Cheese and Biscuits: Beckett’s Musical Monadology

Both Beckett’s 1936 poem Cascando and 1962 radio play of the same name have attracted relatively little critical attention. Entitling both works with a word synonymous with the idea of diminuendo or decrescendo, it seems Beckett himself was foreshadowing their disjecta status. With an interdisciplinary approach, this paper looks at the 1962 radio play, and attempts to open it out and unpick its musical form.

Beckett’s interest in music has been much documented in Mary Bryden’s Beckett and Music, and Catherine Laws’s Headaches in the Overtones. Focussing on Beckett’s love of Beethoven and Schubert (evident in his late teleplays Ghost Trio and Nacht und Träume); Bryden and Laws pay less attention to his interest in contemporary composers, such as Béla Bartók or Morton Feldman. As a result, Beckett’s use of twentieth century music in Cascando is understudied. Written in collaboration with the composer Marcel Mihalovici, Cascando makes the listener traverse across this less familiar territory. This paper questions Beckett’s creative approach and method, and examines the ever-changing dynamic between word and note in this “invisible opera”.

I argue that by reading Cascando alongside G. W. Leibniz’s Monadology, the role of music begins to emerge. Not merely an accompanying voice, Music is an important dramatis personae that functions, to borrow a common Leibnizian metaphor, as an individual wave amongst the distant roar of the surf. Accordingly, for Mihalovici, Music is “a third character” that functions singularly yet forms part of Cascando’s sea of sound. In turn, for Beckett, the

---

relationship between Opener, Voice and Music mirrors Leibniz’s infinite world of monads. Voice and Music are answerable only to a pre-established harmony (Opener), though in their manifestation, they become multiple, disparate, and inexplicable. I suggest that just like Voice’s unfinishable story about Woburn, Beckett offers the listener a play that also, due to the interaction between Voice and Music, resists resolution.