

## Chapter 9

### Beckett in Music Translation: Embodiment and Subjectivity in Richard Barrett's *Ne songe plus à fuir*

In many respects, the music of Richard Barrett seems diametrically opposed to that of Morton Feldman. In the context of late twentieth-century musical modernism, Feldman's music is, superficially at least, relatively simple: even in his later, more continuous pieces, the degree of musical incidence is relatively sparse, the complex aural experience emerging out of the scrupulous attention to details of musical sound and its patterning in time. In contrast, Barrett's compositions are hyper-complex in notation and overtly virtuosic in performance, and the density of the musical surface has an immediate impact. Nevertheless, as becomes apparent in this chapter, there are certain similarities in the relationships of these two composers to Beckett, and in their musical approaches to his work.

For Barrett, Beckett's influence is complex and ongoing. His first acknowledged work, *Invention 6* for solo piano (1982), has a quotation from Beckett on the score, and many other scores by him are prefaced by Beckett's words or include them alongside the music: *Anatomy* (1985–86), *Tract* (1984–96), and the more recent *faux départs* (2003–4) are all examples. Before writing his string quartet *I open and close* (1983–88), with its title taken from *Cascando*, Barrett read and re-read Beckett's entire output, intending to cover the score with numerous small quotations: 'The quotations would have been apposite to various parts of the music in such a way as to form, on the one hand, an expressive itinerary through the piece in the sense of expanded performance instructions, and on the other hand, to make an imaginary itinerary through the Beckett' (Barrett, Bermel, and Cody, 2006). In the end Barrett decided against this, leaving just a few quotations dotted throughout the score, but the relationship remains apparent. A number of additional works take their titles from Beckett – *nothing elsewhere* (1987), *EARTH* (1987–88), and *Another heavenly*

*day* (1989–90), for example – while several others have titles likely to be evocative of Beckett to those familiar with his writing: *ruin* (1985–96), *Alba* (1986–87), and *what remains* (1990–91).

Once one starts thinking along these lines it becomes hard not to see connections in other titles: *The Unthinkable* (1988–89), where the direct source is actually a painting by the Chilean surrealist Roberto Matta; ‘Residua’ (which forms the third movement of the orchestral work *Vanity*); and even *NO* (1999–2004), which is in part a response to the first Gulf War but nevertheless takes on a Beckettian ring in this context. Moreover, Barrett seems to feel an affinity with the same strands of Romanticism as Beckett: *dying words* (2011–12, for a solo vocalist who also plays the flute) uses poetry by Hölderlin, the words becoming increasingly submerged into the flute part; also, as is discussed later in this chapter, Barrett (like Feldman) shares Beckett’s interest in Schubert. Despite all this, Barrett has never set Beckett’s words to music in the traditional sense. In only one piece are the writer’s words actually heard: the penultimate section of the large-scale visual, vocal, instrumental, and electronic work *DARK MATTER* comprises a series of instrumental and electronic interruptions, entitled *stirrings* (2001), within a spoken performance of Beckett’s *Sounds*.

From all this it is clear that from the mid-1980s into the early 1990s Barrett’s work was particularly strongly connected to Beckett. By 1996 the relationship was well enough established for Barrett to have tired of discussing it: ‘It’s not so easy to talk about that kind of thing these days; I’ve moved on to different areas since then, and I feel that the connection between my work and Beckett has run its course’ (Barrett, Bermel, and Cody, 2006). However, he later returned to working on Beckett-related materials in *stirrings*, and in an interview in 2000 he rejected the idea of his output having ‘periods’ based around specific influences.<sup>1</sup> By 2001 he was characterising his mid-1990s attitude as less a move away from Beckett than a frustration with the critical focus upon Beckett as a means of explaining his music: ‘I did become somewhat tired of Beckett’s name popping up

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<sup>1</sup> ‘It’s been suggested that my work can be divide up into “periods” depending on whether the compositions show primarily a relationship to Beckett or to Celan. This doesn’t make much sense to me’ (Barrett and Deforce 2001).

whenever my name was mentioned, as if it made it easier to understand, to dismiss' (Barrett and Campbell 2001).

Indeed, the relationship that is apparent in the more recent *stirrings* and *faux départs* confirms Beckett as a continuing point of reference for Barrett; this seems to coincide with the sense, expressed increasingly strongly in interviews and commentaries, that what Barrett is engaged upon is really one huge compositional project that circles around, spirals away from, and then revisits from different angles the same key concerns<sup>2</sup> (in a somewhat Beckett-like manner). Furthermore, Barrett sees his compositional development not as linear, with logical progress or changes of direction, but rather as "concentric", gradually encompassing more and more of a certain terrain' (Barrett and Buckley 2003). In this respect, the periodic revisiting of Beckett is hardly surprising. Furthermore, Barrett's *Addenda* cycle comprises the reworking of specific musical materials from earlier works; as with Beckett's 'Addenda' to *Watt* (and the author's many other intimations of the endless but residual character of his writing), the effect here is to undermine the notion that a work is ever a complete, unique, and coherent entity. The implication, with both writer and composer, is that each new piece simply rakes through the remains of previous attempts to say something meaningful.<sup>3</sup>

The repeated references to Beckett suggest that Barrett sees his compositional activity as in some sense related to the preoccupations of the author. This is explicit in his comments on *Invention 6*, a 'little piece that hardly gets started before it collapses', where 'I began to see what the relationship could possibly be between what I was thinking

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<sup>2</sup> Barrett has long been interested in multi-part works, each taking a number of years to complete and comprising a sequence of smaller works that can be performed separately; the *Fictions*, *DARK MATTER*, and *resistance and vision* series are all examples. Some of these are huge: *CONSTRUCTION* (2003–11), the eighth and final part of *resistance and vision*, is two hours long in itself. Barrett has spoken of his whole output as one vast project: 'Maybe what I'm saying is that I'm only working on one composition in the end' (Barrett and Campbell 2001).

<sup>3</sup> As James Harley (1998, 33) puts it, Barrett is effectively 'questioning the "necessity" of musical statement: if it is possible to create a new piece by chiselling away formal profiles from one previous piece, harmonic material from a second, melodic contour from a third, and so on, what does that say about the integral "value" of the original sources? On the other hand, if it is inherently possible for music alone to answer questions about truth, value and the rest, then it is of no consequence where the materials are taken from.'

about and the Beckett texts I knew up to that time' (Barrett and Campbell 2001). In later works there emerges a more complex association with Beckett's work, one that raises questions about the relationship between the different media, and it is here that a link to Feldman's *Neither* becomes apparent: while Feldman did set Beckett's words, it is nevertheless in his treatment of musical material that the deeper connection lies, and this is equally the case with Barrett. For both composers, the use of Beckett stems more from a perceived aesthetic affinity than a desire to give the words an added dimension through musical setting.

This chapter explores these issues through the lens of Barrett's *Ne songe plus à fuir*, for amplified solo cello (1985–86) (Barrett 1986). I examine the significance of the relationship to Beckett in terms of Barrett's approach to musical materials, their expressive character, the interrogation of the embodied act of performance, and the questions of subjectivity, agency, and authority that emerge.

### **Composition as proposition**

Richard Barrett moved into composition after first studying science. His works are often associated with the so-called New Complexity school of composition, though this terminology, stemming from the 1980s, seems less useful as time goes on. While Barrett undoubtedly shares some of the concerns of other composers of 'complex' music (for example, its father figure, Brian Ferneyhough, and others such as Michael Finnissy, James Dillon, and Chris Dench), Barrett's relationship to New Complexity is qualified by the strength of his individual concerns. Furthermore, the statistical musical processes of Iannis Xenakis and the musical and ideological integrity of Luigi Nono<sup>4</sup> are at least as influential.

The notion of musical complexity generally comprises (and often unhelpfully confuses) two issues: complexity of notation and the aural

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<sup>4</sup> Barrett concurs with Nono's belief that the purpose of music is 'to activate the sense and intelligence of the listener' (Barrett and Deforce 2001). He admires Nono's political convictions but is sceptical about his attempts to use his music directly for political ends: 'It's a mistake to think that music (of any kind) can be conceived as a tool in spreading revolutionary ideas. . . . Nevertheless, it would be dishonest, not to mention difficult, to try to effect some kind of separation between musical and political activity. Keeping "politics out of music" is in itself a political stance, and a reactionary one' (Bianchi, 2005).

experience. These are by no means the same thing; there is plenty of music with relatively straightforward notation that has a musically complex result – some of Feldman's music might be considered this way – and it is possible to conceive of notation of great detail and complexity resulting in a relatively simple musical surface (though this is less likely). Barrett's music shares with other New Complexity composers an attention to fine details of pitch (including microtones), irrational rhythms, timbre, and articulation, and these are considered to necessitate scores of incredible intricacy, densely packed with information. At times, the sound-surface of Barrett's music also has elements in common with these composers, particularly Ferneyhough (with whom he studied). However, this is only sporadically the case, and while all the music of these composers offers a complex aural experience, the structural and expressive concerns are very different.

It is perhaps most helpful to deal with the question of Barrett's musical complexity first in terms of the composer's expressed intentions, returning to the issue more critically after examining the piece that forms the subject of the chapter. The complexity of Barrett's music arises primarily from his view that composition (and also listening) should comprise an exploration of the imagination and the nature of experience: infinitely complex entities.<sup>5</sup> Barrett (1998b, 23) therefore believes his compositions 'are as simple as they can be': 'how far is it possible to *simplify* one's actions before the reason for acting is simplified out of existence? How far is it possible to take the virtually continuous processes of musical (and/or any other) thought and parcel them up into "compositions" (or "issues", such as complexity) without falsifying the nature of those processes?' (Barrett 1992). Many critics use the term 'complexity' pejoratively, to indicate that the music is impenetrable and alienating.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Barrett (*ibid.*) argues for the sensual attraction and intellectual fascination of unfamiliar sounds structured in unconventional ways: 'Complexity is not a forbidding exterior but an endlessly attractive interior, a strange attractor'. He relates this to his early experiences of new music: 'at an early age I tended to experience a great deal of what I heard in contemporary

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<sup>5</sup> Barrett describes composition as a 'means to explore the "structure of the imagination" and perhaps to discover something about its nature' (Barrett and Buckley 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Barrett (1992) suggests that this is 'a symptom of the kind of *fear of perception* which takes refuge in contorted quasi-rationalisations when faced with the potential perturbation of a *musical experience*'.

composition in precisely that way, and that was the most exhilarating, fascinating and powerful aspect of it' (Barrett and Buckley 2003). For Barrett, the desire to understand is a very different thing from the desire to be fed more of the same; an encounter with Stockhausen's *Mantra* crystallised his sense that music could instigate a 'complexity of perception, intellection, emotion, so that "understanding" seems an ignominiously prosaic goal but is there any other kind of goal?' (Barrett 1998a, 18). Again, in this context it is hard not to hear in this an echo of Beckett's dramatic assertion that 'art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear' (*Dis-jecta*, 94). Thus Barrett's music is complex because the world is complex, sound is complex, and perception is complex, but complexity is not a criterion of quality or value, success or failure.

