

*Headaches Among the Overtones*  
*Music in Beckett / Beckett in Music*

*Catherine Laws*

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# *Headaches Among the Overtones*

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**FAUX TITRE**

**391**

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Keith Busby, †M.J. Freeman,  
Sjef Houppermans et Paul Pelckmans

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## Introduction

### Why Beckett and Music?

In 1957 Samuel Beckett wrote to theatre director Alan Schneider expressing his reluctance to discuss his works or their meaning: 'My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended), made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin' (Harmon 1998, 24). A clear statement on the face of it. And yet, as so often with Beckett, the very play on words provokes further thought about quite what he does mean. Most obviously, dismissing the joke draws attention to it. But the phrase 'fundamental sounds' also resounds in other ways for the Beckett reader, reminding us of Beckett's frequent analogies between writing and farting or excreting (not least in the titles of some of his short prose: the *Fizzles*).

Perhaps, though, the metaphor of 'headaches among the overtones' is more provocative still in its evocation of the critic's head throbbing with the pain of trying to get to grips with Beckett's work. On the face of it, with 'overtones' he implies that critics are superfluous, even unnecessary: they are concerned too little with the 'notes' of his work – its concrete experience – instead focusing on their surplus, the harmonic detritus that rings on. But any musician knows how important overtone frequencies are: they determine the quality of a musical sound. It is the subtle differences in the spectrum of overtones that distinguish the tone of a 'middle C' played on one piano from that of another, for example. Musical affect, as well as the perception of form and structure, are in part constituted in resonance, timbre, and texture, and the nuances of overtone structures are what a musician is learning to control in developing subtleties of tone and articulation in sound production. Overtones, then, are not supplementary or peripheral. Beckett knew this in both theory and practice: he was not only a good amateur musician but also a student of Pythagoras's theory of tuning.

Beckett had plenty of headaches among the overtones himself. His texts display extraordinarily careful attention to the sonic patterning of words. Simultaneously, they resonate with multiple fragmentary allu-

sions, echoing other texts of his own but also those of other writers, artists, and philosophers. More specifically, it is no coincidence that Beckett's early work draws directly on ideas of tuning, melody, and harmony; these analogies form part of an explicit, self-conscious grappling with the direction his writing should take and, more boldly, the possibilities for literature of the twentieth century. Here, Beckett's own headaches among the overtones are explicit: he makes use of a range of theoretical models and philosophical ideas of music. In this light, the letter to Schneider reads somewhat differently: if such headaches are pointless, then so is his own work. But this, of course, is nothing new for an author who routinely couples statement with retraction, composing with the utmost fastidiousness while declaring the impossibility and futility of writing: 'Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none' (*WH*, 7).

'Headaches among the overtones', then, are not just for critics: they are the very stuff of Beckett's work. And the very richness and ambiguity of this apparently pithy, witty, and rude comment is exactly what draws many of us back to Beckett, again and again.

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The musical analogy is no accident. It is one of many that appear throughout Beckett's work, as well as in his more personal materials: letters, notebooks, and manuscript marginalia. Beckett's love of music is well documented, and it played an important part in his early life. His grandmother wrote songs and often adapted those of others for playing on the piano, and Gerald, her son, often played piano duets with Sam, his nephew (Knowlson 1996, 7). Classical music seems to have been Beckett's staple, but as a young man, at least, he was also familiar with popular music and played a variety of tunes in piano duet form with his brother Frank (Knowlson 2012, 112). Beckett continued playing piano throughout his life. He was good enough to play some quite challenging repertoire – in 1948 he wrote of 'working at Chopin's 3<sup>rd</sup> Sonata and [Schumann's] Etude Symphonique' (*Letters*, 2:105) – on acquiring a Schimmel upright for his house at Ussy he commented with pleasure that he could now 'wander and blunder among Haydn' (Overbeck 2011, 726). He was married to a professional pianist, counted a number of musicians amongst his friends, and attended concerts on a regular basis. He seems to have relished

getting to know certain pieces of music well, playing his favourites over and over again, commenting to his cousin Morris Sinclair, 'How lucky you are to be able to play in an orchestra, however third-rate it is. It is a matchless opportunity to get to know the details of a score' (*Letters*, 1:196–97).

