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WHAT IS THE WORD

Benjamin Dwyer - composer, performer, writer

Research Excellence Framework 2021 - UoA33

29 February 2020

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Collaborators

Barry Guy (double bass)

Maya Homburger (violin)

Conor Lovett (actor)



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CONTENTS

04 300 WORD STATEMENT

05 MODE OF SUBMISSION

06 OUTPUT & DOCUMENTATION

09 CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

12 DISSEMINATION & FUNDING

20 REFERENCE LIST

PDF FUNCTION & NAVIGATION



CONTENT PAGE NAVIGATION - CLICK TO ACCESS

| [MODE OF SUBMISSION](#) |

CHAPTER NAVIGATION - CLICK TO ACCESS



ARROW KEYBOARD PAGE NAVIGATION



EXTERNAL VIEWING LINK



300 WORD STATEMENT

When Beckettian language is reduced to fragments of sound, it comes close to music; music itself emerges out of silence. what is the word meditates upon the delicate interrelationship of language, music and silence.

what is the word is a CD comprising three compositions and written 'reflections' created through an engagement with the late aesthetics of Samuel Beckett: what is the word (for narrator, violin, double bass and guitar; six residua (after Beckett) for violin; and five disjecta (after Beckett) for guitar.

Following Beckett has altered my compositional process, forming new musical formulations that shift from narrative approaches to processes that investigate music itself. Notwithstanding Beckett's stature, I was inspired by his fierce integrity in creating a kind of philosophy of (and in) writing. Seeking to explore in music facets of Beckett's late work—an aesthetic of impoverishment; semantic deconstruction; a yearning for silence—led me into areas exploring techniques often deemed 'incompatible with art', employing sounds considered 'unusable' by composers; shifting from reliance upon traditional semantic constructions towards methods whereby minute entities are mined for the utmost meaning. Silence-orientated procedures replace conventional motific development. Figurations reappearing in different contexts offer different meanings and perspectives. Established vocabularies are abandoned in favour of fractured schemata, deconstructed 'languages', gesture-generated sounds, and a host of traditionally rejected sonorities and noises. For example, following Beckett's incessant mining of individual words, and their onomatopoeic and palindromic potential (nohow on / knowhow / 'no' mirrors 'on', etc.), which reproduces multiple meanings from a minimum of material, my residua I comprises only a series of repeated G notes. However, alterations of articulation, note length, dynamics, timbre, and harmonics result in a similar extraction of excess meaning and reinterpretation.

The CD was launched at the Dublin New Music festival at the National Concert Hall on 29 February 2020.



MODE

Multi component

what is the word is a two-component output:

1) a CD recording—consisting of recordings of three compositions and a reflective essay by Benjamin Dwyer

2) scores of the three recorded works

what is the word (guitar, violin, double bass & narrator)

six residua (after Beckett)

five disjecta (after Beckett)

eleven reflections on Beckett, music and silence



OUTPUT AND DOCUMENTATION

what is the word

PAGE RANGE: 06 - 08

USE ARROW KEYS FOR NAVIGATION



INCLUDES EXTERNAL VIEWING LINKS





Benjamin Dwyer

Six residua (after Beckett)

for
violin
2019

01



Benjamin Dwyer

what is the word (triptych with interludes)

for
violin, guitar (prepared guitar), double bass and narrator
2019

02



Benjamin Dwyer

five disjecta (after Beckett)

for
solo guitar
(2019)

03



01 - 03 EXTERNAL LINK

Click on the thumbnails to view scores pdf file.

what is the word
(CD recording): Diatribe
Records

six residua (after Beckett)
score

what is the word (triptych
with interludes) score

five disjecta (after Beckett)
score

AUDIO TRACKS

Click on the track names to listen.

six residua (after Beckett)

Track 1
Track 2
Track 3
Track 4
Track 5
Track 6

AUDIO TRACKS

Click on the track names to listen.

what is the word (triptych with interludes)

Track 7
Track 8
Track 9
Track 10
Track 11

AUDIO TRACKS

Click on the track names to listen.

five disjecta (after Beckett)

Track 12
Track 13
Track 14
Track 15
Track 16



04 EXTERNAL LINK

Click on the icon to view pdf.

eleven reflections on Beckett, music and silence (essay) Diatribe Records.