For Barrett, complexity *in notation* is a necessary result of the disappearance of common practice in music-making of the twentieth century. The relationship between notation and its musical realisation has never been simple or transparent: this allows for the multiplicity of interpretation. Nevertheless, historically the relatively contained traditions of Western classical performance practices allowed composers and performers to proceed as if notation, at least to an extent, operated within a specific, shared cultural context. A tradition of common practice thereby facilitated the development of certain conventional short-hands of notation; as an example, Barrett (pers. comm., 14 November 2005) refers to the tradition of using rubato around the first beat of a waltz rhythm, despite its notation with three equal beats to the bar. In this way, performers can be expected to 'understand' more from the notation than is explicitly laid out in the dots on the page. However, in the twentieth century, increasing access to a plurality of musical styles, along with modernist experimenting with the very relationship between notation, action and sound, unravelled the notion of common practice. This leaves composers of notated music with the obligation to consider the nature and function of their scores: to determine the extent to which they need or want to control the various parameters of a performance. Intricate notation is therefore indicative of an attempt to account for the complexities of a particular performance situation: the detail of a Barrett score is 'one way of suggesting an idiomatic performing practice' (Barrett and Deforce 2001). Additionally, as James Harley (1998, 28) points out, notational complexity is a result of Barrett's move away from thinking of music pri-

marily as 'notes' and towards multifaceted *objets sonores*: 'The notation of necessity becomes highly complex, as a range of "internally sculpted features" are added to the basic pitches and rhythms'.

Beyond this, the difficulties involved in realising complex notation are such that the performer's struggle to play the music is thrown into relief. Barrett shares this emphasis with Ferneyhough; both recognise the virtuosity demanded of performers of their music, but consider that their foregrounding of the act of performance itself forms a distinction from the Romantic tradition of virtuosity: attention is here focused towards the (re)producing of musical ideas rather than the player's mastery of the instrument. For Ferneyhough, the desired result is a kind of objectified virtuosity: the performer's ego is transcended through the intense concentration required for the process of realisation, and a more direct communion between composer and audience is thereby achieved (he believes).<sup>7</sup> While a similar immediacy is very much part of Barrett's own complexity, here the emphasis is instead on the relationship between composer, performer, and listener; on the process of communication itself. As Barrett says, a greater or lesser degree of confusion or ambiguity is inherent in any act of communication (Barrett and Deforce 2001), and while complex notation on one level provides a trace of the composer's thinking, the breakdown of common practice inevitably draws attention to the *difficulties* of musical communication between composer, performer, and listener. For Barrett, this is worthy of creative attention in itself. The problem of notation is not simply a practical matter to be overcome; after all, music-making can proceed perfectly well without it, as it often does for Barrett: some of his works combine notated elements with improvisation (especially those pieces developed collaboratively, such as *Blattwerk* [1998–2002]), while others are intended for improvisers (the *codex* pieces [2001–], of which there are thirteen to date). Indeed, he is himself active as an improviser, especially in the context of FURT, his electronics duo with Paul Obermayer. Instead, continuing to use notation opens up the possibility of 'working with that relation as musical material in its own right' (Barrett and Deforce 2001); the composer-performer-listener 'problem' constitutes a productive

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<sup>7</sup> 'Ferneyhough hopes that by presenting him [the performer] with almost insuperable difficulties he will suppress his subjectivity and any personal desire to interpret the music – there simply would not be time or concentration left while struggling to comply with all the notated difficulties' (J. Harvey 1979, 724).

tension and becomes part of the subject of composition. It is in this sense that notation is, for Barrett, always a ‘proposal’ to the performer rather than a set of demands or instructions.<sup>8</sup>

The detail of this ‘proposition’ – the intricacies of the scores – results in a foregrounding of the difficulty, even impossibility, of the situation in which the performer is placed. Faced with such incredibly detailed notation, the performer is likely to achieve great expressive intensity but will inevitably fail to give a wholly accurate performance. The extremity of the situation simply exaggerates what goes on in any performance where a performer attempts to realise a composer’s musical intentions: if performance is considered to comprise the accurate reproduction of musical ideas codified in notation, failure will always be part of the process. This ‘failure’ is, of course, conventionally configured in more positive terms as interpretation – creative deviation – but accuracy and fidelity nevertheless continue to form the basis of the practices and pedagogy of most western classical music performance. It is this that seems to interest Barrett: His adoption of a ‘complex’ mode of composition problematises the casual acceptance of the situation of performance and, indeed, of the very idea of musical expression.

This helps to clarify Barrett’s attraction to the work of Beckett. Clearly, it has nothing to do with any perception of ‘musical’ elements in the writing (and Barrett is explicit on this point<sup>9</sup>). Instead, he shares the experience of striving towards the very possibility of expression in the face of uncertainty and likely failure, a process that necessarily tests the limits of the artist’s materials. It is in this sense that Barrett can refer to his work as ‘experimental’ (bearing in mind the considerable differences in other respects to musical experimentalism<sup>10</sup>): Bar-

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<sup>8</sup> For examples of relevant works and further discussion of the relationship between composition and improvisation, see Barrett (2002).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Of course much has been said on the “musicality” of these texts, in sonorous terms, structural terms and so on. But I don’t think that was the main reason for the attractiveness of that body of work to me’ (Barrett, pers. comm., 16 June 1994).

<sup>10</sup> In many respects the complexity of Barrett’s music (and in particular its intricate notation) sets him against experimental music’s concern with ‘outlining a *situation* in which sounds may occur, a *process* of generating action (sounding or otherwise), a *field* delineated by certain compositional “rules”’, thereby avoiding ‘prescribing a *time-object* whose materials, structuring and relationships are calculated and arranged in advance’ (Nyman 1999, 4). There is a danger of simplifying matters to produce this opposition. As is discussed later in this chapter, some of Barrett’s more recent work is



rett's music 'is concerned with possibilities rather than outcomes' (Barrett and Deforce 2001).

Beckett is by no means the only figure to have inspired Barrett, and he comments on the general importance of literature: 'Most of my works are related to many other things as well, although I have had so many experiences of musical ideas being "ignited" by words that it must be more than a coincidence' (Barrett 1998b, 22). Beckett's contemporary, Paul Celan (another poet of reduction, disintegration, and ambiguity), is also an ongoing influence, while other works take their titles or involve quotations from Pinget, Flaubert, Proust, Lautréamont, and Roberto Matta. However, Beckett's work acted as a catalyst at a fundamental level: '[W]hen I first came across his work, the "link" seemed to me more a case of *recognition*: it is possible to take many paths towards an understanding of *how* and with *what* to make music, but what I recognised in Beckett was my most important lesson in *why* to do it, why to carry on when seemingly the only constant factor in one's activity is that empty certainty of its worthlessness and pointlessness' (ibid.). With Barrett, following Beckett, the focus is often on the difficulty of coming to a position of understanding, the impossibility of finding a clear path or telling a coherent story.

Some of Barrett's remarks about his (in many ways very different) work as an improviser, in the duo FURT, are equally evocative of Beckett's writing, especially the later plays, prose, and poetry: 'A constant strand in our output has been the appearance of diverse vocally-derived materials, using our own or sampled voices, which seem primarily to be engaged in the (often desperate) attempt to articulate a message whose import remains out of reach' (Barrett and Obermayer 2000). Strikingly, Barrett once implied that he might have a greater facility with words than music, but that, paradoxically, this was a reason for choosing to compose; he links this to Beckett's shift to writing in French:<sup>11</sup> 'I don't think of music as a language, but if it were, to me

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not entirely through-composed, while many works of the experimental tradition are fully notated (though not with the detailed attention to every parameter of sound that is found in Barrett's compositions).

<sup>11</sup> In 1956 Beckett explained his decision to shift to French as the first language for his texts (from 1945) because it was easier to write 'without style' (*'parce qu'en français c'est plus facile d'écrire sans style'*) (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 206). Later he confirmed to Charles Juliet (1995, 143) that the relative unfamiliarity of French 'allowed him to escape the habits inherent in the use of a native language'.

it would be a foreign language with which I have a certain fluency – maybe the reason I write music rather than words is similar to Beckett’s reason for starting to write in French rather than English. The easy familiarity of one’s mother tongue can be an obstacle, and sometimes one hears this in the music of composers for whom music is as it were their “mother tongue” (Barrett and Deforce 2001).<sup>12</sup> Thus Barrett actively chooses to work within a medium from which he always feels a certain distance, perhaps in an attempt to maintain a sense of strangeness and fascination, but also to recapture the difficulty and struggle he describes as characteristic of his early listening experiences and as equally significant in his literary preferences. In this way, even those works with no explicit relation to Beckett retain the same attitude towards composition. Inevitably, this leads to questions of how and to what extent similar concerns can be explored in the different media of language and music.

***Ne songe plus à fuir: the context***

Barrett has written quite a large number of works for solo instruments. He is also clearly interested in monologues, but these two things are not necessarily synonymous; his solo pieces are sometimes structured to undermine the impression of monologue (as in the folio section of *Blattwerk*, which entangles fragments of different musical sequences and transitional passages, to avoid any impression of a linear, organic trajectory<sup>13</sup>). Conversely, writing for ensemble does not necessarily preclude monologue; Barrett’s ensemble pieces often include cadenza-like passages or the dramatic opposing of one instrument with the others. *Ne songe plus à fuir* (*Dream no more of fleeing*) explores the very possibility of evolving a monologue-like sequence of musical events, but the process is fraught with twists, turns, and dead-ends. At the time of composing this piece Barrett was particularly interested in Beckett’s monologues, especially those, such as *Not I*, that take place under psychological pressure or in constrained physical conditions: ‘The strongest way in which *Ne songe . . .* is affected by the experience of studying and getting to know the work of Beckett is the idea

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<sup>12</sup> Barrett makes a similar comment about trying to maintain a sense of distance from his musical language: ‘I want to try and place myself in situations where my own musicality becomes unfamiliar to me. In that process of discovery consists the impetus to carry on’ (Barrett and Campbell 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Barrett (2002) describes this as ‘the sound-image of a musical “organism”’.

of this monologue taking place as it were almost under unbearable stress, in confrontation between the necessity to express something and the impossibility of knowing what that something is, or how to express it' (Barrett and Deforce 2001).

The title comes from a painting by Roberto Matta; it is one of a number of compositions to have been inspired by Matta, each in different ways.<sup>14</sup> This piece stems from Barrett's experience of an exhibition of five paintings at London's Hayward Gallery in 1977. The composer was particularly struck by the huge scale of these works and the multiple perspectives offered to the viewer according to one's distance and position:

Matta's paintings have that sense of perspective built into them already – there is no single way to view them since there are elements which can only be appreciated from a short distance, and other elements only from a large distance. This kind of polyvalent perspective struck me as something which was very akin to the way that I had started thinking about musical polyphony, and the composition of structures which could be sensed in different ways, which neither reveal themselves immediately nor hide themselves behind a screen of mystification. (Barrett and Deforce 2001)

Barrett describes Matta's *Ne songe plus à fuir* as depicting 'a dark, troubled atmosphere within which anthropomorphic figures are immersed in attitudes of desperation, imprisonment [and] oppression, surely influenced by the often brutal recent history of the artist's home country' (quoted in Toop 1993). The work therefore has a specific political background, and indeed Richard Toop (*ibid.*) sees it as part of a post-war tradition of works in which the cello is used as a symbol of human suffering: he cites Bernd Alois Zimmerman's *Canto di Speranza* (1957), Isang Yun's *Cello Concerto* (1976), and Ferneyhough's *Time and Motion Study II* (1973–76, originally called *Electric Chair Music*; Barrett worked on the electronics for a realisation of this piece [Barrett 1998b, 24]). In addition to the Matta reference, however, Barrett prefaces the score with lines from Beckett's *Molloy* ('Stories . . . I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one'), and a quotation from *As the Story was Told* (1973) is placed at the end of the piece: 'No, was the answer, after some little hesitation, no. I did

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<sup>14</sup> Barrett stresses that his relationship with Matta's work has constantly changed; the focus is different in each of his Matta-related compositions (see Barrett and Campbell 2001).

not know what the poor man was required to say in order to be pardoned, but would have recognised it at once at a glance, if I had seen it' (*AST*, 256). He therefore chooses accompanying quotations which might be read in relation to the political context of the painting but which also link back to the 'monologues under stress' of Beckett. Beyond this, though, the texts might equally refer to any process of composition. Barrett comments that in this piece, 'all of the expressive, structural and technical aspects of music that I had been concerned with finally flowed together for the first time' (Barrett and Deforce 2001).

