Textures of a Dream: Barry Guy & Samuel Beckett

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go end there

one fine day

where never till then

till as much as to say

no matter where

no matter when

—'Brief Dream', Samuel Beckett (1989)

For decades, bassist-composer Barry Guy has immersed himself in the work of Samuel Beckett. Guy's long association with Ireland, where he has lived and worked part time for years with his partner, the violinist Maya Homburger, suggests an affinity with Beckett's birthplace, while the restless, searching nature of Guy's art indicates a shared sense of exploration and exile. After all, Guy has not lived in his native England for over thirty years.

Guy's most recent work dealing with Beckett's influence is a major, hour-long concert piece, *all this this here*, written for Guy's fourteen-piece working ensemble, The Blue Shroud Band (named after the piece that initially brought them together, Guy's seventy-minute opus inspired by Picasso's *Guernica*). I produced and directed a documentary film on *The Blue Shroud*, delving into Guy's compositional practice, his background, and the astonishing range of musical styles the piece demands. The Blue Shroud Band is unique among touring ensembles today—an international group equally at home with baroque, classical, contemporary, avant-garde and improvised music.

In the band, Guy plays bass while conducting from a central position, surrounded by the band sitting in a semi-circle. Guy is a locus of energy—wiry, agile and strong. His aim is to diffuse his authority over the ensemble, inviting them into conversation and collaboration. His scores mix standard notation with areas for free improvisation in a seemingly limitless rotation of small groups within the larger ensemble. The composer wrote both *The Blue Shroud* and *all this this here* specifically for this group of musicians, which includes Guy as bassist, bandleader and composer; Homburger on violin; Greek vocalist Savina Yannatou; Catalan pianist Agustí Fernández; Irish guitarist Benjamin Dwyer; trumpet player Percy Pursglove from the United Kingdom; French violist Fanny Paccoud; tuba player Marc Unternährer (like Homburger, also

Swiss); a central saxophone quartet (which Guy compares to a string quartet) comprised of Torben Snekkestad (Norway), Michael Niesemann (Germany), Per "Texas" Johansson (Sweden), and Julius Gabriel (Germany); and anchored by two drummers, Lucas Niggli from Switzerland and Ramón López from Spain.

When the group performs Guy's large concert hall pieces, these events are often accompanied by nocturnal forays into small group improvisation on small jazz club stages in whichever city the group happens to be visiting. For these performances, Guy and Homburger put together specific sets based on the most interesting—and potentially explosive—combinations from the larger band. What would happen, for instance, if piano, baritone saxophone, tuba, and two drummers were let loose in free improvisation? If you'd like to find out, check out The Blue Shroud Band. Each individual musician's mastery is tested and foregrounded in these small group sessions. Guy's invitation to them is wide open, as if he is saying: *come, be here with me, free -- without boundaries.*

In 2021, at the Kraków Autumn Jazz Festival, I joined the band and observed hours of rehearsals for Guy's Beckett piece, *all this this here*. The rehearsals were held in the basement space of the world-class jazz venue, the Alchemia Club. In the evening, The Blue Shroud Band broke into small groups and thrilled tightly-packed audiences with searching, sometimes raucous musical explorations. At the end of a week in residence at Alchemia, the band moved to a large concert hall space at the edge of the city, the Nowohuckie Centrum Kultury, where Guy's Beckett piece was given its world premiere.

Like *The Blue Shroud*, Guy's new work takes listeners on a journey through musical periods and styles. In the film I directed, Benjamin Dwyer referred to *The Blue Shroud* as "a history of western music," and *all this this here* operates in similarly expansive territory. With Beckett's writing and spirit at its heart, the piece reflects on profound questions, while it winds its way through a number of truly extraordinary musical passages.