II

...His writing is not about something; *it is that something itself*...

...Propositions regarding Beckett's appeal to silence do not decry a material positivism, an innate thereness. But he is one of the very few to truly broach the unknowable recesses of human consciousness through the act of writing, as opposed to simply writing *about* them. (He says as much about himself when he speaks of Joyce). Presence and immanence are elements of Beckett's writing, but his later works exhibit a distinct stripping out of language: its narrative cohesion, its grammatical organization, its 'I'...no clocks measure time...the scene dimly lit is a *lieu vague*...

...the elision of punctuation declares archaic perceptions of elemental unison prior to the impoverishing, distorting fragmentations of logic and the sciences...

...Beckett's comment on *Waiting for Godot* epitomizes an increasing trend—(to paraphrase) silence seeps into his writing like water into a sinking ship. This trajectory towards the ambiguous and unlit inaugurates an ontological imperative...

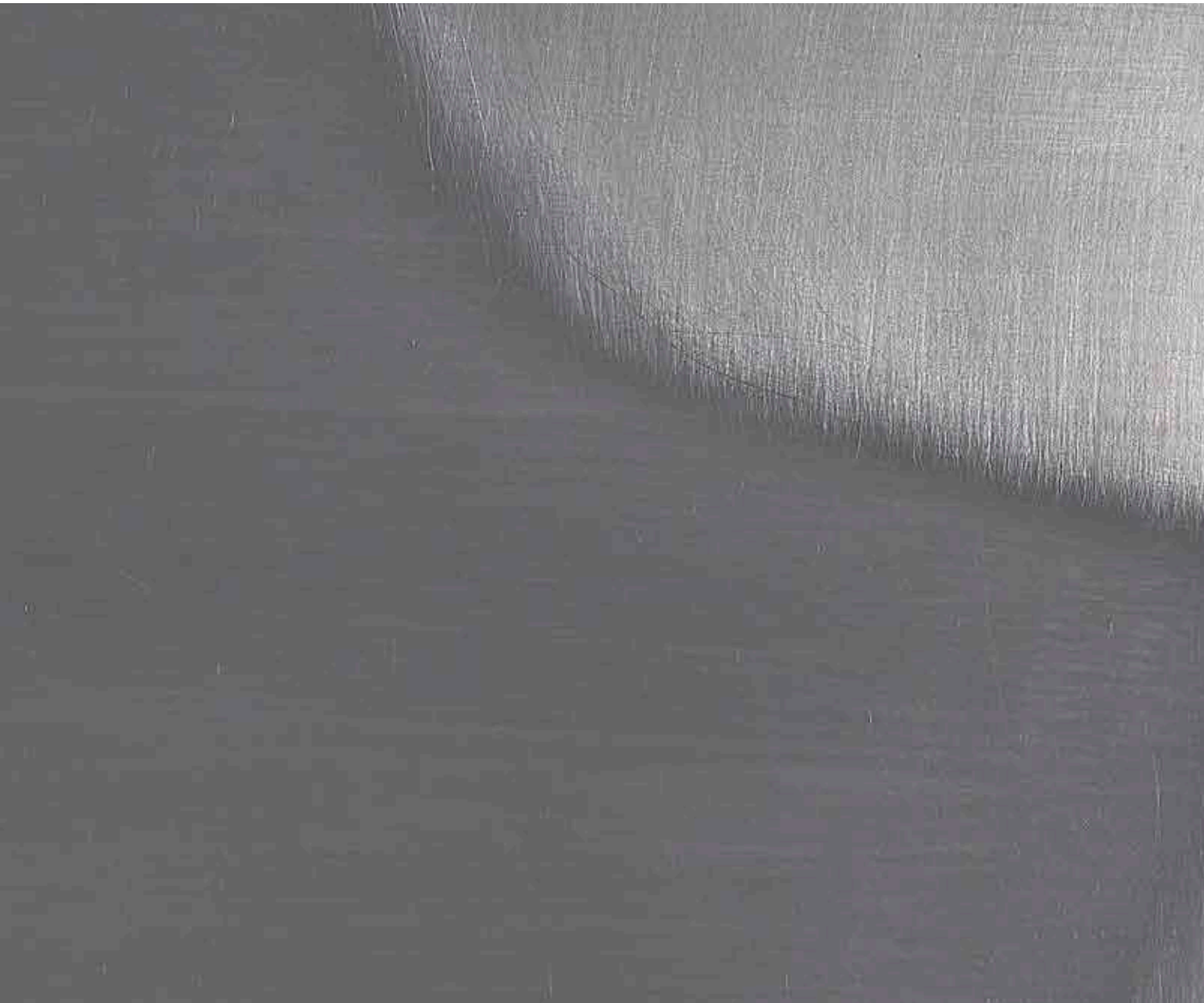
...the sound emerged so softly from the silence and so resembled it...