**'Somehow on':<sup>15</sup> structural and expressive concerns in the opening section**

*Ne songe plus à fuir* is divided very clearly into eight sections: bars 1–33, 34–59, 60–81, 82–111, 112–20, 121–27, 128–33, and bar 134. With one exception, the sections become progressively shorter, the last section comprising a single very long bar: this scheme maps the expressive effect of the gradual fizzling out of successive attempts to communicate. Within this structure, the bars themselves form self-contained units clearly demarcated by dynamics, the use of rests, or the placing of commas at the ends of bars. Clear formal divisions tend to be a feature of Barrett's work, though their significance and effect can vary considerably; here they are apparent both on the large-scale, in the divisions between sections, and in the small-scale bar divisions, and both have an important expressive impact. The bar-lengths hover around a mean of 5/8, and the performance details state that each bar should be played as if taking place in a single breath (the commas thereby acting as breaks for gasps of air); each bar comprises a spurt of material which fizzles out or breaks off, as if the breath has run out. Thus the time signature has no metrical significance (indeed, Barrett often does not use barlines during the process of composition, inserting them later as a visual aid for the performer [Barrett and Deforce 2001]); the barlines simply indicate 'the ebb and flow of the duration between successive primary attacks' (*ibid.*), and the piece comprises a gradual process of accumulation with one short, expiring phrase following another.

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<sup>15</sup> *Worstward Ho* (7).

Richard Barrett  
1985-86

### Ne songe plus à fuir

Shows... I have not been able to get them, I shall not be able to tell this one. (Beckett, Malloy)

$\text{♩} = 36$  with barely articulated anger - never lose identity of bar units

(compressive only just sufficiently soft to expose off at start of each sound)

These sounds to "average" from 16- upper part of the 16-8 (nat.)

\* i. glissando alternating two fingers with linkage glissando

Example 24. Ne songe plus à fuir, bars 1-14.

This emphasises the monologic nature of the piece and is highly reminiscent of Beckett's *How It Is*, where the protagonist emits a stream of grammatically incomplete phrases, punctuated only by gaps on the page. Indeed, cellist Arne Deforce identifies a 'clear vocal breath-like shape in the phrasing, in some ways a [sic] instrumental *parlare cantando*' as a characteristic of Barrett's solo works, and the composer agrees, adding that he believes that the time-scale of this music is very much influenced by the voice in general and the phrasings of spoken language more specifically (*ibid.*). Barrett marks detailed instructions for bowing into the score, conveying his sense that the length and quality of bowings is related to the breath; he is interested in the timbral differences produced by the up- and down-bows, and at times in *Ne songe plus à fuir* this is used to imply inhalation and exhalation. Following from this, Barrett suggests that instances of heavy bow pressure or the bow grinding to a sudden halt are inevitably suggestive of strangulation (*ibid.*), or at least running out of breath (and this attention to the detail of how a sound ends, as much as the attack, is also typical).

In many ways, the first section of the piece sets up the pattern for those that follow. It begins with the minimal, bar-length gesture of a long, accented C# harmonic, high on the bottom string (which has been tuned a semitone lower than normal, to B). The note begins *sffz* and *diminuendos*, becoming an ordinary stopped note with a small glissando down to a B quarter-flat at the very end; the effect of this tessitura, high on the thickest, lowest string, with such a forceful attack, is of clinging desperately to a precipice, attempting to maintain the sound as it dissipates, inevitably trembling and wobbling before falling off. This bar is repeated five times, allowing the establishment of its gestural identity before its development over the following bars: example 24 shows bars 1–14. Each element is gradually transformed. The brief fall, in the form of the short glissando at the end of the first bar, is developed, first by its extension (in bar 7) into a plunge down to the bottom open string. At the same time, the main note decreases in length until it is so short that the glissando plunge itself becomes the opening gesture of the bars. Increasingly, the bars are filled with oscillating glissandos that gradually work higher, often using microtonal intervals until, at bar 14, the initial plunge downwards is abandoned and the low accented B (along with the next open string which is also tuned a semitone lower than usual, to F#) takes over as the fo-

cal point at the beginning of each bar: the initial plummeting gesture is now fully transformed into an ascent, straining upwards, with this lowest string acting as the point of return from which each bar sets out, striving higher into increasingly frantic glissandos and pizzicatos. The bars with a pause at the end mostly follow a single dynamic trajectory, from very loud to very soft, emphasising the impression of each bar as a discrete utterance.

Overall, the opening establishes and attempts to develop a distinct, expressive musical gesture. The first few bars provide the gestural material and the points of focus from which the rest of the first section is generated, deploying increasingly frenzied material, often in quasi arpeggiando figuration but with microtonal pitch adjustments. While the rhythms are complicated and the pitches are often destabilised by the use of quarter-tones, harmonics, and double-stops, the processes of gestural transformation are surprisingly easy to follow in general terms. Basic areas of pitch are established and become associated with different types of material; for example, in each bar from 13 to 18, the cello at one point plays a harmonic glissando oscillating around two areas, the first of which starts by covering the smallest of intervals (G $\flat$ –F $\sharp$ ) and gradually expands over the bars, while the second begins by covering just over a sixth (D quarter-flat to B) and again expands slightly (both within each bar and from one to the next): these first two, in bars 13 and 14, can be seen in example 24. Additionally, because so much of this material involves expansion either out *from* the smallest intervals of a quarter-tone to a tone or out *to* nearly an octave (i.e., to roughly the inversion of the quarter-tone or tone), and because the constant use of glissandos and harmonics generates an approximate sense of pitch, it is very easy to hear these isolated areas as transpositions and transformations of the original gestures.

Once the bottom open string has first been sounded, it becomes the major focal point of the section, recurring almost every bar (and often more than once). Its use at the base of the glissandos, or sustained under the beginnings of an oscillating harmonic glissando, gives the impression that it generates the rest of the material, acting as a root from which the bow attempts to pull away but to which it is constantly drawn back. Its frequent occurrence in a double-stop with next open string (F $\sharp$ ), and with the later addition of the top two open strings (again at the bar openings, from bar 23), implies a conception of the cello's open strings as the resonating force from which each bar at-

tempts to develop; as will become clear, this corresponds to Barrett's procedures for pitch selection. The effect is complemented by the instruction that the harmonic glissandos 'are to "emerge" from the upper partials of the low B'; at this speed, the cellist cannot really hope to be fully in control of the emergence of harmonics, but the effect is clear.

The repeated plunging down to the bottom strings followed by the straining away and upwards into the higher reaches of the instrument, all demarcated by breaks for gasps of air, effects a clear sense of expression under restraint. The impression is of a musician making repeated attempts to articulate a phrase, perhaps getting a little further each time (at least for a while), until persistence becomes futile and the gestures more frantic and hopeless. The oscillating glissandos unavoidably suggest searching back and forth, as if for the 'right' notes, and Barrett's written instructions give a clear indication of the growing sense of frustration and desperation: the opening is marked 'with barely articulated anger', and bar 26 with 'increasingly incoherent, phrases becoming wild spasms'. By the end of the section the line has disintegrated: we are left with brief, frantic double-stopped glissandos between the areas thus far pinpointed, often with the accompaniment of finger percussion on the instrument.

This first section is clearly defined, but in no sense does it form a completed whole. Instead, the sense is of something abandoned, of faith having been lost in the material's potential to become meaningful. The expansion of the initial musical cell and the recurrent exploration of particular pitch areas and intervals (usually themselves related to the opening) imply progress. However, the further the phrase develops from the fundamental notes, the more desperate the impression: the intervals covered by the glissandos widen, and the sound grows more screeching and scraping (as a result of the higher harmonics). It becomes clear that any sense of advancement has been misleading. Retrospectively, Barrett's use of the narrow opening glissando followed by the enormous breadth of the glissando in bar 7 comes to seem almost a parody of motivic development – in a sense, any music might have grown from these seeds: the result now seems purely arbitrary, rather than the result of a unique, inspired artistic process. As Barrett suggests, 'One needs to have in mind that there is some ineffable vision there in the midst of it, which needs to be got at, yet I know all the time, and so does everyone else, that it isn't really there . . . it's a process of gradually finding out the truth that there was nothing



there in the first place' (Barrett and Toop 1991, 31); sentiments which relate closely to those of Beckett.

**'Till nohow on'?**<sup>16</sup>

This first part of the piece acts as a template for the sections that follow. The material of subsequent subdivisions is, however, generally more restricted than that of the first, each elaborating a search for expression within one main type of material. Additionally, while every section is in part characterised by the use of open strings as a prime generating force for the material, each takes a different combination of strings as its focal point (and this helps to determine the resonant character of each section). Furthermore, there is a tendency to alternate between sections focused around just one string, creating a narrowly defined field of possibilities, and those with a limited combination of strings, creating a more fragmented effect (but still retaining the sense of open strings as the gravitational force field). While a blow-by-blow account of the piece is unnecessary, a brief description of the structure, expressive content and significant instrumental techniques of each section provides a basis from which to consider the effects of the piece and the relationship to Beckett. This account proceeds diachronically through the material, mimicking the plainly demarcated section-by-section structure and the effect of repeating ultimately similar gestural processes across a sequence of contrasting, expressively defined soundworlds.

The second section (marked '*pesante, non legato*: dogged and disjunct, becoming increasingly hysterical and convulsive') is mainly concerned with glissandos (on stopped notes rather than harmonics). The main notes are stressed or accented, giving the effect of the left-hand fingers attempting to create a coherent line by hanging on to fixed pitches for as long as possible, before being pulled away to the next position. For Barrett, this section is 'as close as this piece gets to melodic' (Barrett and Deforce 2001), and certainly the lines are less disjointed and fragmented than in many sections: the opening of this section is shown in example 25. No system of pitch organisation is audible, and Barrett does not use recurrent points of focus as clearly as in the first section, yet occasionally within a bar a particular note (or a note in close proximity) will be reiterated after a sudden plunge away.

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<sup>16</sup> *Worstward Ho* (7).

However, the heavy articulation produces a relentless effect with none of the relative ebb and flow of pitch stresses that would help shape and characterise a melody. Equally, the glissandos themselves both suggest and undermine a striving towards lyricism; the gliding seems simultaneously expressive of a lyrical urge and symptomatic of an inability to stabilise the material sufficiently for a melody to emerge.

*pesante, non legato: dogged and disjunct, becoming hysterical and convulsive (always treating bars as audibly discrete units)*

The musical score consists of three staves. The first staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/8 time signature. It begins with a dynamic marking of *sfz* and features a slur over a series of notes with an interval ratio of 16:15 indicated below. The second staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp and a 6/8 time signature. It starts with a dynamic marking of *sfz* and includes several slurs and accents, with interval ratios of 7:6 and 10:7 noted. The third staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp and a 6/8 time signature. It begins with a circled number 36 and a dynamic marking of *mf*. It contains slurs and accents, with interval ratios of 5:4 and 10:7 noted, and a *leg.* marking at the end.