Beckett clearly felt sure enough of himself, musically, to voice forthright opinions. His letters contain numerous reactions to performances, often both rude and comic. At one point he dismisses Beethoven's Quartets as 'a waste of time' (*Letters*, 1:68), while Schumann's Fourth Symphony 'is less like a symphony than like an overture begun by Lehar, completed by Goering, and revised by Johnny Doyle (if not his dog), and which is really not worth thinking about let alone launching into' (*Letters*, 1:182). Furtwängler comes in for a beating on more than one occasion. As a conductor, he 'has the charming modesty of letting himself be led by his brass-players, who blow as only beer-drinkers can, while making with his left hand very daring gestures towards his first violins, who fortunately paid not the least attention to them, and swinging the soft flesh of his posterior as if he longed to go to the lavatory' (*Letters*, 1:182). As a composer, he apparently shows 'The maximum determination (to get it all off his chest in a modern manner) & the minimum ability, a frenzy of impotence, with reverberations from everyone from Berlioz to Bartok' (*Letters*, 1:470). This has a terrible effect on Beckett, whose 'musical susceptibility seems all concentrated in my arse, which ached diabolically' (*Letters*, 1:470) – more fundamental sounds. All this musical criticism in itself prompts further lamenting: 'Alas! Why can't I tell you what I feel without getting on a platform' (*Letters*, 1:69). It does, though, show the strength of Beckett's feelings about music.

Listening to music on the radio and, eventually, in recorded form seems to have become just as important to Beckett. He expresses excitement on receiving an electrophone gramophone in 1956, noting 'We hope this week to acquire Dichterliebe sung by Souzay and the Winterreise with Fischer-Dieskau' (*Letters*, 2:640). Beckett also listened to and discussed music with friends, extending his range beyond his staple diet of nineteenth-century Romanticism. In particular, his friendship with composer Marcel Mihalovici and Mihalovici's wife, Monique Haas (a pianist), resulted in his acquaintance with a wide range of twentieth-century music (as discussed in chapter 6). Beckett showed at least some interest in the music of Schönberg, Berg, and

Webern (*Letters*, 1:146); he listened to their music with Avigdor Arikha (Knowlson 1996, 496) and discussed it with others. More contemporary developments also seem to have held some interest for Beckett according to Everett Frost (pers. comm.), who recalls conversations with Beckett on such matters during their recording of his radio plays in the 1980s.

The question, then, is what relevance this has to Beckett's work. The analogies with tuning mentioned above form one of the starting points for Beckett's ongoing use of music in his creative exploration of language, representation, and subjectivity. However, the role of music in Beckett's work extends far beyond these early, experimental forays. Sometimes it becomes a theme, idealised as a model for what literature might be or do if freed from the banal clichés of language, and sometimes it provides a refuge from the very struggle with meaning. At times, actual music appears in his plays. We hear recordings of Schubert in *All That Fall* and Beethoven in *Ghost Trio*. *Nacht und Träume* includes the humming of a few bars of the Schubert lied of the same name, and other plays include fragments of opera and popular song.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere Beckett takes music as a formal or expressive model, incorporates snippets of musical notation into his novels, or refers to musicians and specific musical works. Music even becomes a character in the radio plays *Words and Music* and *Cascando*, pitted against words in a dramatic testing of their relative artistic powers. Always and everywhere, Beckett is attentive to qualities of sound, even tiny, non-musical sounds in the environment. Finally, the more fragmented that Beckett's writing becomes – the more disintegrated its surface, and the less concrete the sense of narrative, character, or meaning – the more musical the effect. The stutters, sputters, gaps, and repetitions that express the impossibilities of language and its prevarications on the threshold of its own ending also expose and exploit the resonant and rhythmic qualities of words.

This gives an indication of the depth at which Beckett's thinking about and listening to music penetrates his writing. Moreover, the more obvious manifestations of music or of the idea of music – the recourse to Schubert and Beethoven or well-known tunes, for example, or the characterisation of music in some of the radio plays – are

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<sup>1</sup> James Knowlson (2012, 112–13) notes the popular song references embedded in *Happy Days* (not least in the title). Also see Morin (2012) on embedded memories of Irish song in Beckett.

not the only significant factors in this context. The impact of Beckett's attention to music permeates the fabric of his work; his thinking through music (like his ways of thinking through art or philosophy, or the work of certain other poets and novelists) helps him to interrogate fundamental themes: subjectivity and embodiment, authority and agency, representation and mediation.