III

...If you really get down to the disaster, the slightest eloquence becomes unbearable...

...Beckett broadly aligns himself with Adorno's assertion that it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz. This is accommodated within a classicism inherited directly from Racine. But Beckett is also an incisive chronicler of anguish, and thus adheres to Adorno's later (and less known) remark that perennial suffering has as much right to expression as the tortured have to scream...'Too much to hope. At most mere minimum. Mere-most minimum.'...The mere-most minimum positive is an understanding of humanity's ability to endure, if only just—'...from time immemorial rumour has it or better still the notion is abroad that there exists a way out...' This is stark positivity, doubtful, cynical. Beckett embraces fracture and failure as prerequisites to freedom...

...for if among these sedentary the need to climb is dead it is none the less subject to strange resurrections...



CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

what is the word

PAGE RANGE: 09 - 11

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INCLUDES EXTERNAL VIEWING LINKS



This section consists of research project description and external hyperlinks.



WHAT IS THE WORD

Research Project Description

Beckett's writing, his late work in particular, is both an aesthetic-artistic commentary on the state of language and a reflection (in line with much existential thinking—Camus, Sartre) on the absurdity of modern existence. The direction of Beckett's writing moves towards an aesthetic of impoverishment in terms of language itself and its implementation, grammatical elision, the increasing use of silence as a formal element in writing, the use of repetition, and facets of disintegration in both the structural and content elements of language. Significantly, he strives to expose what lies behind language: '...And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it...' Moreover, Beckett often strips language of its semantic frameworks — 'My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable—as something by definition incompatible with art'.

Seeking to understand these facets of Beckett's late work through my own compositional praxis has led me into new areas. Through a series of techniques 'incompatible with art', opting instead for sounds and techniques often discarded by composers as 'something unusable', the solo works (residua and disjecta) hone in on Beckett's fracture of narrative, subject, and even place (the lieu vague); and include the exploration of minimalist (with a small 'm') techniques (methods by which 'lessnessness' may be

explored; investigating methods of 'unsaying' through compositional means (harnessing of silence, prepared guitar, 'wrong' bowing techniques, extracting sounds from 'wrong' parts of instruments, extended techniques, etc.). They further discard tonal functions and programmatic devices, exploring instead music's relationship to silence ('And then what about silence itself, is it not still waiting for its musician?'). what is the word interlaces text and music in ways that explore the shifting relationship of the word-music-silence triumvirate. The three texts used in my composition, what is the word (triptych with interludes) are neither, Worstward Ho (excerpt) and what is the word (Beckett's last poem).

Music and text have always been interlaced. This project, however, is not about 'setting' a given text to music. The instrumental works are created out of a methodology formed through a deep engagement with Beckett's own linguistic methodology. In this sense, they seek an epistemological parallel to Beckett. The engagement through music with sounds and silence are not necessarily new (Russolo, Cage, Feldman) but seeking this engagement through a linguistic model offers new insights into music's relationships with sound and silence and how they may be articulated through notated score and performance.



what is the word is a CD recording comprising three compositions and an essay, all of which are the result of an artistic engagement with the late aesthetics of Samuel Beckett. The works included are

- 1) six residua (after Beckett) for violin
- 2) what is the word (triptych with interludes) for guitar, violin, double bass and narrator
- 3) five disjecta (after Beckett)
- 4) eleven reflections on Beckett, music and silence.