**Example 25.** *Ne songe plus à fuir*, opening of section 2  
(‘*pesante, non legato*: dogged and disjunct’).

The speed of the glissandos is disorienting, such that the return to roughly the same general area as a recently sounded pitch is perceived as establishing a momentary focal point (especially since the intervals between clear pitches are either very small, emphasising this focus, or fairly wide – almost or just over an octave: roughly an octave displacement of the same focus). This section, like the first, grows progressively more frantic due to the increasing use of very fast string-crossing and the shortening of those defined notes which provide the only stability. Additionally, the sense of onward struggle is emphasised by the progression upwards to the very high F quarter-sharp, G#, G♮, and A in the penultimate bar (bar 57), before the instrument seizes up on a tremolando harmonic chord.

The straining towards this summit, though far from clear, is suggested throughout the section by the isolated sounding of gradually higher pitches from this region (over two octaves above middle C) in the midst of the frantic playing of lower notes. At the beginning of the section we hear a high C, followed by a leap back up to C quarter-sharp later in the bar. A high D quarter-sharp occurs three bars later, E quarter-sharp in the next bar, a glissando to F quarter-sharp in bar 39, and a G quarter-flat a few notes into bar 40. From this point, the ascent seems to become more difficult, the high notes being sounded more infrequently: bar 45 includes an A quarter-flat, bar 52 an A quarter-sharp and Gs, while bar 55 falls slightly in order to reactivate the climb through F quarter-sharp (with an F acciaccatura), G quarter-flat and A, before the final attempt in bar 57. This contributes to the general effect of increasing desperation and the final abandonment of the material.

**Example 26.** *Ne songe plus à fuir*, opening of section 3 ('veiled, melancholic, distant').

The following sections work through similar processes, each with its own distinct timbral colouring. The third section, marked 'veiled, melancholic, distant', is muted and *sul tasto* (played with the bow over the fingerboard, resulting in a thinner, weaker tone). Each bar opens with a chord, often taking either the F# or A string (or both) as the root, and the cello then extends an individual pitch (or pitches)

from each chord, usually oscillating unsteadily around the quarter-tonal intervals surrounding the same pitch class in a different octave: see example 26. This gives a portamento effect that, instead of leading somewhere, simply fades away; the effect is of a chord disintegrating into its overtone vestiges (emphasised by the frequent use of harmonics). This residue then grows louder and more substantial; some kind of development seems to be taking place from one bar to the next, with widening intervals, the introduction of glissandos, and the increasing incidence of notes. As in the first two sections, the activity becomes gradually more frantic (though the effect is this time restricted by the muted, glassier soundworld), until the last desperate bars fade out with swooping harmonic glissandos that freeze on a final chord, nothing having been achieved.

The fourth section (from bar 82) attempts to develop 'grinding and laborious' quarter-tonal double-stops and is one of the most striking in timbre and in its tightly controlled expressive identity. Here the left-hand controls two lines of pitch at once. Additionally, the bow articulation is not designed to articulate these two streams of notes, as one might expect, but is instead conceived independently, as if forming a line in itself. The bowing cannot but interact with the trajectories of the pitches, but in contrast to the conventional coincidence of bow articulation and melodic contour, Barrett more often produces the impression of a struggle between these two parameters within each line. Furthermore, the upper and lower lines, often both moving by means of glissandos, are pitted against one another by a gradual crescendo from mezzo piano to fortissimo in each bar of the lower part, and a diminuendo from *sffz* to mezzo piano in each bar of the upper part. Regular bow changes emphasise the laborious sawing back and forth, and (as usual) the movement is often around the same or similar pitch areas; the bars often end only a very small distance from the starting point, adding to the impression of little having been achieved. As DeForce puts it, 'What you hear in listening to it, is a kind of tonal center with a rhythmical and gliding melodic flux, or ornamentation around it – as if the same material was sculpted each time with a different chisel' (Barrett and DeForce 2001). Eventually, the music seizes up on a *fff*, grinding, semitonal double-stop, but starts afresh in the next bar. This time, though, the cello gradually covers more wide-reaching pitches, again giving the impression of increasing desperation, until it finally accelerates out of control and breaks off.



Section five comprises ‘nervous and hesitant’ material that oscillates speedily between differently articulated bowed and pizzicato notes, each bar following a long crescendo and a correspondent change from *sul pont* (with the bow over the bridge, producing more high overtones and a somewhat nasal, slightly glassy tone) to natural playing (except in the last bar, described as ‘gently disintegrating’). Section six, ‘nightmarish, indistinct’, in contrast echoes the third subdivision’s use of an *sffz* opening chord (this time nearly always comprising the outer two open strings, bowed behind the strings) that fades into barely audible oscillating glissandos around the higher string. Here, however, the use of finger percussion and the bow behind the strings, *molto sul pont*, give a different quality to the sound – scraping and scratching. There is again some sense of the recurrence of certain pitch areas, but this is now limited by the insubstantial nature of the material.

Each of these sections repeats the attempt to develop something concrete, but by the time we reach the six bars of the penultimate section, defeat is virtually inevitable. All that can be attempted is ‘groaning’ around a mid-range D, played on different strings and with different articulations, as if making a final, brief attempt to develop something of interest. Each bar begins *fff* but *sul pont*; the sound quality is therefore extremely harsh, and the section ends with a single quarter-tone (D and E quarter-flat) bowed ‘unbearably hard’ until the bow comes to a complete standstill, choking the sound. All that is left for the final ‘fleeting, delirious’ one-bar section (shown in example 27) is frantic finger percussion and *col legno battuto* (striking with the wood of the bow) behind the bridge, very occasionally picking out the notes of the open strings (or these same pitches in octave displacements): we are left with the most insubstantial echo of the earlier music. The articulatory paraphernalia remain, but the actual musical substance has evaporated (and Barrett likens this to the almost inaudible muttering that begins and ends Beckett’s *Not I*: ‘The compulsion to speak has been removed, leaving an empty husk which jabbars meaninglessly into the silence’ [Barrett and Deforce 2001]). Here the use of amplification has a particular impact, emphasising the contrasting extremes; as elsewhere, the very loud notes of the penultimate section gain an additional physical force, but equally the most delicate and fragile flutterings are only audible due to the amplification. The whole piece fizzles out with the plucking of the bottom open string, *sfffz*,

followed by the light touching of the string, pppp, to damp it and to hint at the overtone C# (in a final reference to the piece's opening gesture).

In a sense, each section follows the template of the first, embarking from similar points of focus and attempting to develop something of note before falling away in frustration. Barrett links the repeated starting, disintegrating, and restarting to Beckett, but also to the influence of Robert Pinget (and he comments that his own dreams are often structured this way, too; in this respect perhaps the 'dream no more' of the title takes on a further meaning, with a tinge of irony) (*ibid.*). None of the subsequent passages achieve so strong a sense of searching through material as the opening. This is partly due to the opening comprising a wider range of material types; sections two to eight each have their own specific limited range of timbral characteristics. Section one has clear gestural preoccupations but its spectrum of sound sources is wider, ranging from ordinary double-stopped chords (with or without glissandos and covering a wide range of pitches) to harmonic glissandos and sometimes including playing *sul pont*, pizzicato, finger percussion, arpeggio figurations, and *jeté* (literally 'thrown', where the bow bounces fast on the string in one direction for several notes). In this sense, each of the subsequent sections explores different facets of section one, giving the impression of examining the residue of a fundamental (and this large-scale structure mirrors the internal workings of each bar). The first section implicitly provides the range of expressive devices and timbres upon which the following sections will attempt to focus in order to attempt the derivation of a piece; it therefore seems appropriate that while the first section initially deludes the listener with impressions of development, the increasingly limited resources of successive sections gradually undermine this effect, until the music can barely be said to have achieved anything more than futile gesturing.

Barrett's inclusion in this score of descriptions of the desired expressive effect, or even the state of mind to be projected, serves to emphasise to the performer the emotional character apparent in the structure, notation, and expressive devices of *Ne songe plus à fuir*. This is an approach he uses elsewhere (though less in recent pieces, due to his sense that his music lends itself 'less and less to such "ex-

pressive encapsulations” [Barrett 1998b, 23]<sup>17</sup>). For example, in *Dark ages* (1987–90, for solo cello with two bows) the performer is instructed to play ‘as if straining vainly to continue’ and ‘sliding helplessly back from silence’ (Barrett 1990). In the solo piano piece *Tract*, these dramatic elements are translated into action: the pianist should ‘Walk slowly and wearily onstage to piano with unsuccessfully suppressed apprehension as if about to embark on a compulsive but eviscerating experience for the thousandth time. . . . Move hands slowly to keys and remain there for a disconcerting time before beginning’ (Barrett 2002). At the end, the performer has to ‘Stop dead with no sense of completion. Remain motionless, without relaxing, throughout the silence, hands remaining at the keyboard, eyes at the score’.

The depiction of the failure of expression in *Ne songe plus à fuir* acts on more than one level. Thematically, we have the link, through the title and the context of Pinochet’s Chile, to restrictions on freedom in oppressive regimes (and Barrett suggests that the impression should be of the music being ‘extorted from the cello as if under interrogation’ [quoted in Toop 1988, 36]). However, in hearing (and especially in seeing) this piece performed, most striking is the simple fact of an instrumentalist attempting to play a piece of music. The effect of struggle is twofold, for while the music itself articulates a search through potential material, the player is faced with notation of great complexity from which a performance must be extrapolated. In this sense, the struggle is not only that of the extreme performance situation, but also one of creating a piece of music of any real significance. Interestingly, *Ne songe plus à fuir* went through ‘all kinds of twists and dead ends during the process of composition’ (Barrett 2005) (and at one point the score was lost on a tube train, necessitating its complete reconstruction from sketches<sup>18</sup>). Barrett does not always experience composition so tortuously, and to assume a correspondence between the characters of the process and the resulting piece is dangerous. Nevertheless, that the composer of this piece experienced the same twists and turns as the performer and listener is somehow satisfying, from a critical perspective.

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<sup>17</sup> Barrett also comments on his use of these kinds of instructions in Barrett and Deforce (2001).

<sup>18</sup> Barrett says that this recomposed version was less ‘weighed down by deterministic systems’, generally for the better (Barrett and Deforce 2001).



**Zero-point instrumentalism**

Barrett is keenly aware of the physicality of performance; as with Ferneyhough, the embodied experiencing of the musical complexity is significant. Percussionist Steven Schick has written of the necessity of choreographing his performances of Ferneyhough's *Bone Alphabet*, explicitly integrating the physical into the sonic assimilation of the piece in learning to play it (Schick 1994). Similarly, Barrett's attention to details of bowing, the exact placing of notes on the string, and the articulation of sounds highlights the physicality of the performance process as integral to the piece. However, whereas the Ferneyhough example concerns the process of realisation, *Ne songe plus à fuir* is conceived as evolving from the physical interaction of body and instrument: the intention is to create a situation where the aural is always already a manifestation of the physical. This was the first of a number of pieces to take root in the fundamental confrontation of a body with the characteristics of a particular sound-making object:

Before I could write *Ne songe* . . . I had to search out a way to approach a solo monodic instrument, which I had never done before. . . . I decided to treat the cello as more or less just a resonant box with four strings on it; then, the player has two hands, one of which holds the bow, both of which are able to move in three dimensions. This, one might say, is a 'zero point' from which to begin thinking about the cello. In subsequent works I became interested also in taking on board historical aspects of performing technique, but at first it seemed important to try, not merely to ignore, but consciously to reject the history and associations of the instrument. (Barrett and Deforce 2001)

This approach is found in some of Barrett's later pieces (including ensemble works, which he often sees as expanded soloistic music in this respect [Barrett 1998b, 22]), and it is to an extent influenced by the deep physical relationship with the instrument that Barrett sees as characteristic of free improvisation (Barrett and Deforce 2001). The difference, of course, is the division of labour: with improvisation there is no distinction between creation and realisation, whereas here the embodied understanding of the music differs between composer and performer. Barrett does not play the cello; indeed, he has suggested that some of his approaches to tapping and plucking the instrument probably derive from his experience of playing the guitar, while other techniques come from his objectified, 'resonant box' approach to the sound source (*ibid.*). The process therefore involves finding ways to draw out this physical relationship, 'so that the in-

strument becomes not a machine for projecting a sequences of notes or sounds which contribute to an abstract compositional structure, but instead a theatre of action with its own characteristics, its own landscapes, through which the composer is then able to make “poetic journeys” (ibid.).