The texts Guy has chosen for *all this this here* deal with the passage of time. A fitting preoccupation for a composer. The texts also deal with endings, with the limits of language, expression and communication. The central text in the piece is Beckett's 'What Is The Word', one of the last poems the Irish writer completed. Characteristically, it was written in French and translated by the poet himself into English. It reads:

> folly -
> folly for to -
> for to -
> what is the word -

folly from this -

all this -

folly from all this -

given -

folly given all this -

seeing -

folly seeing all this -

this -

what is the word -

this this -

this this here -

all this this here -

folly given all this -

seeing -

folly seeing all this this here -

for to -

what is the word -

see -

glimpse -

seem to glimpse -

need to seem to glimpse -

folly for to need to seem to glimpse -

what -

what is the word -

and where -

folly for to need to seem to glimpse what where -

where -

what is the word -

there -

over there -

away over there -

afar -

afar away over there -

afaint -

afaint afar away over there what -

what -

what is the word -

seeing all this -

all this this -

all this this here -

folly for to see what -

glimpse -

seem to glimpse -

need to seem to glimpse -

afaint afar away over there what -

folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what -

what -

what is the word -

what is the word

In Guy's composition, Beckett's poem appears in both its French and English versions. Other pieces—from Japanese haiku to a contemporary Irish poem by Barra Ó Séaghdha—intersect with the Beckett material.

The genesis of the project is Guy's decades-long relationship with Beckett's writing. The composer and I have spoken at length, and I have had the opportunity to embed with him and The Blue Shroud Band for extended periods of time. What I find, inevitably, is an indefatigable drive toward bridging boundaries between genres, styles and even forms of art. Guy is constantly looking outside of music for the materials that will constitute his new works—whether those extra-musical territories are those of literature, painting, architecture, and so on. The way Guy works with musicians, inviting them in on a process of discovery, is an inspiring act to witness. His humility, and his musicians' respect and confidence, are remarkable. What comes from the openness of these processes in composition and performance is a singular expression that defies definition.

In his work, Guy's personal history and artistic trajectory, which I explore in *The Blue Shroud* film, is subsumed in the larger structures and sets of relationships he builds around him. Even while Guy stands at the literal centre of the bandstand when The Blue Shroud Band performs, his true authorship is in dispersal.

A Beckettian at heart, to be sure.

Discovering Beckett

Guy's earliest encounters with Beckett's writing go back to his secondary school days. "My English teacher, who was in fact Irish," Guy says, "introduced me to Beckett, as well as Shakespeare. He used to take us to see Shakespeare. I never saw Beckett then, but in our English classes—by way of demonstrating aspects of language he thought we should know about—he introduced us to Beckett."

Today, in Guy's workspaces in Ireland and in Switzerland, Beckett's works line the bookshelves. Alongside them are rows and rows of Irish authors, literary criticism, history, architectural studies, art books, poetry and fiction. The raw stuff Guy turns into music. But Beckett clearly holds a special place. Even if the early encounters were met with some bewilderment.

"To be honest," Guy tells me, "at the early stage I really didn't know what was going on. I didn't quite understand what Beckett was getting at. On the other hand, what it left was a kind of residue of some kind of information, and perhaps in that there was some mystery as well. Something I didn't quite understand. But even at that time I thought: *I have to look into this.*

He didn't dive much further in at that point. "But," he emphasises, a touch of reverence in his voice, "I remembered this name: *Samuel Beckett*. It stuck in my brain."

As a young man, after practising both architecture and music for a time, Guy eventually threw himself entirely into his bass playing, and—crucially—his development as a composer. He studied in the Guildhall School of Music and began to associate with leading lights in the worlds of classical, contemporary and improvised music. Beckett's work was embedded in this natural artistic progression.

As Guy relates, "my next encounter with Beckett's work was in the 1970s. I was working with a music ensemble called SONOR, which was Bernard Rands' group. He was Professor of Music at York University. He had a great interest in Joyce and Beckett, and he imparted this interest to his students. There seemed to be this constant to-ing and fro-ing, referencing the works of these two Irish giants.