The CD was launched at the New Music Dublin (<http://www.newmusicdublin.ie>) at the National Concert Hall by Diatribe Records (<https://shop.diatribe.ie>) on 29 February 2020. My collaborators in performance (both live and on the recording) are double bassist Barry Guy, violinist Maya Homburger (see: <https://mayarecordings.com>) and Beckett specialist Conor Lovett of Gare St Lazare Ireland (<http://garestlazareireland.com>). The scores are archived and available for purchase at the Contemporary Music Centre Ireland (<https://www.cmc.ie>).

NOTE: Alongside Conor Lovett, three other leading Beckett actors have performed what is the word

Performances

So far, all three Beckett-engaged works have been performed on four occasions:

1) Hugh Lane Gallery Concert Series: 3 February 2019 (premiere)

• with Barry McGovern

2) Belfast Book Festival: 13 June 2019

• with Owen Roe

3) Centre Culturel Irlandais (Paris): 17 December 2019

• with Conor Lovett

4) New Music Dublin 2020 (National Concert Hall Dublin): 29 February 2020

• with Mark D'Aughton

Insights and Processes

Supporting Documentation relating to research insights/processes

I have discussed the research and artistic responses to Beckett that led to the what is the word project in a podcasts broadcast by the Contemporary Music Centre Ireland and an online zoom interview/performance (hosted by the CMC)

1) Contemporary Music Centre (Ireland), Amplify podcast series: discussing Beckett and music:

<https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode-18>
(21:40 – 29:45)

2) Contemporary Music Centre (Ireland), Salon online series: discussing Beckett and guitar music:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ze1sD6emLhI>
(26:34 - 34:50)



DISSEMINATION AND FUNDING

what is the word

PAGE RANGE: 12 - 19

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INCLUDES EXTERNAL VIEWING LINKS



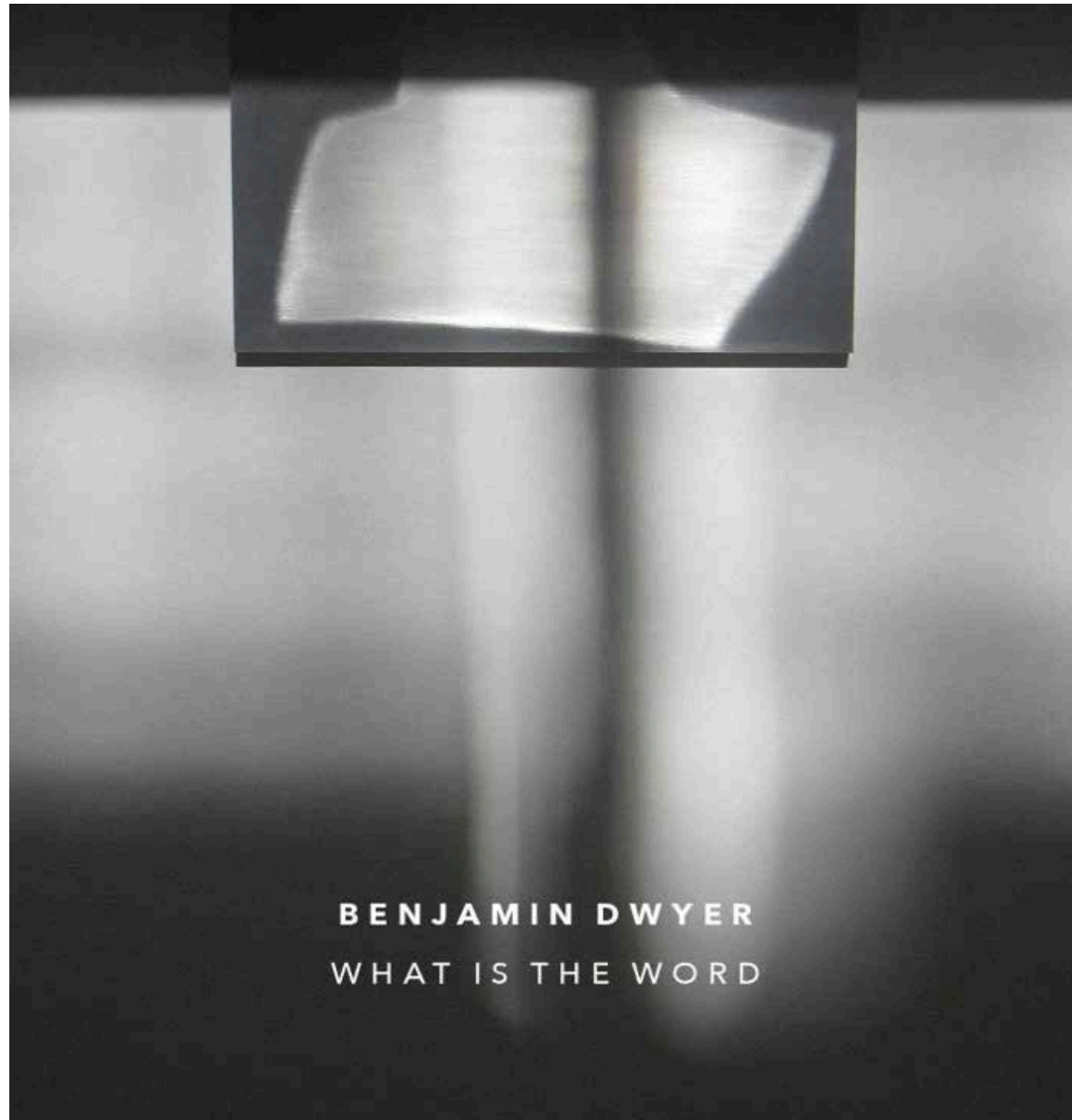
This section consists of a selection of images, website screen grabs.