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Beckett's recourse to music is in many ways typical of modernist writing and beyond: numerous twentieth-century writers venerated classical music's apparent vagueness of meaning yet fullness of expression, perceiving in this a means to rejuvenate a language they felt to be exhausted of original expression. This extends from the symbolist reveries of Stéphane Mallarmé and Édouard Dujardin, through the novels of Joyce, Proust, Virginia Woolf, André Gide, and Thomas Mann, into the *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Michel Butor, and Robert Pinget. It also appears in the most experimental movements of the earlier twentieth century – in some of the work of the Dadaists, surrealists, vorticists, constructivists and futurists (though sometimes reconfigured as noise, or a noise-music hybrid) – but is equally apparent in the work of apparently more conventional writers, such as E. M. Forster. Traces of a similar approach might be identified in recent writing: prominent examples include Anthony Burgess, Thomas Bernhard, Milan Kundera, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Vikram Seth.

Eric Prieto (2002b, x) situates this in relation to a crisis of mimesis in literature at the end of the nineteenth century and the subsequent desire 'to seek out techniques appropriate to one of the central quests of literary modernism: the ever more accurate representation of psychological states and processes.' Music, as the idealised other of literature, seemed (and as Stephen Benson [2006] shows, often still seems) to offer direct access to inner experience: something inaccessible to a language system hampered by conventional associations and too bound up with the quotidian.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As Alex Aronson notes (1988, x), 'that music and the musical experience may have a truth to communicate which lies beyond any specific cultural context within a given social group is a theme repeatedly hinted at by contemporary novelists.'

In this context, Beckett is typical: in his early work at least, music seems to offer a model that can facilitate a breaking away from conventional forms of representation. If one of the main concerns of modernist writing is to find better, more accurate representations of inwardness, then music, of great significance to us but apparently without stable, referential meaning, offers hope: ‘Of all the arts, it is no doubt music that provides the most interesting test case for understanding the role of representation in aesthetic communication’ (Prieto 2005, 7). However, while this idealisation of music has an important part to play in Beckett’s work, his understanding and *use* of it is more complex and sophisticated: increasingly so, as his writing develops. I argue that the intertwining of ideas of rupture and chaos within the evocation of music in Beckett’s early prose, expressed in terms borrowed from a diverse range of sources, philosophical, musicological, and cosmological, unravels the apparent opposition of language and music and informs his examination of creative authority.

Indeed, as with much in his work, Beckett deconstructs the idealisation of music even as he posits it: he is never quite happy with the idea of music as ‘Music’, an indivisible higher idea that transcends the everyday. Instead, and especially in his later work, the very tendency to position and use music in this way – the inclination to seek sanctuary in listening to familiar (usually Romantic) music – becomes part of a broader exploration of representation and subjectivity: chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine this process with respect to the uses of Beethoven and Schubert in the radio play *All That Fall* and the television plays *Ghost Trio* and *Nacht und Träume*. As Lawrence Kramer (2006, ix) says, the apparent semantic ‘emptiness’ of music

has not historically functioned as a lack, which is one key to its cultural value. On the contrary, this absence in music has marked the site of a lack in the order of language, and one that music alone can make good. Precisely because music is so rich, so obviously rich, in signification, it constantly challenges us to interpret it. At both its best and its worst, language withholds a part of itself from those it addresses. But the music that moves us seems to do the opposite. It seems just to pour into our ears; we take it in without hesitation and without reserve.

Particularly in *Ghost Trio* and *Nacht und Träume*, Beckett explores exactly this capacity of music.

Beckett’s focus on our subjective engagement with music, through listening, reflects back to us the complexities of its action in the world; musical meaning operates differently to language, for sure, but

Beckett recognises that its very slipperiness leaves it open to projection, distortion, and appropriation. Here, though, the imagination comes into play: Beckett dramatises how music can act as a site for the creative reworking of experience: an affective space into which we can project, and perhaps attempt to objectify, hopes, desires, and fears. He makes us aware of what it is to listen. And in doing so, we experience the performativity of listening: the reflexive awareness of our own acts of listening, our own attempts to find meaning in sound. Thinking through the different manifestations of music in Beckett therefore entails unpicking music as the transcendent, ideal other of language: this is the concern of part 1 of this book.