Barrett already had experience, through his work with FURT, of improvising with instruments or other sound sources of which he had no prior experience (initially in performance as well as in the preparation of musical materials for playback, but increasingly only the latter [Barrett and Obermeyer 2000]<sup>19</sup>). However, in composing for solo cello, this took on a more imaginary dimension; Barrett spoke of ‘practicing’ the cello without touching (or even looking at) the instrument, imagining what the fingers might be able to do and the sound that would result (Barrett and Deforce 2001). Arne Deforce indicates the creative potential of such an approach, suggesting that it can lead to the discovery of techniques and sounds that would not normally occur to a performer trained to handle the instrument in particular ways (or to a composer working in a more traditionally ‘idiomatic’ manner) (ibid.).<sup>20</sup> This is not, though, to suggest that Barrett prefers working in conceptual isolation from the performer; while *Ne songe plus à fuir* is probably the least collaborative of his solo cello pieces (and *Blattwerk* the most)<sup>21</sup> all have involved working relationships with specific players: Alan Brett (who commissioned *Ne songe plus à fuir*), Frances-Marie Uitti (*Dark ages* and *praha*), Friedrich Gauwerky (*von hinter dem schmerz*), and Arne Deforce (*Blattwerk* and other improvisational projects).

Barrett sees the cello as the perfect instrument for exposing the embodiment of sound: ‘it presents us with a very close and accessible analogy between the player’s actions and the sounds that emerge.

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<sup>19</sup> Barrett comments elsewhere on the close relationship between his compositional and improvisational practices in this respect: ‘What is clear is that my compositional work . . . has been deeply affected by the attitude towards instrumentalism, as well as the sound-worlds, characteristic of free improvisation’ (Barrett 1998b, 24).

<sup>20</sup> Deforce comments that Barrett’s approach ‘results more often than not in challenging (almost “finger-breaking”) situations for the performer. It is surprising to see that you [Barrett] know the possibilities of those new fingerings very well, and on the other hand we performers are confronted with a totally new knowledge of what you can do on a cello’ (Barrett and Deforce 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Despite knowing he was writing the piece for Alan Brett, Barrett worked on *Ne songe plus à fuir* ‘without a precise “image” of a performer in mind’ (Barrett 2002).

When you see a cellist performing, you see as well as hear exactly what he or she is doing; with winds, piano or even violin those actions are not exposed to the audience to such a degree' (Barrett and Deforce 2001). The historical associations of the instrument are also significantly absent: the rich and mellow tone is barely in evidence, the lyrical tradition stripped away, leaving us with the four open strings and their overtone resonances as the basic source of the material. This was Barrett's first attempt to make a composition 'purely out of the encounter between an expressive/structural "vision" and the instrument itself (ibid.), without mediation by an abstract concept of musical materials and relationships. In this way, and despite the mass of aural information, the perception of the open strings as gravitational 'roots' towards which the bow is constantly pulled back corresponds to Barrett's initial concept. The material for the piece derives from a series of trajectories across the strings: 'I divided each string into a number of different registral bands, and then I constructed straight lines which would scan across from top to bottom of a specific band' (ibid.). As such, each string is treated like a separate instrument and the retuning of the two lower strings gives the piece a particular harmonic palette, drawn out by the significant role of the open strings and the derivation of material from the physical locating of pitches on the strings.<sup>22</sup>

Barrett links his notational practice to this physically-conceived mapping of a field of potential sounds, arguing that in this respect his scores have something of the quality of tablature: "'Classical" notation, as it's evolved gradually over the centuries, has been directed towards the notation of *sounds*, i.e. events which to the reader are independent of whichever instrument is or is not specified. . . . In *tablature*, however, the actions made by the performer, rather than some desired results, are notated, such as the specification of fingers and strings (without reference to tuning) in lute music. The notation of my music frequently occupies an ambiguous position between these two extremes' (Barrett and Buckley 1990, 167). Overall, then, Barrett effectively treats the instrument (and the performer's relationship to it) as a site for excavation.

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<sup>22</sup> Each of Barrett's solo cello pieces employs *scordatura* in different ways. This therefore acts as one means of 'reinventing' the instrument each time, changing the sound of the instrument and the harmonic resources. See Barrett and Deforce (2001).

**Priming the canvas**

Beyond this approach to the instrument, the detailed pitch selection is far more complicated, based on statistical processes developed by computer. The trajectories across the registral bands provide an array of ‘virtual pitch material’ (Barrett, pers. comm., 16 June 1994) from which the final pitches are extrapolated; four modes, within which certain notes function as the ‘hypothetical centre of computerised, “probabilistic” distributions – the most probable outcome at any moment is a note of the mode itself, the next most probable outcome a semitone above or below etc.’ (Toop 1988, 33).<sup>23</sup> Barrett divided each cello string into eight overlapping registers, sampled vectorially such that at any moment thirty-two pitches could potentially be available (though these notes are not necessarily all different). In this way, a large proportion of the virtual material – as much as eighty-five per cent, Barrett suggests (Barrett and Toop 1991, 28) – never finds its way into the piece. The process is mapped to the duration of the work, generating centres of ‘pitch probability’ which transform throughout the piece and from which the actual written pitches are derived at further levels. Barrett sees this as a way of ensuring that the material follows a centripetal process of development, related to processes in the psychology of perception and memory; his preference for exponential processes, wherein the rate of change increases as the process develops, seems (to Barrett) to correspond to the way the memory allows the mind to assimilate music: ‘a given situation is apprehended and then a certain change to that situation can be apprehended and, as one becomes more used to the kind of network of ideas initially set up, it changes more and more rapidly without one losing track of it’ (quoted in Toop 1988, 32). Thus the micro level of extraordinary gestural detail is always in some way connected to the large-scale structural sense of each section following roughly the same process, setting out from a basic idea, attempting its elaboration and development, and eventually falling away again: ‘however complex one’s music is, there

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<sup>23</sup> Toop is here describing *Coïgitum* (1983–85), but Barrett has explained that Toop gets this wrong: *Coïgitum* uses other processes. Toop’s description is instead applicable to *Ne songe plus à fuir* and *Anatomy* (Barrett, pers. comm., 14 November 2005).

has to be one level on which there is an element which is drawing the listener into the complexities' (Barrett and Deforce, 2001).<sup>24</sup>

Barrett's computer-based procedures of pitch selection are, therefore, not perceptible but are derived in such a way as to support the broader structural and expressive effect of the evolution and abandonment of materials. Importantly, these techniques are not compositionally prescriptive: 'their built-in uncertainty means that at every stage there is freedom to move and so to speak to "breathe" compositionally' (ibid.). Overall, Barrett creates a musical situation that draws the listener into the following of paths, finding aural points of focus around certain notes or individual gestures, but then losing track as the musical surface disintegrates. It becomes impossible to ascertain whether perceived pitch relations (such as those noted above) are 'objectively' part of the composition or result from the individual listener's desire to make connections, to find paths, and to make sense of it all: the uncertainty foregrounds a self-conscious awareness that individual perceptions are active in the possibility of the material becoming meaningful.

Barrett's articulation of each bar of music as an isolated unit, each of a length fluctuating around a mean of 5/8, limits the distance that can be travelled in a single bar; once the end of the 'breath' is reached, the cellist must break off, as if for a gasp of air. Again, the rhythmic detail is determined primarily in relation to processes of perception, but the means of their generation remains imperceptible. Barrett describes these rhythmic structures in the general terms of a 'hierarchical ordering of "disturbances" in a chain of iterations' (Barrett 1987, 34) which moves from binary subdivisions (2:1), to ternary (3:2), and on to more and more distant subdivisions. The frequency of occurrence of the different subdivisions is exponentially proportional to the inverse of its 'remoteness' such that, ideally, every rhythm is conceived (and hopefully perceived) as a 'more or less extreme departure from an implied "fundamental"' (ibid.): the irrational nature of the rhythms therefore becomes compositionally meaningful. Barrett describes this as a kind of 'harmonics of pulsation', evoking the hierarchy of the

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<sup>24</sup> Barrett has commented similarly elsewhere: 'I believe that every composition must attempt to manifest at least one level which is immediately engaging' (Barrett and Buckley 1990, 166).

harmonic series (an analogy which parallels the exploitation of the resonant potential of open strings).

As with the determination of pitch, these compositional processes bear little relation to the audible result; the mathematical processes define the musical environment, priming the canvas so that composition can take place more 'freely' within the prescribed frame. However, while focal pitch areas can be perceived (whether or not they result from the mathematical procedures), this is not the case with the rhythmic divisions. The unit pulsations are obscured, while the glissandos and awkward harmonics often preclude precise articulation and hence undermine any attempts to find rhythmic relationships. Nevertheless, other kinds of relationships *are* discernible; these concern the rate of note production and its relation to individual bar units. Due to the pauses between bars, it is rare that durational patterns are comparable between any two bars other than in extremely general terms (such as the extending or shortening of the same or a similar gesture). Within individual bars, though, it is often possible to perceive the rhythmic subdivisions as correspondent to the pitch structures, articulating patterns of growth and decay. Thus each bar of the opening (from bar 9 onwards, at least) follows a pattern of increasing rhythmic incidence that corresponds to the broadening-out of the pitch material from central points of focus. In this sense, the degree of complexity in the rhythms relates to that of the microdetails of the sound: 'the more one goes into the rhythmical detail, the more it becomes a matter of timbral fluctuations' (Barrett and Deforce 2001). Likewise, the patches of rhythmic indistinctness mirror the obfuscations of pitch that occur through the use of harmonics, glissandos, and timbral inflections. In this sense the complexities of pitch and rhythm are necessary to the balance between the simple gestural surface (with the broad structural and expressive sense of the development and abandonment of materials) and the expressive and musical complexity contained within.

*Ne songe plus à fuir* presents a visceral depiction of the repeated attempt at musical expression and its ultimate failure, and for this to work the apparent progression from the original ideas must be perceptible in the face of the encroaching disintegration. Barrett sets himself a very difficult task, attempting to convey the complexity of musical experience as part of the process of creation and degeneration. The material is already performative of its own coming into being; any individual instance of performance cannot simply represent the strug-

gle but must *be* that struggle. In this sense *Ne songe plus à fuir* offers a provisional, reflexive narrative of how it is to *be* in the world; it can never hope to be objective or to tell anyone anything new, but nevertheless holds out for the possibility that one might, in the telling, somehow stumble across something of note. Barrett likes the idea of 'musical composition (and, by extension, listening) as an attempt to bring order to a (fictionally) broken down remnant of . . . what? The distant past? The depths of the subconscious?' (Barrett and Buckley 2003).<sup>25</sup> The statistical processes provide a means of building 'imperfections' into the structure – imperfections that result not exactly from chance, but from the possible non-coincidence of the processes with the listener's perceptions – and in this way Barrett generates an ironic structure of control and non-control that corresponds to the overall paradox of his attempt to communicate non-communication.