DISSEMINATION

CD recording

what is the word – Benjamin Dwyer
Diatrobe Records (February 2020)



05

05

what is the word
(CD recording cover):
Diatrobe Records

six residua
(after Beckett)

what is the word
(triptych with interludes)

five disjecta
(after Beckett)


Tracks can be accessed on
page 7



DISSEMINATION

Performances


Hugh Lane Gallery Concert Series (Dublin)
3 February 2019, premiere of *what is the word* and
six residua (after Beckett).



Comhairle Cathrach
Bhailie Átha Cliath
Dublin City Council

HUGH LANE GALLERY | ADMISSION FREE | DÁNLANN AN HUGH LANE

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Sundays@Noon: Beckett into Music

 PRINT

03 February 2019

Admission free

**Maya Homburger violin, Barry Guy bass
Ben Dwyer guitar/prepared guitar, Barry McGovern narration**

Ben Dwyer - *What is the Word (after Beckett)* **premiere**


György Kurtág: *'Hommage a Eberhard Feltz' after Beckett's Roundelay*

Barry Guy – *Fizzles (after Beckett)*

Ben Dwyer- *Six Residua (after Beckett)* **premiere**

The final of *Six Residua* (after Beckett) for the solo violin (Maya Homburger) to be premiered alongside another premiere *What is the Word* with Maya, Barry Guy and Barry McGovern as performers.

www.benjamindwyer.com



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DISSEMINATION

Performances

Online promotion of premiere of what is the word and six residua (after Beckett) on the website of the Contemporary Music Centre.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Contemporary Music Centre website. At the top left is the logo for 'the contemporary music centre Ireland'. To the right are social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Below the logo is a search bar with the word 'SEARCH' to its right. Under the search bar is a button with a plus sign and the word 'MORE'. The main heading is 'Sundays @ Noon: Beckett into Music featuring works by Benjamin Dwyer and Barry Guy'. Below this is the date and time '3 February 2019 12:00'. The venue is listed as 'Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane'. Below the text is a photograph of a man with grey hair, wearing a black t-shirt, sitting at a desk and writing on a piece of paper with a yellow pencil. He has his head resting on his hand. Below the photograph is the text 'With Benjamin Dwyer, Barry Guy, Maya Homburger and Barry McGovern'.