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This work takes place in a still relatively young and somewhat problematic context: ‘word and music studies’, as it tends now to be called,<sup>3</sup> long established in a somewhat fragmented way within comparative literature and musicology, but only relatively newly emerging as a field in itself. As Delia da Sousa Correa (2006, 1) notes, until the mid 1980s it was relatively rare to find rigorous critical approaches drawing together music and literature. However, this has changed with the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of literary studies and a growing interest in the role of music in literary culture. In this context, ‘The diversity of contemporary critical theory has opened up new ways of conceptualizing the connections between literature and music’ (ibid.). At the same time, musicology has in recent decades become increasingly outward in its approach; musicologists are no longer content with more purely formalist analytical accounts of musical signification, nor with the idea of music as reflective, only, of the prevalent social conditions of a particular time and place. Rather, the active

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Melopoetics’ is the other term used in recent years, proposed by Lawrence Kramer and favoured by Steven Paul Scher and others. However, as Werner Wolf (2002, 39) says, the etymology is misleading and rather arcane. The term suggests a questionable ‘privileging of some aspects of the interrelations between music and words/literature: “melos” (the Greek equivalent of what we would call “song”) is not representative of music, especially not as opposed to verbal texts, and “poetics” with its connotation of a prescriptive aesthetic meta-discourse is even less representative of verbal texts and literature.’ ‘Musico-literary studies’ (used by Stephen Benson [2006], for example), seems appropriate for a focus on musical aspects of literature, but not for work equally concerned with language-like and/or literary aspects of music.

agency of music as, at least in part, productive of those conditions is now of much broader interest; there is, I would argue, increasing willingness to draw ‘internal’ matters of musical forms, materials, and their sonic significations into a broader field of critical inquiry. As Lawrence Kramer (2002, 37) says, ‘The result is to disable the distinction (which is admittedly a practical convenience) between “music” as a self-contained whole – whether that be the whole of the musical artwork or of genre or style or of organized sonority conceived on the largest scale – and the social and historical fields of the “extra-musical”.’

This is a process to which Beckett has much to offer: indeed, he does the same himself in his sophisticated uses of music in his later work, exploiting the structural and affective properties of music along with its wider cultural signification. Nevertheless, Mary Bryden’s book *Samuel Beckett and Music* (1998b) formed the first serious engagement with the topic. Since then the work of Michael Maier, Eric Prieto, and Thomas Mansell, amongst others, has been extremely important in helping to extrapolate the significance of Beckett’s recourse to music. Comparative study can be problematic, however. Many critics have, like actors and directors, commented in passing on the musicality of Beckett’s works,<sup>4</sup> but vague analogy is often more mystifying than revealing. As a musician, I find myself simply flummoxed when distinguished and otherwise highly insightful writers refer in passing to Beckett’s ‘musicality of thinking’ (Rabaté 2007, 547) or ‘musicality of creativity’ (Gontarski 2007, 481), without clarification or explanation. Many of these comparisons suffer from an insufficiently nuanced approach to notions of music. There is a tendency to discuss ‘music’ in a generalised sense, as if we all know what that means, ignoring the diversity of musical practices and the very different ways in which music becomes meaningful.

However, more specific references can also be tricky. There are numerous allusions in the critical literature to the ‘orchestration’, ‘counterpoint’, or ‘harmony’ of Beckett’s voices, most of which amount to little more than vague metaphors. More concerning, though, are some of the substantial attempts to establish relationships

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<sup>4</sup> This is often apparent in reviews of Beckett’s work. See, for example, A. Alvarez on *For to End Yet Again* and the comments on Stanley Kauffmann’s review of *Not I* in Graver and Federman (1979, 35, 351). Also see Benedict Nightingale on *Not I* and Martin Esslin on *Words and Music* (Cooke 1985, 34, 47).



between particular musical forms and Beckett's work. *Endgame* is not in sonata form (as is claimed by Jacquart 1994), *Molloy* does not follow a process of Brahmsian developing variation (Grim 1987), *Lessness* is not fugal in the musical sense (Fournier 1970), and *what is the word* does not use words in the manner of scales or keys in tonal music (Brater 1994, 167). In cases such as these (and there are many more), the useful insights with respect to Beckett's structural thinking are undermined by the determination to fit the work to a pre-established musical mould.