### **Paths in the labyrinth**

The detail of the musical surface causes the performer great difficulty and makes it harder for the listener to find a way through the processes of gestural transformation. Barrett provides aural pathways that appear to adhere to a pattern of cause and effect but eventually fall apart, only to start afresh. At times the frantic activity is dazzling and absorbing; any attempt to retain a larger-scale sense of where one is in the piece, or where it might be heading, is all too often confused by the stream of sounds. Nevertheless, the gestural specificity is such that a degree of logical continuity is always apparent at some level – in terms of the developing musical surface, in the trajectory of apparent gestural development and subsequent abandonment within each bar, in the repetition and elements of extension from one bar to the next within a section, and in the mapping of the gestural processes of individual bars onto the shape of each whole section. This proceeds without an overall sense of progress or tension and resolution, but with the effect that the listener can be located simultaneously within and without the musical experience (or can move in and out of these positions); one can become active, attempting to find and link points of reference,

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<sup>25</sup> Barrett makes similar comments elsewhere: 'When composing I try to put myself into a situation where discovery is made possible, where every step should be a first step into an uncharted territory, while at the same time I am quite aware that every step might also be the last' (Barrett and Deforce 2001).

while at the same time observing from without the depiction of an attempt to create a meaningful piece of music.

In some respects this seems closely related to Ferneyhough's conception of his compositions as labyrinthine, the initial material being arbitrarily chosen and following no predetermined path, such that manifold outcomes are possible. For Ferneyhough, musical events project both backwards and forwards in time, functioning as a consequence of previous parametric gestures as well as providing potential material for those which follow: the music follows an organic logical continuity wherein 'each moment is . . . an inspired momentary response to a given set of constraints – in each case, other solutions, equally compelling, would have been thinkable' (Toop 1990, 53). Both composers are fascinated by the tricks of memory that allow us to build something new from a fictive, ever-recreated idea of what has preceded. Ferneyhough consciously builds a disparity into the time-flow of his compositions, such that the listener is always one step behind the music, picking a path through the over-abundance of parametric relations. In contrast, the stronger gestural identity of *Ne songe plus à fuir* results in a more specifically narrative effect: while there are elements of over-coding in the hyper-expressivity and the often dense musical surface of Barrett's music, his insistence on a relationship to processes of aural perception leads to a very different effect. While both composers foreground the response of the individual, stressing the multiplicity of available paths, with Ferneyhough the listener is entangled within webs of multi-dimensional relationships and their extensions. In *Ne songe plus à fuir* (and also in some of Barrett's other works) the ambiguity arises from his foregrounding of the question, How do we find and follow a path from one sound event to another, and does anything meaningful result from that process? In this respect, Barrett's treatment of memory and forgetting is more akin to Beckett's, but also, despite the very different musical surface, to the disorientations of memory that effect the 'crippled symmetries' of Feldman's later music. As Barrett says, 'Forgetting is a very important thing in my compositional structures, and in many cases the music is constantly trying to get back to its original model . . . there's always something that the music is failing to do' (Barrett, Bermel, and Cody 2006).

Barrett's choice of gestures has considerable semantic coherence; it is hard to imagine hearing the first section other than as some kind of



restraint being placed on the cellist's attempts at expression. Similarly, the repeated use of glissandos away from semi-stable pitch areas cannot fail to evoke a sense of the fingers trying desperately to create a coherent line, and this is reinforced by the scraping and sliding timbres. All this inevitably leads one into extra-musical metaphors of struggle and confinement. At the same time, the derivation of the musical materials from the fundamental characteristics of the instrument and the gestural intensity emphasise the quality of 'ur-performance': on this level, all this really is – and all it ever can be about – is a body in a space with an instrument and the obligation to realise a score – a purely musical event. With this contradiction the music almost seems to challenge us to hear it as abstract; it simultaneously invites and rejects the tendency towards extra-musical interpretation, performing a form of self-reflection while never capitulating to concrete representation or direct metaphor.

**Back to Beckett: a syntax of weakness?**

In some respects Barrett and Beckett place their audiences in similar positions. Beckett's later work achieves what he referred to as a 'syntax of weakness' (L. E. Harvey 1970, 249): 'a syntax that operates on our sensibilities by insinuation rather than assertion, by its infinite suggestibility rather than by its vehement rigour' (Knowlson and Pilling 1979, 178). The structural and referential conventions of language fragment, leaving minimal traces of logical connectivity and residues of allusion. These drive the sense of significance that persists within Beckett's structures of 'undoing': his cycles of proposition and retraction, onwardness, and abandonment. The reader or viewer can act within or without, or both, experiencing the attempt to find meaning at the same time as observing the representation of that process. In many of Beckett's late plays (*A Piece of Monologue*, *Footfalls*, *Come and Go*, or *Play* are all good examples), the uncertainties of character, action and utterance are such that one is inevitably drawn into the process of trying to piece together some kind of meaning. This is taken to extremes in *Not I*: one either surrenders to the sensual flood of words or attempts to reconstitute the fragments of narrative (or moves back and forth between these two positions). Similarly, in Beckett's late prose the syntax is so dissolved that the reader becomes involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in attempting to make sense of the situation:

an attempt that is also often the subject of the text, as it pushes ever onwards, ever trying, ever failing, but failing better and better.

Ironically, the vestigial semantics are fundamental to the effect of these later texts: any remaining conventional meanings are active in depicting the minimal events or situations, or in signifying the delineation of a compositional process (or both). In an extreme example like *Worstward Ho*, the words appear residual, the leftovers of a process of reduction and contraction, but they function economically – both semantically and reflexively – through the bare remains of their meanings, referring us to the struggle onwards, or to the process of construction, or of generating words, or reading or speaking or listening. ‘On’ we go from the start, but ‘no’: we can’t. Can we?

It could be argued that music – all music – makes these same demands (indeed, that the perception of Beckett’s work as musical is in part bound up with this): a listener must always extrapolate relations between sounding events in the absence of denotational meaning. However, music that makes use of, or operates in tension with, conventional forms (whether structural, harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, or stylistic) removes something of the obligation to formulate these anew each time. These musics generate significance through similarity and difference, tension and resolution, expectation and denial, and these contrasts are generally indicative, if not constitutive, of both meaning and affect. Barrett’s music operates outside these conventions and brings the question of import to the fore, producing a reflexivity that implicates the listener in the processes of making meaning. Barrett himself suggests a relationship to Beckett in similar terms: ‘The traditional way of looking at music as something which is stated, developed, repeated, and has an integrity of its own completely falls down. It is no longer possible to look at things in that way. Beckett expresses this situation. . . . Against that, the idea of musical material as something memorable in itself begins to look like so many empty words’ (Barrett, Bermel, and Cody 2006).

The transparency of gesture in *Ne songe plus à fuir* makes establishing large-scale relationships relatively easy. However, it is precisely this that allows one to perceive the impossible complexity of the detail within the gestures, avoiding absolute confusion. Without such clearly related gestural types, the listener would simply be faced with a mess of aural activity. In *Ne songe plus à fuir*, then, the listener has the sense of following the evolution of ideas, seeking relationships

between elements, but the process is undermined both by the incredible and unfathomable detail within the gestures and, more importantly, by the uncertainty of the gestures themselves. Conversely, the attempt to simply 'go with the flow' of the musical surface, riding the ebb and flow of musical events, is constantly undermined by the transparency of the gestural outlines and the drive towards finding a narrative.

Beckett breaks down language towards an ever more abstracted and musical state, but in doing so reveals the very impossibility of absolute abstraction, exposing the persistence of the desire to find meaning, to project significance upon the ebb and flow of his words, to make something of the shadowy echoes and allusions. Barrett pushes in the opposite direction towards the same point. To create a comparable effect in music, he elaborates a quasi-semantics, composing gestures which cannot but be interpreted in certain terms – struggle, desperation to express, and even torture – and evolving a perceptible, repetitive structure of evolution and disintegration. A delicate balance is therefore necessary; the semantic must be defined enough to give the desired impression of struggle and to allow the listener to perceive both the initial development of material and the gradual abandonment of this process. Simultaneously, however, the material must be handled in such a way that these perceptions are undermined, the relationships becoming increasingly ambiguous. This equilibrium is even more precarious for Barrett than for Beckett. In Beckett's terms it would seem that Barrett has the immediate advantage of working with material that is generally less bound to conventional systems of meaning and reference (though these are always, to varying degrees, still in operation). However, Barrett needs a degree of specificity, and he has to create this 'semantic' from scratch – the relationships must be self-contextualising.

Effectively, in *Ne songe plus à fuir* Barrett creates a kind of minimal double articulation, allowing certain gestures to achieve a quasi-morphemic status; on one level this effects a more tangible semantic than is normally possible (or required) in absolute music, while the details themselves remain at the non-specific differential level equivalent to (though not precisely identifiable with) phonemes. The maintaining of such structures is, in music, a very delicate business. Too substantial an emphasis on the creation of reference points will create too solid a degree of certainty for Barrett's project, while the deployment of

hardly recognisable gestures will, on the other hand, result in mere confusion: either way, the ambivalence of intention will disappear.

### **Authority, agency, and subjectivity**

As the piece proceeds, it becomes increasingly apparent that the opening gestures, despite initially seeming to have some generative potential, were in fact quite empty; they have led nowhere of any significance. We are presented with what is, in traditional terms, a failed exercise in composition and a futile attempt to perform that composition. A completely successful realisation would be impossible, given the demands made on the performer, and, in any case, how would an audience recognise a 'successful' rendition of such a work? To an extent, even the role of the listener collapses as, gradually, the ability to make sense of the music in terms other than failure is eroded.

However, this is not, of course, the whole truth; if the piece failed absolutely to communicate, it could not be perceived as concerned with a process of failure. The performer is not simply floundering around an instrument, and the listener is not simply cast adrift on a random flow of sound events. Much of the time, the gestures could have formed the basis of an 'ordinary' contemporary composition as well as any others; the opening material is no more or less convincing than that of any piece. Barrett needs to allow the processes to degenerate without completely disorienting the listener; he requires us to experience a degree of confusion, but once the repetitive sense of the initiation, development, and abandonment of each gesture is established, this has to be acknowledged as intentional for the piece to take effect.

As noted above, many of the apparently related events are based on approximations: the return to the rough area of a previous note, or the use of repeated glissandos between approximately similar intervals. This aggravates the uncertain intentionality of perceived relationships through time; to what extent were they deliberately composed with the intention that they should be perceptible and significant, or do they result from the listener's desire to find a path through the detail: in what sense are such relations really 'there' at all? Just as Beckett denies the meaningfulness of his words through various anti-narrative and anti-grammatical strategies, Barrett puts into question the apparently significant relations in his piece, speaking of his work as proceeding 'from fictions which are necessary for the personality of the composer

to believe, to make acts of faith in order to carry the work through' (Toop 1988, 31).

Barrett simultaneously asserts and undermines his own authority as composer. This is the case in terms of the surface of the music, which (like Beckett's writing) demands serious consideration while declaring its own futility, but also relates to Barrett's broader sense that twentieth-century music is increasingly characterised by heroic failures: he paraphrases Adorno, reiterating the idea that every piece of Western music is in some sense about the end of Western music (Barrett, Bermel, and Cody 2006) (and Arnold Whittall [2005, 65] suggests that Barrett exemplifies Adorno's demand for music that 'avoids "an affirmative sound" and creates "something actually distressing and confused"').