That reactivated the old memory of Beckett. I started getting interested in it. I thought, well, if my composing friends can write pieces of music which include the words from Joyce and Beckett, perhaps I'm missing something. So I thought I'd do my own homework. I can't say I solved the mystery, but this is where the moment arrived when I wanted to research and find out what all this mystery was about."

This raises an important question. Was there something musical that struck Guy about Beckett's work? Afterall, Beckett was an accomplished pianist himself, who played for pleasure all his life. The Irish exile is noted for the rhythm, colour and texture of his writing. Beckett shared with James Joyce an innate musicality and drive toward forming words in musical sequences. Both writers were interested in the voice, both spoken and sung.

Or was Guy's early interest in Beckett more fundamentally about the ideas he found in the writing? The aesthetics? The restless (and perhaps futile) search for life amid ruin?

What was it that drew Barry Guy, as a working musician and composer in the 1970s, to Beckett's art, and made the young composer think about working with the language in a musical context?

"There were various strands that were interesting to me," Guy says. "One was that I was intrigued by the way the various student-composers, and indeed the professor-composers, were dealing with the language. Language and the human condition, really."

He continued, getting to the heart of the matter: "In the '70s, we were all feeling very much focused on humanity, on lack of humanity, and what was going on in the world—with Vietnam, war, nuclear disarmament. I was part of that *milieu* that felt somehow that we were not in control of what was going on in the world. There seemed to be this correlation between the lack of interest by politicians and the world order. What they were saying, and what they were expressing seemed completely different from what I was picking up, the ways that Beckett and Joyce looked into the human condition. The reality of how people deal with their lives."

The politics of the 1970s, and the uncertainty across all levels of society, found some kind of absurd expression in the work of two iconoclastic Irish writers—Joyce and, especially for Guy, Samuel Beckett. Their unique explorations of language provided some direction for probing deeper into human lives, against the backdrop of what seemed like societal friction, fissure and collapse. The timelessness of these lyrical confrontations mean that they retain cultural relevance today.

Guy was drawn in.

"When I talk about *the mystery*," the composer continues , "this is where I wanted to get into the fabric of the words. To find out how these people—and Beckett in particular—could, with a great deal of humour very often, interrogate humans' lives on this planet. There seemed to be some kind of important investigations to be had there.

I thought, *let's get deeper into it and see what the emotions are*. Rather than just writing a piece of contemporary music, how to get into the spirit of the dialogue or the monologue of Beckett.

This sent me off on my journey."

In musical terms, what does it actually mean to work with the materials of a literary artist? Is there a way a composer starts dealing with text in music that becomes common across these kinds of pieces, or is it different every time?

"It's different," Guy says plainly. "Because I think that every new musical adventure demands certain ways of dealing with *the problem*."

Characteristically, Guy begins to speak of elements outside himself. The *problem* is addressed, partly, "through the type of ensemble: what the ensemble represents, what the players want to play, whether they want to be improvisational, non-improvisational. There are some earlier pieces where I used the *textures* of the instruments—not the words. But the *textures* followed the structure of what I thought Beckett was getting at.

Very often, even if I didn't quite understand the linguistic machinations of Beckett's writing, I understood the feeling behind it, the intention behind it. It gave me sufficient direction to write a piece of music, based upon the tensions that he was building in his text, as I understood them."

Writing with Beckett

The first pieces of Guy's based on Beckett's writing that I saw performed were his *Fizzles*—solo bass pieces that stretch the instrument into spaces I had never heard before. Here, Beckett's presence is not felt through the actual inclusion of his language, but rather through the contours (or what Guy calls the *tensions*) he finds in Beckett's short writings. Guy says of these concise, dynamic explorations, "It came from these short texts, which Beckett called 'Fizzles', just a few pages long. They all have different moods and atmospheres. If I moved from the linguistic context to musical playing, suddenly it seemed like a good discipline as a player to find a reductionist way of playing a series of short pieces."