As Prieto (2002b, 18) warns with respect to comparative studies of literature and music more generally, 'When stripped of their metaphorical coverings, such extended comparisons often reveal themselves to depend on assertions of the type: "this piece is like a rondo because it is divided into three parts," or "this piece is like a fugue in that there are several distinct voices"'.<sup>5</sup> It is true, for example, that a work in sonata form comprises some kind of exposition, development, and recapitulation, but these features alone do not constitute sonata form. A similar tendency is apparent in attempts to find parallels between Beckett's work and the methods of serial composers or, in dramatic contrast, the chance techniques of John Cage and others: this is discussed in chapter 6, in which I explore the relationship between Beckett and contemporary music. Overall, insufficient attention has been paid to music in and the music of Beckett's work. It seems ironic that in attempting to account for the complex effect of some of Beckett's most innovative and thought-provoking work it is often rather simplistic notions of music that are invoked.

I do not attempt to deal with all instances of music in Beckett. They are simply too numerous, and many are momentary, passing references (though his choices are never without significance). Overall, I have concentrated on the substantial uses of music to which, I believe, insufficient attention has been paid in the critical literature to date. There are, for example, a number of very useful articles on the role of music in Beckett's novel *Watt*,<sup>6</sup> and I therefore refer only in passing to this novel. However, to my mind there is still much to be

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<sup>5</sup> Prieto (2002b, 18), too, identifies this problem specifically within the Beckett context and cites further examples.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Prieto's (2002, 155–97) discussion of *Watt* is especially useful, as is Heath Lees's article on tuning (1984, mentioned in chapter 2). See also Senneff (1964); Byron (2006); Park (1975).

said about the sophisticated use of music in the earlier prose, and in the radio and television plays. This is in part to do with the constraints of publication: short articles have not allowed for the more in-depth consideration warranted by these works. Moreover, editors and publishers often prefer to avoid technical musical detail except in specialist music publications. The broad arguments of this book should be perfectly understandable without closely following the analysis of musical examples, but I have included this detailed material because, I believe, it strengthens the arguments, especially since the wider points often arise from the musical observations: the account of the relationship between Beckett, music, and meaning derives from direct engagement with the music as well as its cultural mediation. It is my intention that the line of thinking is still apparent to those readers who cannot read musical notation, or do not wish to follow this level of detail; I hope this is the case.

There is a danger of overstatement with a topic like this: music is one relatively small facet of Beckett's work. However, its operation, I argue, mimics that of other aspects of his work: he employs music, as he does visual art and certain philosophical and scientific theories, as part of the wider exploration of agency and meaning. And there is still plenty of room for further work in this field. I have preferred to focus my attention on what we can hear: on the music in publicly available texts and recordings. I have not, therefore, attempted to consider the music composed for early productions of Beckett's radio plays and early broadcasts of prose readings – some of these still exist, but in archives only. They are certainly worthy of study, both in themselves and in relation to the development of Beckett's ideas about music and collaboration.

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Notwithstanding the issue of critical rigour, the vague but pervasive sense that Beckett's work is peculiarly musical, and that music plays an important role in the work, is certainly significant. Such perceptions are too prevalent to be dismissed, especially amongst those with practical experience as actors or directors. George Devine's comment to Alan Schneider is indicative: 'One has to think of the text as something like a musical score wherein the "notes", the sights and sounds, the pauses, have their own interrelated rhythms, and out of their

composition comes the dramatic impact' (Schneider 1986, 249). The working relationship between Beckett and actor Billie Whitelaw provides an ideal example of this approach, and Whitelaw described herself as the musical instrument Beckett used in order to 'play the notes' (Whitelaw and Knowlson 1978, 89). No doubt tendencies such as this derive from Beckett himself: Ruby Cohn (1973, 153), amongst others, has commented on Beckett's tendency to use musical terminology (especially Italian terms) in rehearsal, while Whitelaw noted Beckett's preference for directing her by 'conducting' the lines (Whitelaw and Ben-Zvi, 1990, 6).<sup>7</sup>

