding the soprano. There is continual frustration of communication.

In addition to the dislocation of the sung material, the text in Among the Voices Voiceless is also presented through pre-recorded spoken word samples. Spoken voice embodies a different form of communication than song, one that is more direct and immediately communicable. The spoken word can be a vehicle for delivery of information, or it can be used as a way to contrast sung materials. Electronic processing of text can provide further options, such as distorting text to pure noise or other manipulations. In Among the Voices Voiceless, these functions are invoked through specific moments that highlight the spoken text. There are three locations in the vocal setting where sections of the poem in are left unsung, filled instead by recorded voice samples. These are the lines “without this wave where in the end body and
shadow together are engulfed” which occurs at the opening of the Interlude; “wandering” and “that throng my hiddenness” from “III. What I did Yesterday.” In each of these cases, the use of sudden text provides emphasis as well as disorientation. The first example represents a definitive break in the dramatic world presented up to that point. The Interlude is the section of the piece that relies most on live electronic processing, and the stark presentation of text sets the stage for the wave-like musical behaviors of the section.

The best example illustrating how the elements of song and recitation are used together is the second main section of the piece, “II. Without this silence.” The text of this section marks the second main inquiry of the poem. It is the section that draws the clearest distinction between subjective humanity and objective observer. It evokes the murmuring and panting voices becoming silenced, dying away to the image of soaring sky held down by the ballast of the earth’s dust. The music illustrates these images through the imaginary space of electronics alone.

During this section, the lights are dimmed to black and the disembodied sounds through loudspeakers become the focus. The principle sound source is vocal material, both sung and spoken. A disembodied voice recites the text of the poem sporadically, but the foreground element of the section is not the text, but electronically processed sung material. Two sources are used: future material from section III, ”what I did yesterday,” and otherwise-unused vocal recordings of the second section text material. These vocal lines are illustrated in Musical Example 10. These lines are manipulated using my granular synthesis engine, *Grain-Storm.*
Granular synthesis is one of my responses to the influence of the editing algorithms used in Roger Reynolds' music. It accomplishes a similar function: the re-generation of musical ideas through segmentation and rearrangement of existing musical ideas. The engine accepts sound files as input, and outputs a string of “grains” defined by a particular location in the file, duration, and shifts in parameters of pitch, envelope, and spatialization. My granular environment contains an additional level of timbral control: I have built the option to probabilistically select from multiple sound-files with their own independent grain onset locations. This functions as a mixer of sorts: using the graphic interface, one can change the probability that the engine will playback a grain from up to four pre-loaded files.
Using this environment, I performed musical ideas that connected to the rest of the pieces, yet were built out of the otherwise divergent vocal material. The construction of the vocal materials in Musical Example 10 facilitated the creation of these gestures. The general tendency of musical materials in Among the Voices Voiceless is that of repetitive ebbing and flowing. Therefore, granulating sound file segments that gravitate around central pitches with neighboring digressions easily produces static results with periodic pulses of neighboring tones. This is combined with segments of text slowed using phase vocoding algorithms. The result is music that is vocal in its impression but lacking comprehensibility. The form of this section is illustrated in Figure 6.
The section consists of two principle parts, (A) Murmurs and (B) Frenzies. These are sections that are nearly identical in length, symmetrical in proportion but disjunct in content. Section C is not an independent section, but rather a fading out of B, which evokes Beckett’s imagery of “where the murmurs die.” The material of A begins in a fashion reminiscent of the unfolding of other material in the work. Gestures are self-contained, similar, and separated by silences. The gestures sound like pitch clouds of limited bandwidth: the overall pitch trajectory is flat, with local detail provided by the chromatic meanderings generated through the granular process. Section B emerges from the discourse as an insistent, buzzing cloud of indistinct voices, evoking the “pantings” and “frenzies” in the text.