The composer adds, "What was proposed were these very dense, discursive texts, which fed me with a lot of information. What I decided to do was not try to paint a picture of each of these texts. I could imagine Sam writing it to me on a postcard: *'Go away lad, here are these texts. Work out the psychology of the presentation, and see if you can make a musical idea of that.'*

For Guy, Beckett's writing helps to tap into a well of musical expression that stretches the limits of the instrument. "Having read Beckett's *Fizzles* many times," he says, "they worked their way into my subconscious. I walked away with the idea of a structure of five pieces, all different, and each one concentrated on a particular area of the instrument. One will be pizzicato. One will

be arco. One will be with wood. One will be with a brush. One will be with metal. One could be very dense. One could be sparse. Etcetera."

I have seen Guy's *Fizzles for Samuel Beckett* performed (usually in five parts) on a number of occasions, and without fail they are mesmerising to an audience. The tools Guy employs to prod, poke, wrench (or even *subtly coax*) sound from his instrument produce something entirely original. Surely, one of its debts to the influence of Beckett is in the*Fizzles'* theatricality. Guy is a consummate performer, and the art he produces onstage can be as revelatory as it is confounding.

Guy's much longer concert piece, *all this this here*, presents different demands, and it came from a more complex process. The piece finds its genesis in a ten-minute string quartet, *What Is The Word*, which Guy was commissioned to write by the Kronos Quartet, as part of their monumental Fifty for the Future project. The aim of the Kronos project is to commission fifty new string quartets from fifty contemporary composers. The pieces are recorded and distributed through a comprehensive website, which also features interviews with Kronos and the commissioned composers.

Importantly, there is also a pedagogical aspect to the Kronos commissions. The pieces are meant to inspire young quartets to expand their techniques, styles, and performance practices. When Kronos got in touch with Barry Guy, Beckett was already on the composer's mind.

"I came across Irish actor Barry McGovern in one of our festivals, the Barrow River Arts Festival," Guy remembers. "McGovern read Beckett's last poem, 'What is the Word'. I remember McGovern's delivery grabbed my attention, as I was pondering what to write for a string quartet."

Again, the composer fixed on the rhythm and structure of Beckett's writing: "I so much enjoyed the structure of the poem, the repetitions. It was almost as if it were a musical score in itself. After analysing it, I came up with this exoskeleton, which the composition was placed on top of. As the words progressed, certain musical gestures started appearing in my mind, as to how I could present the changing of musical gestures."

Guy elucidated the detailed process and purpose behind the string quartet that would end up as the seed for *all this this here*:

"I thought, if I were to use certain repetitions of Beckett's 'What is the Word', it seemed to suggest a certain articulation in the string quartet. And I thought, this articulation could then take another form. It could be written out perfectly, in difficult language. But there's another, let's say *ghost*, of this language, which could invite the musicians to make an improvisational

statement. A way to enter the world of creativity rather than just interpretation. This was my pedagogical side of things. They were not being asked to just interpret the quartet. They were being asked to make some very personal decisions in the music.

I wanted to find this contrast. A reason to take the quartet *way out*, into active creativity. I also wanted quietness and introspection, implied questioning. It was perhaps a yearning for an unfulfilled sense of place. Qualities of the poem. But also inner turmoil.

And then there was something that came back from my very early days of working with Sir John Eliot Gardner, with the Monteverdi Orchestra. We played a piece by an English composer, Pelham Humfrey, called 'O Lord my God'. (Henry Purcell was one of Humfrey's pupils.)

I decided to use fragments of this Pelham Humfrey piece to offer calm moments, where I was suggesting a focus that is on the threshold boundary between thoughts. So we would have the wild passages, which actually dissolve into introspection.

This is very much what I was getting from Beckett's poem, 'What is the Word.'

This interrogation of language.

It's Beckett's last poem, and it's an elegiac interrogation of what he thought about language over his life.