One might consider such comments to be actorly conceits, appropriating terminology for metaphorical effect but with little to do with music itself. However, many actors reach beyond the surface metaphor. In a recent interview, Simon McBurney qualifies his use of the analogy with music, highlighting the embodied experiencing of qualities of sound that is more tangibly musical: 'There is a sensuality and a music to the language which is extraordinarily enticing. And when I say sensuality or musicality those are poor words because they tend towards a cliché of the imagined . . . but by sensual I mean there's a real feeling in the mouth and that is given, not only by the words themselves, but also by the rhythm and the percussion of them and the speed of exchange and by the silences they create' (McBurney and Campbell 2010, 302–3). Other actors see a relationship between the perceived 'musicality' and Beckett's approach to language and meaning. A number of performers relate the musical effect to Beckett's determination that his characters and their words or actions cannot be explained, and that performers should avoid imposing an interpretation in the traditional sense. Peggy Ashcroft reported that in rehearsal for *Happy Days*, 'Beckett would answer questions like "Why does she gabble as she does at a certain point?" with "Because it has to go fast there"' (Ashcroft and Worth 1990, 12). Similarly, rehearsing *Footfalls* with Rose Hill, Beckett announced: 'We are not doing this play realistically or psychologically, we are doing it musically' (Knowlson 1992a, 13). For some actors this approach is problematic, the absence

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<sup>7</sup> Whitelaw also describes this working method and makes frequent reference to the musicality of Beckett's plays in her autobiography (1995). Occasionally, Beckett seems to have extended these musical analogies still further; for example, Walter Asmus (1997, 93) describes Beckett comparing a particular transition with a specific tonal modulation.

of motivation or 'back story' leaving them without a sense of identity or control.

Roger Blin describes Beckett's contribution to rehearsals of *Fin de Partie* causing the actors some difficulty: 'At first, he looked on his play as a kind of musical score. When a word occurred or was repeated, when Hamm called to Clov, Clov should always come in the same way every time, like a musical phrase coming from the same instrument with the same volume. I thought that this idea was very much a product of the intellect and would result in an extraordinary rigour. He didn't see any drama or suspense in Clov's imminent departure. He would either leave or he wouldn't' (Blin and Bishop 1986, 233). Such an approach to character and drama is clearly antithetical to conventional training,<sup>8</sup> yet not only do Beckett's notebooks for the play reveal such thinking to be absolutely fundamental to its structure (see the '*Endgame*' Notebook, for example [Gontarski 1992], and Lawley's [1979] comments on this matter), but it is similarly central to its effectiveness (and, not least, to its comedy).

For other actors, especially those particularly associated with Beckett's work, this method is fundamental and necessary. Barry McGovern, for example, suggests that to discuss content or motivation in the usual fashion is unhelpful: 'Once you start talking about what some of his plays are about, it's really how they are about' (Frost 1988). David Warrilow, like Whitelaw, is similarly uninterested in the 'whys' of performance: 'I know that if an actor gets up onstage and starts to play the meaning of the thing it dies, it just dies' (Kalb 1989, 229). Musician John Tilbury, best known as a composer, improviser, and pianist, has acted the role of Krapp, produced performances and a recording of *Cascando* in which he speaks the parts as well as composing and playing the music, and performs versions of *Worstward Ho* and some of Beckett's poems in which the text is heard, spoken by Tilbury, with piano accompaniment. He, too, stresses that meaning is not a priority, admitting that there are parts of *Cascando*

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Chabert, an experienced director of Beckett's work and one who clearly has great respect for the writer, suggests that Beckett's own directorial methods move too far away from psychological questions and are too formalist: 'Beckett leaned towards music, and music basically goes against what is "natural" in the theatrical interpretation of a text. Personally, I think that one must find an equilibrium that tends toward something more human, something that has a more spontaneous feel to it' (Chabert quoted in Oppenheim 1994, 74).

where he is uncertain of his understanding but ‘if you get the timing, intonation, voice, body etc right it takes off and somehow all makes sense’ (Tilbury and Laws 2004); he adds that this is perhaps something musicians feel quite comfortable with.

From this perspective, Beckett’s use of musical terminology suggests an approach to performance that treats characters, words, and stage directions as given; their relative articulation in sound and space – intonation and rhythm, repetition and variation – rather than meaning, becomes the focus of rehearsal, as in music. At this level, the general perception of Beckett’s texts as musical relates closely to the question of meaning in his work and his preference for exploring *how*, rather than *why*, something should be said or done. This draws the musicality of his work into relation with his use of music: Beckett’s ongoing engagement with music is always, if in different ways, bound up with meaning.