The placement of text recitation is also marked in Figure 6. These readings are plain and disinterested. The spoken poem’s contrast with the fantastical aural imagery of digitally processed song makes clear the multiplicity of actors implicit in electronics. The narrator is heard as being in this “convulsive space” of voices, opposing and distracting from each other.
Conclusions

Summation

*Among the Voices Voiceless* presents a model for future compositional activity. Engaging Samuel Beckett’s work has forced me to rethink many aspects of my compositional craft, crystallizing new ideas, procedures, and forms. This piece is a significant departure from my previous work: It is both the longest work in my catalogue as well as the most extensive in use of live electronic elements. It also is the first to consciously engage ideas I have been curious about for a long time: large scale use of text and the use of static musical elements. Further, it has been a laboratory for the creation of new technical approaches. Engaging with Beckett’s text led me to elements of *prosaicness, repetition, fragmentation, ambiguity, and symmetry* have forced a reckoning with my previous methods of working, proving an impetus for my growth as an artist.

Paths Forward

I am excited about the prospects of further exploration of the directions that have emerged from my engagement with Samuel Beckett’s poetry. *Among the Voices Voiceless* approaches time in a more elastic, spacious manner than I had previously attempted. My prior music has valued brevity and conciseness, goals inspired by my study of the music of Schoenberg. The scale of *Among the Voices* has opened up the worlds that composers like Feldman have inhabited: a sense of time that is not bound by clear-cut narrative progression. The joy of exploring simple sonic ideas, loosely bound in time, supplants teleology. The music focused on ebb and flow. Rather than the constant need to create momentum, sound events
are content to exist in time. This is particularly true of the Intermezzo and Interlude. The method of unfolding of the material on the local level highlights a newfound patience with my materials. I view the core ideas as being pushed and pulled through time: time is a muscle that contracts and expands, pulling along musical materials as tendons guide limbs.

This piece also marks a shift in my approach towards works that mix electronic and acoustic elements. In the past, my experience with writing purely electronic music has caused a disjunction between my purely instrumental practice and my instrumental writing with electronics. Being primarily trained in creating fixed media works, I would begin with creating acousmatic materials. This method of working never produced satisfactory results. The methods I used to create electronics seemed to limit my perceived pallet of acoustic sounds. This seems contradictory given the vast possibilities of digital signal processing. For me however, creating acousmatic music by editing and processing real world sounds into gestures created its own sonic discourse. Even considering the extended technical possibilities of instruments, I was never able to satisfactorily bridge the conceptual gap between processing techniques and instrumental writing. When I attempted to apply my musical ideas to existing electronics, they seemed of a different world, unable to blend properly. The instruments seemed a superfluous addition: the sonic world I was creating did not need instruments. In contrast, in this composition I made sure to generate acoustic materials first, only then proceeding with the electronics. This allowed me to conceive of electronics as being generated from, and commenting on, the musical discourse already present. This technique has proven more compatible with my creative process: starting with the musical element that has the more limited frame of possibilities reduces the burden of decision.
This new methodology in electronics has been reinforced by my exposure to the editing techniques of Reynolds, and to the pattern strategies of Feldman. Both suggest the retreat of motivic development to a background importance. Reynolds accomplishes this through establishing musical behaviors and extending them through segmentation and reordering. Feldman’s patterns destroy the usual function of motive as element of unification and development, and instead focus on repetition and contrast on an extended scale. Since the surface stays largely the same, it is the temporal differentiation between patterns becomes the main compositional determinant. These lines of thinking are symbiotic with the Beckett’s characteristic use of simple repetition, fragmentation, and large-scale formal symmetries. My music has traditional focused on motivic saturation and recontextualization, applying familiar classical methods in a post-tonal environment. Extension, rather than development, allows another dimension of relationships between musical events. Extension therefore suggests a pathway that can be used to maximize temporal space in my music. Single ideas can be the generators of even more musical content, which can be displaced in time from original statements. This opens up the possibility of longer, more intricately linked forms.