This was the first time I became involved with 'What is the Word' as a composer. At the same time, we were preparing a piece written for us by Irish composer Benjamin Dwyer, *what is the word.* He presented yet another way of interpreting Beckett's words in musical form.

I was so interested in the way my string quartet developed, it seemed to me there was another generation of music, which was lurking behind this ten-minute piece. That's where *all this this here* comes from."

Typical of Guy's compositional approach, *all this this here* is a layered piece of music. It twists and turns. Over its duration, it transforms. The piece journeys through styles and sonic landscapes, experimenting with different combinations within the band. Beckett and the Kronos commission may have been the impetus behind the piece, but Guy draws on other texts that further develop and evoke the underlying meaning of the music. This presents a practical challenge of composition, drawing these layers into connection and combination. And it also enlarges the canvas Guy is working on, from the quartet to larger concerns.

As Guy explains, "Like the quartet, I've used the Pelham Humfrey fragments, but orchestrated them for a bigger band.

In addition to 'What is the Word,' I have also included Beckett's 'Brief Dream', Barra Ó Séaghdha's 'Waiting', and haiku from the eighteenth century Edo period, which reads in part, "the tide of age ever flows and never ebbs".

I found a connection in this series of texts—all looking at late life in retrospective language. The way the night comes on. The way the day passes. For me, they seemed to be sending a message. By having these particular pieces in front of me, they also suggested the seven parts of *all this this here*.

As a piece of music, it's not a philosophical statement. What I want is the piece to represent the band. Again, as always, I had a good hard look at how the musicians responded to the first piece, *The Blue Shroud*. What were the successful combinations? What would be interesting for new combinations for people, how I could bring them together. How improvisations can develop. Also, I wanted to somehow build a structure that could, over a period in excess of an hour, actually take us on this journey considering the life of language, and the passing of time."

Ever the architect, Guy concerns himself (musically) with a variety of textures, colours, materials, weights and measures—creating a structure and, ultimately, a *building* that echoes Beckett, while also demonstrating the power of creative collaboration and reflecting on the passage of time and the flow of life toward death. This is not*easy* material, but at its heights it is both urgent and necessary.

Practice and Performance

When the Blue Shroud Band gathered in the basement venue of the Alchemia Club in Kraków, it was a lively reunion. In 2019, we had finished principal photography on *The Blue Shroud* documentary film, just before the world went into lockdown. Like all performers and musicians through the pandemic, The Blue Shroud Band members had their lives turned upside down. No rehearsals. No performances. No contact (musical or otherwise) with their friends and families, let alone their international networks of collaborators.

Walking into Alchemia a year later, I was greeted by smiles and embraces from members of the band that felt, more than anything, *relieved*. Relieved to be back together, doing what they are meant to do, working with a challenging piece of music, *together*—charged with bringing it to life. A week progressed where rehearsals for *all this this here* took place each morning and

afternoon, and in the evening the venue hosted small group performances from various combinations of Blue Shroud Band members.

While joyous, these musical reunions presented certain challenges. Musicians need to find their ways back into conversation. Established alliances need to be renewed and reinvigorated. Guy is a master of this alchemy. His pieces leave room for interpretation and improvisation. His approach to conducting and leading rehearsals strikes a balance between sure-handed direction and open invitation. The way he and Maya Homburger curate an experience, both for the band and later for their audiences, is a unique art on its own. They are able to create a world defined by the music at hand, but one that is also expansive, allowing for the surprises of the unknown.

Guy's writing mirrors this approach. The structure of *all this this here* encourages exploration of unknown territories.

Beginning with the language, Greek vocalist Savina Yannatou has a range of material and articulations to work with. Her interactions with Guy and the musicians during rehearsals were some of the most fascinating to witness.

"Within *all this this here*, we have both versions of Beckett's 'What is the Word'—the French ('Comment dire') and the English. The first time through, it's in French, and as the architecture of the piece builds, structurally, it's balanced up by the English version at the end.