07

Online promotion on the website of the Contemporary Music Centre

07



DISSEMINATION

Performances

Belfast Book Festival online promotion of what is the word, six residua (after Beckett) and the premiere of six disjecta (after Beckett)

Barry McGovern, Benjamin Dwyer, Maya Homburger and Barry Guy perform the premiere of what is the word at the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin 3 February 2019

The screenshot shows the Belfast Book Festival website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the festival logo, a Crescent logo, a phone number (028 9034 2330), and links for Login/Register and a shopping cart. Below the navigation bar, the main heading is 'Beckett Into Music'. The event details are listed: Date: Thursday 13 June 2019, Time: 8:00 PM - 9:30 PM, Price: £10 / £30, and Venue: The Crescent. A large portrait of Samuel Beckett is featured on the right. Below the details, it says 'Musical Performance By Benjamin Dwyer, Maya Homburger, Barry Guy & Owen Roe'. There are two buttons: 'Book Now' and 'Explore More'. At the bottom, there's a paragraph about celebrating the 50th anniversary of Samuel Beckett winning the Nobel Prize for Literature by immersing oneself in beautiful original compositions inspired by Beckett's writing. Below that, it says 'what is the word' is a musical meditation on three pieces of writing by Samuel Beckett: 'Neither, Westward He (prelude)' and 'What is the word', composed by Benjamin Dwyer for amplified guitar, double bass, violin and narrator.

07

07

Belfast Book Festival
online promotion

08

Picture: Barry McGovern,
Benjamin Dwyer, Maya
Homburger and Barry Guy



08

DISSEMINATION

Performances

Centre Culturel Irlandais (Paris)
17 December 2019

<https://www.centreculturelirlandais.com/en/agenda/what-is-the-word>



09



10

09 - 10

Brochure for the French premiere of what is the word at the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris



DISSEMINATION

Performances

New Music Dublin Festival 2020 at the National Concert Hall (Dublin)

Diatrobe CD launch & performance
29 February 2020



11

https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=dbcFPsIQ4kk&fbclid=IwAR0Htth0QK_QbPgLb4NNQE1upYrD55H-DNSeDgsKcD9JZXMIrzdVaAjFodc

<http://www.newmusicdublin.ie/events/diatrobe-stage-3-benjamin-dwyer-what-is-the-word>

http://www.newmusicdublin.ie/diatrobe-stage?fbclid=IwAR1kCAK4B47WUitYxVhjGhpe_shvWgunzWWj_nmfRETqC9u5MxuSt6DWPG4

11

Programme Booklets for
the New Music Dublin
festival in association
With RTE (national radio
& television broadcaster)
and the National
Concert Hall



DISSEMINATION

Reviews

The Journal of Music review by Mark Fitzgerald

The Journal of Society of Music in Ireland review by Timothy Diovanni

Podcasts & Online Interviews

I have discussed the research and artistic responses to Beckett that led to the what is the word project in a podcasts broadcast by the Contemporary Music Centre Ireland and an online zoom interview/performance (hosted by the CMC)

1) Contemporary Music Centre (Ireland), Amplify podcast series: discussing Beckett and music: <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode-18> (21:40 – 29:45)

2) Contemporary Music Centre (Ireland), Salon online series: discussing Beckett and guitar music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ze1sD6emLhI> (26:34 - 34:50)



Benjamin Dwyer performing at New Music Dublin 2020. (Photo by Dáire O'Sullivan)

Little Islands of Melody and Silence

Composer and guitarist Benjamin Dwyer's new album on Diatribe records, 'what is the word' – featuring Dwyer, Barry Guy, Maya Homburger and actor Conor Lovett – is the result of a renewed engagement with all of Samuel Beckett's output. Mark Fitzgerald reviews.

MARK FITZGERALD

12

12

<https://www.musicologyireland.com/jsmi/index.php/journal/article/view/199/225>

[#WhatistheWord](#) – "In exploiting the potentials of discarded materials in his music, Dwyer not only mimics how Beckett treats language in his work, but also participates in a broader political and social discourse."



13

13

<https://journalofmusic.com/criticism/little-islands-melody-and-silence>



REFERENCE LIST

S.E. GONTARSKI, *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho—Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1980).

THE LETTERS OF SAMUEL BECKETT Vol 2: p. 477 (to Edouard Coester).

DANIELA CASELLI, ed., *Beckett and Nothing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010),

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC CENTRE (IRELAND), Amplify podcast series: <https://www.cmc.ie/amplify/episode-18>

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC CENTRE (IRELAND), Salon online series: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ze1sD6emLhl>

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