Barrett (to an extent following Adorno) identifies Beethoven as 'probably the first composer to write pieces which were quite obviously not intended to be a successful realization of their material' (Barrett, Bermel, and Cody 2006), citing the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony. In this, his very rejection of traditional notions of the 'well-made piece' is provided with a venerable, canonical ancestor. Inevitably, in this context, his comments evoke Beckett's (and, in slightly different terms, Feldman's) somewhat exaggerated characterisation of Beethoven as a model for formal disunity and disruption; Barrett's comments echo Belacqua's lamenting, in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, of his inability to compose a 'linear . . . lovely Pythagorean chain-chant solo of cause and effect' (*Dream*, 10) and his description of Beethoven's 'vespertine compositions eaten away by terrible silences' (*Dream* 138–39).

Moreover, given the relative rarity with which Barrett uses musical quotation or otherwise references earlier composers, it is striking that the other significant figure here is Schubert (again, as with both Beckett and Feldman). *Faux départs* alludes to Schubert, and the orchestral work *Vanity* quotes a Beckett favourite: the second movement of 'Death and the Maiden'. Here Barrett leaves the final cadence unresolved, and the missing G major chord then appears in the string quartet *13 Self Portraits*. Moreover, in *nacht und träume* (2007, for cello, piano, and electronics) Barrett follows Beckett in naming a piece after the Schubert *lied* and using a ghostly, slow performance of the last part of the song: it emerges at the end, as the instrumental music subsides (though here it is in recorded form, unlike in Beckett's television

play). Just as Feldman sees Schubert as an example of an artist willing to fail, so Barrett focuses on formal disjunction; he cites a number of pieces in which, he feels, Schubert ‘isn’t *telling* you but *asking* you what the formal elements of such pieces have in common. This I find very provocative and fascinating’ (Barrett 2005). Here, again, Barrett draws attention to the failure of the musical material neatly to cohere – to the problematics of composition – while at the same time invoking the authority of precedents who have failed ‘masterfully’. Ultimately, then, Barrett offsets the possible failure of his material with its potential success in reflecting on its own condition. While the Schubert quotations belong to Barrett’s more recent works, the Beckett quotations in the score of *Ne songe plus à fuir* act as a comparable means of validation, again stressing the impossibility of expression while invoking the authority of the master of failure.

While asserting that composition is itself an act of faith in materials in the face of pervasive confusion, Barrett requires the listener to place faith in him, accepting that both the articulation of a coherent piece of music and its subsequent undermining are intentional: the incoherence of the situation is what becomes coherent. Additionally, this faith corresponds to that required of the performer, who knows that success is impossible but must proceed as if it is not. Barrett attributes creative authority to the performer and listener, but also wants to instil a self-consciousness with regard to the processes of perception and experience:

I am not interested in expressing my experiences to audiences and performers but in people actually having an experience of their own. Something should be happening to them, not just in front of them. The listener should be confronted with him- or herself, though reflected and refracted through the music in such a way as to defamiliarise and therefore perhaps to create some kind of insight. (Barrett and Deforce 2001)

Certainly, Barrett is right to suggest that the audience is in a similar position to the performer, or even the composer, to the extent that a high degree of concentration is required (*ibid.*). Ivan Hewett (1994, 151) states that ‘No remnant of subjectivity remains in Barrett’s music, which is alienated and objectified through and through’. However, the complexity of the musical surface combined with the gestural immediacy is such that the situation is one of all or nothing: on starting to listen, the choice is whether to back out immediately, alienated by the soundworld and intensity of expression, or to treat unfamiliarity

and extremity as an invitation, accepting the confusion and exploring possible relations to it. In this way, the awareness of individual perceptual responses is heightened; subjectivity is actively engaged. Just as Barrett's music maps a potential composerly subject, a striving to make the self present to itself in the face of its own impossibility, so the listening subject is similarly invoked.

However, if the subject of the music is, at least in part, the very difficulty, even failure, of expression and communication, the apparently positive activation of the performer's and listener's roles makes them complicit in and partly responsible for that failure. Barrett offers the performer and listener a share in the authority, but in making them more than usually implicated in the processes of meaning he creates a situation where the blame, too, can be shared: the work asks with whom lies the responsibility for its coming into being as a meaningful entity. This situation is one towards which it is hard to take a critical position; the critic is no more able to position her- or himself objectively outside this process than any other listener, and so is equally implicated. In this respect, the possibility of rejection or poor reception is accounted for within the problematics of the work.

Effectively, Barrett removes himself as composer and *Ne songe plus à fuir* as the 'work-in-itself' outside the critical frame: neither can be viewed as discrete entities for independent critical appraisal. At the same time, he reinscribes his authority elsewhere: he may not be solely responsible for the meaning of the work, but is the creator of the situation in which meaning might arise. This, of course, is hardly unusual in itself; many late twentieth-century composers, particularly those of the American and English experimental traditions, moved away from creating through-composed, fully notated works toward devising situations in which the performer and/or the listener could take a more active role (Nyman 1999, 1–30) (and much contemporary music continues to operate in this way). However, this is usually predicated upon a rejection of the traditional composer-performer-listener model of the Western musical canon, or upon formal strategies that avoid linear processes of logical musical development or hidden structures of cause and effect (musical minimalism is based on this latter model, for example). In contrast to this, the musical fabric of *Ne songe plus à fuir* is composed down to the last detail, and its structure of repeatedly beginning, developing, and breaking down is hardly a disengagement from Western forms but more a critical deconstruction of

that very discourse. Barrett's provisional denial of his own authority is therefore complicated by his decision to employ forms and practices that are fundamentally reliant upon that authority; even ultimate failure is covertly reinscribed as decisive and authoritative.

The composer's authority prevails to varying degrees within the conventions of Western classical music. Some composers, like Ferneyhough, try to minimise the 'distortions' effected by the performer's role, while others compose in collaboration with performers. However, whichever way the balance swings, the composer takes ultimate responsibility for the imaginary concept of the 'work', and the assumption is usually that the performer is there to 'serve' that voice. At the same time, musical meaning is always mediated by performance: the performer's role cannot but enter into the equation to a lesser or greater degree in any individual manifestation of that work. In this way the construction of a musical source subject is inherently unstable, subjectivity always distributed.

Barrett's work seems to exacerbate this instability. Although he is at pains to stress the active role of the performer, viewing positively the differences between performances (Barrett and Deforce 2001), he nevertheless agrees that extremely detailed notation is, in part, a form of protection against performances by players less than fully dedicated to the work: 'Obviously the music requires a great deal of application and ability on the part of the player in order to realize what I've written: there is such a thing as an adequate failure as opposed to an inadequate one. You can imagine that a Beckett play performed badly, for instance, is a seriously inadequate failure' (Barrett, Bermel, and Cody 2006). However, in any performance of notated music it can often be unclear where or how one might exactly draw the line between an interpretative decision and a deviation from the composer's intentions – just as it might not always be obvious what constitutes performing a Beckett play 'badly' – and that difficulty is exacerbated in music with a dense and fast-moving musical surface. Furthermore, if interpretation involves nuances of attack, tone, timbre, phrasing, dynamic, and timing (within limits), but the notation attempts to prescribe all such details, at what level can the performer's conscious intentions come into play? The concept of interpretation, as much as that of accuracy or fidelity, relies upon an assumption that notation is a transparent and unproblematic means of communicating musical ideas; it depends upon one having a relatively clear conception of the



object of interpretation. However, as we have seen, in other ways what Barrett is doing forces us to revisit naturalised assumptions about communication and expression in music. The piece pushes us to question where the origin of the material and its meaning lies: with the composer, performer, or listener, or somewhere in between? In this sense we cannot ascribe failure to a musical idea; success or failure can only ever be manifested somewhere within this ongoing process.

Barrett's assertion of the importance of the performer seems designed to defy the critical assumption that complex notation and the extremity of the performance situation amount to a desire for total control, a somewhat tyrannical exertion of power. However, to my mind these comments resort to the traditional terms of the composer-performer relationship in a manner that is resisted by the work itself. Verbally, he appears to reinstate his traditional position as a composer who creates a transparent musical object for interpretation and reinterpretation by performers. Musically, though, this piece constantly throws one back into a position of uncertainty with regard to the material, where it might lead, what it might mean, and who is responsible for its success or failure (and it is interesting to note that Barrett sees his recent, more collaborative relationships with performers as an attempt to disengage from prevailing institutional, economic and other power structures:<sup>26</sup> the seeds of this can perhaps be seen in these aspects of *Ne songe plus à fuir*). In this respect, the contradictions in the questions of authority and agency are articulated through the work as questions of the origin and perception of meaning.

### **The performer's body**

These games with authority and the denial of responsibility for the meaning of the work echo those of Beckett. Both assert the unavoidability of failure and the impossibility of satisfactory artistic expression while at the same time exerting a keen compositional control over the artistic material and indirectly invoking the authority of significant past failures. At each level of *Ne songe plus à fuir* – composition, per-

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<sup>26</sup> This relates to earlier comments on Barrett's various ways of working with performers, but at the root of this move beyond traditional models is a belief that 'the accepted model of this art mirrors the structure of society which generates it, that is to say, it is characterised by dehumanising economic/power relations' (Barrett 2002). For further details see Barrett's other comments on the final two pages of this article, and also Barrett (1995).

formance, and reception – there is an attempt to inscribe a provisional sense of self, but the repeated dead ends undermine the possibility of establishing anything concrete; the work traces a self in the process of perceiving itself, but articulates the impossibilities of communication, expression, and self-presence. As Barrett (1988) writes in his introduction to the score of the string quartet *I open and close*, the effect is of ‘obsessive circling around an obscure fixed point’ without ever finding a centre, an image that is thoroughly redolent of Beckett.

Physical confinement is an important part of the live experience of this piece, both for the listener, for whom escape from the enclosed, darkened space of the auditorium is difficult and who is in any case likely to be overwhelmed by the intensity of the performance, but especially for the performer, who has no option but to struggle onwards, grappling with the instrument and the material. The idea of the musical material repeatedly attempting to develop something meaningful from the initial gestures is embodied in the struggle physically to produce the notes. In this respect Barrett dramatises his power over the performer’s body in a manner somewhat similar to Beckett.

As we have seen, Barrett cites Beckett’s physically-constrained monologues as a direct influence upon *Ne songe plus à fuir*. Pierre Chabert (1982, 23–24) has explored the ways in which Beckett treats the body as an object for working, sculpting and shaping it in relation to space, light, objects, and words. There are elements of this in much of Beckett’s work, but plays such as *Catastrophe* and *Ghost Trio* explicitly stage the power of an author or director over the body. In some respects Beckett’s early emphasis on physicality (set in contrast to the rational mind) recedes, initially in favour of its presentation as an object of representation for the viewing subject, but increasingly, in later works, with a more complex undermining of the distinction between subject and object, inside and out. As Anna McMullan (1997, 356–57) discusses, while the drive to objectify or control the body persists, in the later plays this is usually thwarted: ‘The body resists attempts to perceive it whole, either because much of it is missing or unseen (*Not I* or *That Time*), or because the lighting conditions are unstable (*Footfalls* or *Rockaby*)’. McMullan shows how Beckett reworks the body as simultaneously and provisionally both a site of subjectivity and a perceptual object: as both ‘sign and site’. The result is a destabilising of presence and absence and of viewer and viewed, but also an ambiguity

of agency (as discussed in chapters 3 and 5 with respect to *Ghost Trio* and *Nacht und Träume*).