One of the things I thought about Savina, because her French is very good, is that we have her mostly reading, not singing, the words on 'Comment dire'. Like Barry McGovern, I wanted her to read the words, to draw us into the text without any song aspects to it.

Around the annunciation, I wanted to have these improvisations. I made a note in my little book, to create these things I called "portals." And these portals would open up out of the Pelham Humfrey fragments. We would have a Pelham Humfrey fragment in the saxophones, and that would actually open up into what I call Portals 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, etcetera.

In the score, I tell Savina—in these improvisations—not to make reference to 'Comment dire.' Her improvisations have to be in another language. So, in a way, you have the poem which is being read, and then you have the Pelham Humfrey, and then it opens out through the portals to strings and voice improvisation. Out of that come other improvisations.

The generation is like a tree bursting out into leaf. There are always new branches and new leaves. New growth. And then it will go back into the words again. What the voice was doing was taking us into the text, but not through song.

To keep this whole long piece in some kind of structural balance, there is Barra Ó Séaghdha's poem, 'Waiting'. This comes after 'Comment dire.' At the end, before we go back to

the English version of the Beckett, we have 'Brief Dream.' Savina does sing these passages. With the haiku, there are songs there.

I wanted to feature the saxophone in what I call "timepieces," the more jazzy bits. This is where each of the saxophones has a solo.

So we move from areas of introspection and searching to the big expression in the more jazzy pieces."

These kinds of movements are typical of Guy's large-scale works. So too is another central element of the piece—the presence of the composer's longtime partner and collaborator, violinist Maya Homburger.

As Guy says, "at the centre of the structure is the *Lysandra* violin solo I composed for Maya Homburger, which I orchestrated, using a paired-down orchestra with quite a lot of percussion. Guitarist Benjamin Dwyer has an important role in this section as well.

In Maya's violin solo, it was important for me to have this significant colour change, where you have direct focus on one instrument. It reminded me a little of the way [Luciano] Berio, after writing his solo pieces, he orchestrated them. This is the process I was interested in. We have the solo, which stands alone, but I wanted to see how we could interact, and throw other instruments into the argument."

In the basement of the Alchemia Club in Kraków, these "arguments"—more like conversations—played out over hours of rehearsal and improvisation. Each cold November morning, The Blue Shroud Band would gather together, stripping off warm coats, hats and gloves, and begin from where they left off the day before. Slowly, but surely, Guy's new piece started to take shape.

One of the most challenging tasks, or so it seemed to this observer, was to bring this dynamic group of distinct musical personalities back together, to create (or re-create) a harmony that existed before the pandemic lockdowns. Hours were spent focused on the saxophone quartet, which (again) operates like a string quartet in the centre of the group. I witnessed guitarist Benjamin Dwyer and violinist Maya Homburger work over and over to achieve the subtle orchestration of the re-worked *Lysandra*. The multi-lingual, and astonishing, Savina Yannatou took some advice from French violist Fanny Paccoud on how exactly to pronounce the French version of Beckett's poem. The two drummers, Lucas Niggli and Ramón López, characteristically traded percussive ribs and jibes from the back of the room, their diametrically opposed styles blending in an alchemy of rhythm and melody.

This is part of Guy's genius. To create a situation wherein all this potential chaos, all these layers, voices, tensions, portals and creative decisions combine into something more than the fourteen individuals on the bandstand.

The composer's process is ignited by deep and direct interaction with arts outside of music, and with artists outside of himself.

In *all this this here*, the works of Samuel Beckett (along with the other selected texts) appear and disappear in Guy's own musical dream. The poetic voices in the piece echo and resonate across a vast expanse of musical landscape, with ever-changing terrain.

Guy guides the audience through an expedition to the outer limits of language and sound, exploring the edge of the plain where borders dissolve and voices speak in many languages.

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