In this sense, Beckett’s work never truly ‘turns into’ music: he can never abandon words (or only briefly and temporarily, as with *Breath* and *Quad*). But, as Peter Dayan (2006, x) says, ‘Music writes literature, and literature writes music; neither can compose itself alone.’ Music and language wind around each other in Beckett: language is worked in association with and *through* ideas of music; music is sometimes set against language, but is also heard both in relation to it and *in* it. As Stephen Benson (2006, 7) says, ‘Literary music thus also signifies the irreducible status of music as always and everywhere *written*’; this is as true in Beckett as in other writers. But, at the same time, in Beckett language is always and everywhere sounded, and music is active in representation and the formation of subjectivity. As always, Beckett undermines the priority or distinction of one thing over another, exposing the interdependency of language and music. In this respect, understanding music in Beckett helps us to understand the relationship between words and music more broadly. But it is also revealing with respect to the specific understanding of music as much as that of language. Headaches among the overtones, for sure.

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Part 2 of this book turns things around, shifting from the use of music in Beckett to the use of Beckett in music. Beckett’s work has prompted a large number of musical responses from an international array of

composers working in a range of styles and genres. There are various reasons for this attraction. For some composers, certainly, it relates to the perception of Beckett's work as particularly musical. However, if Beckett's subject is, in part, the struggle with meaning through language, it is hardly surprising that some composers have taken a parallel route in music, inviting us to examine music's own meaningful and expressive capacity, not only self-consciously but also in relation to broader questions of expression, communication, and selfhood. This often means taking less conventional approaches to the texts, making Beckett the starting point for creative exploration: finding peculiarly musical ways of exploring what we might think of as Beckettian concerns, without necessarily setting Beckett's words. Given Beckett's preoccupation with the act of imagining and producing meaning, it is unsurprising that one of the main effects of his work has been the self-conscious scrutiny by other artists of the condition of their own art forms: their own materials and processes, and the audience's relationships to these.

I set the context for this in chapter 6, examining Beckett's relationship to contemporary music before moving into extended studies of specific pieces by Morton Feldman, Richard Barrett, and György Kurtág. It seems to me significant that composers from very different worlds, aesthetically speaking as well as in their soundworlds and compositional processes, should be drawn to Beckett. There are two major contentions underlying this part of the book. First, examining how (and why) a number of composers respond to the same writer helps to draw out contemporary approaches to sound and meaning. In turn, this reflects back across to Beckett: the 'musicalising' of Beckett highlights particular aspects of his work, shedding new light on the intersection of music, language, and meaning therein. More broadly, the parallels here are revealing beyond the specific instances, exposing some of the key concerns of late modernist practices across the arts – not just in music. Moreover, these composers are often drawing on a somewhat similar artistic hinterland to Beckett: a nexus of influences within which certain strains of German Romanticism, and particular Romantic poets, philosophers, composers, and artists, play an important role.

Ultimately, all this comes back to us. The experiencing of Beckett's work is never passive: it poses the very question of meaning – its possibility and viability – and music is part of this process. These

works – Beckett’s own, and the most interesting musical responses – draw us into the process: the reader-viewer-listener becomes implicated in the instabilities of meaning, and the impact of the work in its embodied, performative immediacy is bound to that experience. Carla Taban (2012), writing about Joseph Kosuth’s Beckett-based art installations, could be writing about Beckett and any of the composers I have focused on: ‘Both Beckett and Kosuth deliberately create works that disrupt deep-seated reception habits grown into unconscious automatisms, “waking up” the readers/viewers[/listeners] as such to the consciousness of their own activities of reading/viewing. . . . [T]hey make readers/viewers take responsibility for their own meaning-making.’

Examining music in Beckett therefore helps to articulate the radical uncertainties of his work: his posing of meaning as a question, subjectivity as a question, even humanity as a question. I argue, though, that this works both ways: in trying to understand Beckett we are, I think, trying to understand meaning in whatever form: literary, musical, visual, philosophical (and that is also to say socially, culturally, and politically). Beckett uses music to show us things, but in doing so shows us things about it, about how we use it, and about what it means to us: ultimately what we are, what we do, and how we (try to) mean.

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Part 1  
Music in Beckett



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