In traditional classical music-making the body is often assumed to have no significant role to play; the dexterity of technical virtuosity is celebrated, but only as a means to an end, subjugated to the mastery of the notes and subsequent interpretative activity. In Barrett's work, however, the difficulty of realising the notation denies the audience the possibility of ignoring the physical struggle. The composer certainly holds power in this situation: the score is not just a representation of abstract musical ideas but a means of exerting control over the performer's body. However, this is complicated by Barrett's derivation of his materials from the properties of the instrument and the trajectories of the performer's hands across it. In this sense the composer's musical ideas are already conditioned by the physicality of sound production, but the physicality is, at this point, objectified; it derives from a generalised notion of movements or of specific but imagined movements: not from the embodied experience of an individual performer.

Liza Lim (1991, 21) argues that an 'aesthetics of physicality' is a characteristic of New Complexity: 'the act of performance and the notion of "limits" of physical possibility is drawn into the fundamental conception of the compositions. . . . the erotic/tactile relationship that performers have with their instruments – a matter of breath and muscles, knife-edge precision and concentration – is brought to bear on the intellectual and emotional demands of the composer'.<sup>27</sup> In *Ne songe plus à fuir*, this is aurally most obviously apparent in the gravitational pull exerted by the retuned open strings. Additionally, though, the particular use of hard bow pressure to produce a strong, grating tone, and the wide range of other timbral effects, all in contrast to the cultivated, rich, and rounded tone usually required of the classical cellist, draw attention to the physical involvement of the performer. Combined with the frantic and desperate activity, this effects a visceral manifestation of the body in the sound; the result is a strong sense of the attempt to inscribe an embodied self.

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<sup>27</sup> Additionally, Arne Deforce quotes Michael Finnissy's comment on the 'erotic-tactility' of the hand movements in complex music such as Barrett's, and Barrett concurs, stating that Finnissy's work 'was of central importance in awakening this tendency in my own' (Barrett and Deforce 2001).

In this respect any apparent opposition of the intellectual and physical – of composer as origin and performer as reproducer – is undermined. The body of the performer is a perceptual object for composer and audience, but the body resists objectification; the visceral physical performance conveys a sense of immediacy rather than of mediation, and the impression is of the bodily struggle being central to the formation of the ideas themselves, such that the performance embodies the process of musical expression. While interpretation in the conventional sense is rendered all but impossible, the performing *body* effectively recreates the meaning each time. The body therefore acts as both site and sign of the processes of meaning and subjectivity. The absolute authority of the composer is denied, but neither can the conventionally distributed authoritative subject of classical music (composer/performer, creator/reproducer) be relied on. In this sense, while the only direct Beckett references may be the scraps of prose texts included in the scores, this piece produces a musical translation of the liminal bodies of Beckett's later works.

#### **A 'conscious aesthetic project'?**

It should by now be clear that on one level Barrett's work forms a 'conscious aesthetic project' (as Christopher Fox puts it [1995, 147]). In a hostile overview of Barrett's music,<sup>28</sup> Ivan Hewett (1994, 149) compares Barrett unfavourably with Beckett, claiming that while both deal with the uncomfortable subject of the failure of expression, with Beckett, unlike Barrett, this failure is recuperated by the successful expression of failure (see also Hewett 2003, 165). The suggestion is that Beckett's work explores failure eloquently, whereas Barrett simply presents us with a humiliated performer floundering around an instrument. For Hewett (2003, 253), Barrett's music 'refuses any engagement with historical forms and practices. . . . The result is a music that resists . . . any form of collective, socially sanctioned meaning'. However, a composer who continues to work with conventional en-

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<sup>28</sup> The hostile reception from some quarters is perhaps antagonised by the tendency of some of Barrett's advocates to play up the more confrontational aspects of his work. A profile in *The Wire*, for example, celebrated Barrett's 'militancy' and gleefully claimed that 'Barrett's structures still say "fuck you" to those who need to be sworn at' (Clark 2005, 16). To my mind this exaggerates Barrett's stance, which is not gratuitously adversarial but rather provokes active engagement with the music and beyond.

sembles such as orchestras and string quartets is always, to an extent, engaging with the Western classical tradition and, as we have seen, aspects of Barrett's musical structures and his invoking of historical antecedents all carry recognisable traces of canonical practices: the formal processes and the treatment of the composer-performer-listener relationships are in themselves a form of critical engagement with that inheritance. As Barrett (1998a, 18) says, this relation to history and culture is one of 'excavation'; his method is 'not to rise above the worldly but to scratch my way into it' (and the influence of Beckett is here very clear). Even on the most obvious level, as Arnold Whittall (2005, 61) points out, in referencing the Chilean dictatorship of Pinochet in *Ne songe plus à fuir* or the Iraq war in *NO*, Barrett 'can hardly be accused of indifference to matters affecting the role of art in the modern world'. Barrett (1996, 31) continues to believe that the 'essentiality of the imagination, the unquantifiable "visionary" aspect of composition' can still offer 'a radical and critical response' to the world (*ibid.*, 21).

Everything here – score, sound, structure, composing self, performing self, or listening self – has a provisional immediacy and materiality of its own which is progressively destabilised. It is perhaps this that sets Barrett apart from the other 'New Complexity' composers: he uses a superficially similar language to pursue different concerns. While in Ferneyhough, virtuosity is employed as a means of bypassing the intervening ego of the performer, in Barrett similar devices are focused on the very ambiguity of that mediating role. Similarly, while Ferneyhough's profusion of possible paths effects a 'positive structure of doubt' (Ferneyhough quoted in J. Harvey 1979, 728). Barrett's labyrinths expose questions about how a listener moves towards a position of understanding. Thus Ferneyhough's works give the impression of centrifugal processes from which emerge an abundance of possible meanings,<sup>29</sup> whereas Barrett moves centripetally inwards, examining the viability of his (and by implication any) basic materials. Despite the obvious differences, a parallel can perhaps be drawn with a comparison of Joyce and Beckett; beyond the superficial sensual similarity in the treatment of language, the linguistic conglomerations of *Finnegans Wake* produce manifold meanings, while Beckett's concern is an

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<sup>29</sup> Ferneyhough talks of his interest in 'creating polyvalent or multivalent levels of perception' (Ferneyhough and Toop 1985, 7).

ongoing search for a pure mode of linguistic expression, resulting in a process of contraction into the constituent parts of the words themselves.

In this sense, it is difficult to align Barrett with the form of high modernism usually associated with New Complexity. In many ways his music effectively problematises the organicist and transcendentalist basis of much of this music.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Barrett has little time for postmodernism in music, defining this as celebrating, rather than excavating, the ‘evaporation of meaning, significance and process’ (Barrett 1998b, 23).<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Zurbrugg’s (1993) characterisation of a (primarily European) postmodernism of crisis, anxiety and exhaustion, strongly influenced by Beckett, is perhaps useful here (as in chapter 7). Certainly, Barrett seems to have little in common with Zurbrugg’s contrastive strand: a more positive, playful, ‘anything goes’ form of postmodernism (that Zurbrugg relates to the influence of Cage). As with Beckett, Barrett never gives up; the subject is never finally erased, nor is a state of absolute exhaustion ever reached. Instead, again like Beckett, he deconstructs both the materials and contexts of his practice, and in doing so he intimates the possibility that new forms of representation and meaning might be discovered. The complex invocation of a differential subjectivity in process corresponds to a trait that Zurbrugg finds in the more positive mode of postmodernism: destabilising authority but tracing tentative forms of subjectivity, more provisionally and performatively (*ibid.*, 39). We are left with a situation in which performance might, possibly and temporarily, inscribe meaning, but ‘the notion that meaning can somehow belong to the “work”, that its elements can be understood as possessing its meaning is directly challenged’ (Kaye 1994, 70).

### **Beckett in translation? Barrett and Feldman**

Barrett’s ‘conscious aesthetic project’ clearly corresponds to Beckett’s in a number of respects. Both are concerned with the persistent drive faithfully to ‘accommodate the mess’, despite the inevitable failure of

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Toop (1988) sees Barrett, Michael Finnissy, Chris Dench, and James Dillon all as transcendentalists in the mould of Ferneyhough.

<sup>31</sup> Barrett comments elsewhere on ideas of postmodernism: ‘Every individual aspect ... raised by theorists of postmodernism as being new is not actually new.... it strikes me as a very reactionary way of looking at everything’ (Barrett quoted in Cross 1992, 2).

the enterprise. Barrett, like Beckett, articulates a series of provisionally delineated, incomplete subjects (author-composer, protagonist-performer, and listener). The instrumentalist's struggle to create an effective performance from elaborate notation corresponds to the struggle of Beckett's characters (whether on the page or the stage) to express themselves coherently in words. Similarly, the intricacy of Barrett's notation creates a paradoxical situation that parallels Beckett's repeated assertion of the impossibility of expression and his destabilising of authority. Overall, *Ne songe plus à fuir* musically parallels many of Beckett's preoccupations, while simultaneously providing an instance of music that is very much concerned with its own condition as sounds in time mediated by a body in a space.

Despite the disparity between the soundworlds and compositional approaches of Barrett and Feldman, the two composers share a particular affinity with Beckett. Moreover, rather than 'commenting' on a text that is made fully present and comprehensible to the audience as part of the work, these composers both find ways effectively to 'translate' certain of the writer's concerns into music. In both, as in Beckett, the subject of composition is in part the very possibility (or impossibility) of its emerging as a meaningful entity. Barrett and Feldman both juxtapose musical events, generating spatialised structures that invoke the retreading of paths, avoiding more conventional linear development. Fundamental to this is the common impression of an absent centre, of each starting-point as provisional; both composers generate relentless forward momentum while simultaneously seeming to circle around the same territory, creating apparent points of focus that are revealed as unstable. In this respect, each in different ways maps a process towards individuation – selves in the process of coming into being – and the audience is actively involved in the perceptual processes. Barrett's processes of gestural development and abandonment are quite different in character to Feldman's quasi-patterns of endless recontextualisation. Nevertheless, in both, small-scale structures continue *almost* to repeat the same processes, but with differences that tentatively imply change, development, and purpose. They do so to varying degrees and in different ways, but equally without an over-arching teleology or a through-composed sense of cause and effect: they produce different forms of a Beckett-like striving for self-identity through time, in the face of its impossibility.

Conversely, the desperation apparent in a performance of *Ne songe plus à fuir* is a very different matter to the restless pacing of Feldman's *Neither*. Nor is Feldman concerned with the performer's body as a site of meaning or with interrogating structures of power, authority and meaning. There is, too, a danger of speaking of Beckett's (or Feldman's or Barrett's) work as if it is a singular, unified entity. Beckett rewrites elements of past texts in each new piece, but these repetitions serve to disturb and differentiate the attempts to find a stable voice within a concrete narrative, rather than to provide security or confirmation.<sup>32</sup> Particular differences in character are apparent in the texts used by Feldman and Barrett in *Neither* and *Ne songe plus à fuir*. Beckett's *neither*, like much of his later short prose, effects a mode of writing that successfully eschews the confines of subject, narrative, or location, delineating a search for selfhood but in terms of a mesmerising movement between ever-shifting poles. In this sense it is of a profoundly different character to much of his earlier writing – one that suits Feldman well. Barrett's works, however, provide an equally effective counterpart to those Beckett texts in which the crisis of identity and the impossibility of expression is harder to bear.

Finally, Beckett and Barrett exploit the resistance of their material, each pushing towards the meeting point of music and language but from opposite directions. This central point will never be located – it probably does not even exist – but these processes expose the fundamental contiguity of music and language and the impossibility, in both, of making the self present to itself.

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<sup>32</sup> Many critics touch on this aspect of Beckett's work, but Steven Connor's *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (1998) is seminal.