All in all, my encounter with Beckett has changed my compositional outlook. My future work will increasingly amalgamate the broad scope of time, extensions strategies and non-teleological structures with my own musical imagination and experiences.
Bibliography


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PART II

AMONG THE VOICES VOICELESS
Joseph Lyszczarz

among the voices voiceless
for ensemble and electronics
2017
**Instrumentation**
flute, + piccolo
Bb clarinet, + bass clarinet
viola
cello
percussion:
  - vibraphone (mallets and bass-bow)
  - claves
  - tom-toms (4)
  - bass drum (beater, brushes)
  - tam-tam (mallet and metal scraper)
  - suspended cymbal (felt mallets and bass bow)
piano

**Electronics**
Computer running MaxMSP version 7
Octophonic loudspeaker configuration in stereo pairs
Microphone
MIDI foot pedal

**recommended stage setup**

**Performance Notes**
The score is transposed. All accidentals carry through the measure, but never through the octave.

6 Circled numbers indicate electronics cues. These are triggered via footswitch on stage, or by technician at computer

Clave tremolo is performed by holding one loosely. Striking clave is held at midpoint between fingers and rotated, striking clave alternately with each side

This work features live electronics: be sure to sound-check solo instruments as indicated in included patch

All trills are half-step trills unless otherwise specified
Program Note

Among the voices voiceless is a work for pierrot ensemble plus percussion and electronics, setting the poem “What would I do without this world faceless incurious” by Samuel Beckett. The text is not sung by a live vocalist: rather, the vocal component of the work exists purely in the electronics. The sung voice is a phantom, removed from the tangible, physical world of the instrumentalists. This work explores the interaction between the present and absent, one versus collective.

The composition is cast in six sections:

Prelude
I. without this world
Interlude
II. without this silence
Intermezzo
III. what I did yesterday

duration: c. 20'

what would I do without this world faceless incurious
where to be lasts but an instant where every instant
spills in the void the ignorance of having been
without this wave where in the end
body and shadow together are engulfed
what would I do without this silence where the murmurs die
the pantings the frenzies towards succour towards love
without this sky that soars above its ballast dust

what would I do what I did yesterday and the day before
peering out of my deadlight looking for another
wandering like me eddying far from all the living
in a convulsive space
among the voices voiceless
that throng my hiddenness

-Samuel Beckett, “What would I do without this world faceless incurious”
among the voices voiceless
a composition for chamber ensemble and electronics

Samuel Beckett

Flute
Clarinet in B♭
Viola
Violoncello

Claves

Piano

Electronics

prelude...
obssessive, ruminating \( \dfrac{1}{4} = 60 \)

\( \text{Ensemble begins at microphone position in center of ensemble. Lights focused on percussion soloist.} \)

\( \text{Harmonic clave sounds} \quad \text{just between viola and electronics.} \)

\( \text{Increased density of clave samples} \)

\( \text{FOR REVIEW ONLY} \)
Lights slowly fade in, percussionist returns to playing position.

The music gradually builds with instruments taking over.

Resonance from electronics fades out as the music continues.
I. without this world
like unfocused thoughts, slightly slower $\dot{=} 72$

What would I do

with our this world
I. Interlude: without this wave

Languid, $j = 60$

With a feeling of breathlessness

improve circular motions with brushes, following contour of clarinet line and electronics

At center microphone position

improvise circular motions with brushes, following contour of clarinet line and electronics

(no air sound)
II - without this silence

Computer Solo - 2' 42"

FOR REVIEW ONLY
Intermezzo

detached, \( \frac{1}{\text{bar}} = 72 \)

solo, phrasing ad lib - let breathe

\( \approx \) 44 34 54 34 54 78 44

prepare bass bow

\( \approx \) 54 44 54

Begin fading lights in to full ensemble, muted color

\( \approx \) 54 44 54

\( \approx \) 54 44 54

\( \approx \) 54 34 54 24 44

\( \approx \) 54 34 54 24 44

\( \approx \) 54 34 54 24 44

\( \approx \) 54 44 54

\( \approx \) 54 34 54 24 44

\( \approx \) 54 34 54 24 44

\( \approx \) 54 44 54
Lights dim, violist moves to central mic position to prepare for III. what I did yesterday.
III. what i did yesterday

Ironically, $j = 68$

Flute

Clarinet in B♭

Violin

Violin

Violoncello

Piano

Electronics

Brass Drum

Flute

Clarinet in B♭

Violin

Violin

Violoncello

Piano

Electronics

Brass Drum

$5$
of my dead light, looking for another
among the voiceless

Sudden bust of phantom claves, receding into background