

In the Shadows with Feldman and Beckett

by John Dwyer

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BECKETT (thoughtful silence): I don’t like opera.

FELDMAN: I don’t like it, either.

BECKETT (silence): I don’t like my words set to music.

FELDMAN: Not thinking of dialogue. Haven’t used it once in 25 years. I don’t like words to music, myself.

BECKETT (silence): What do you want?

FELDMAN: I have no idea.

It is partly by accident, somewhat by intent, the whole thing transpiring in the shadowy metier of a play by Samuel Beckett.

As well it might, with the slight difference that it’s from real life, and Beckett himself is one of the players.

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TIME: Last mid-September, around noon.

SCENE I: A small, very dark theatre in Berlin, the Schiller, in between rehearsals.

CHARACTERS: Irish-born, Paris-based, 70-year-old poet and dramatist Samuel Beckett, in Berlin to direct one of his plays in a Beckett Festival. It is in German.

American composer Morton Feldman, late 40s, one of the enfants terrible of Greenwich Village in the 1950s, now Buffalo-based UB Varese Professor and director of the June in Buffalo Festival.

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SITUATION: Feldman has been in Glasgow to hear his new piece, “Orchestra,” performed by the National Orchestra of Scotland. He has had an appointment arranged with Beckett. Feldman already has written a chamber work based on two lines of a Beckett opus titled “Film.”¹ But what he wants now, though he’s leading up to it carefully, is a new Beckett text, suitable for a one-role opera. Beckett in correspondence has already suggested excerpts from his earlier works, for a musical setting. He has given Feldman carte blanche in such a venture. Feldman wants something more, something else. He hangs on, and waits.

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BECKETT: You can use the suggested earlier lines?

FELDMAN: I find it difficult.

BECKETT: Excuse me. (Leaves for the stage, where he directs the precise glimmer and yellow-white blend of a single small light for 15 minutes. Returns.)

BECKETT (silence): I don’t like collaboration. I am doing something now about a man listening to the wireless. Music, the slow movement of the Beethoven “Ghost” Trio. Sometimes louder,

¹ The work referred to must be Feldman’s “Elemental Procedures” (1976), though this is not a chamber work, but a large-scale work for soprano, mixed choir and orchestra.

sometimes softer.² But collaboration, I don't like it. (He speaks in a most mellifluous baritone, with just a trace of a refined Irish accent.)

FELDMAN (speaking in Queens, often mistaken for Brooklyn): I understand. I respect and appreciate your view. I came from Buffalo to Scotland to Berlin in hopes, but I understand. (Rises to leave.)

BECKETT: Please. Don't go yet. (Feldman sits down. Silence.)

BECKETT: Pardon. (Goes to murky stage, considers costume hemline on a walking actress. Feldman beginning to see a little. Stage actually is full of quiet people – actors, aides, photographers, all sorts. Beckett converses in fluent German, debates hemline for 10 minutes. Returns.)

BECKETT: (Silence.)

FELDMAN: (Silence.)

BECKETT: (Silence.)

FELDMAN: Would you care for lunch?

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SCENE II: A small nearby restaurant. Feldman has lunch. Beckett, who eats almost nothing anytime, orders beer. Feldman has brought along his earlier score to the Beckett "Film" lines, and Beckett has shown some interest. He reads music perfectly, and is a pianist.

BECKETT: The theater has been just an escape from writing. There is only one theme in my life. (Silence.) What is the problem?

FELDMAN: The problem is that your writing goes its own way. It is like a light I have to follow. I need something else. Something more still, more hovering. (Shows what he means, in the score to "Film" lines.)

BECKETT (begins to be absorbed in the score figurations and the idea): My theme is ... (he states theme. Feldman finds it absolutely beautiful.)

FELDMAN: May I write it down? (Beckett himself takes Feldman's music paper, writes down theme. The holograph alone is an enviable acquisition, but Feldman is too intent on the fulfilment of an opera to be concerned with collector's prizes. Feldman is transported by the theme itself. It reads:

TO AND FRO IN SHADOW, FROM OUTER SHADOW TO INNER SHADOW. TO AND FRO, BETWEEN UNATTAINABLE SELF AND UNATTAINABLE NON-SELF.

BECKETT (The famed playwright, Feldman senses, is now hooked): It would need a bit of work, wouldn't it? Well, if I get any further ideas on it, I'll send them on to you. (They move out of the restaurant.)

FELDMAN: I forgot my raincoat. (They say goodbye in the street, and as they get a little distance away, Feldman turns and adds a word.)

FELDMAN: I don't want to say this, I hate pressure myself, but I will say it. Rome Opera wants it, the National Theater in London, Venice. Considerable money is implied. Can Bill Colleran (Friend of both, a music publisher³) send you a contract?

BECKETT: No, I have too much money. Think of it as a gift. (The two characters walk away in different directions, and the scene closes.)

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EPILOGUE: Beckett eventually returns to Paris, Feldman to Buffalo. Weeks later, Feldman opens his mailbox. An envelope inside holds a rather stiff card, on which beautifully hand-printed lines show Beckett's poetic transformation of his theme. The theme is titled "Neither" and now reads: TO AND FRO IN SHADOW FROM INNER TO OUTER SHADOW. FROM IMPENETRABLE SELF TO IMPENETRABLE UNSELF BY WAY OF NEITHER.

² Samuel Beckett, "Ghost Trio: A play for television" (1975), first broadcast in April 1977.

³ Bill Colleran (1929-2008) was for many years Director of the London office of Universal Edition, Feldman's music publisher from 1969 onwards.

There follow a series of sentences, a small line separating each. To Feldman it is a hypnotic litany, the evocation of a poetic life, and surely it will hold the stage. The opera is on its way.

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CONCERT NEWS: Composer Morton Feldman is at work in Buffalo on a solo-voice opera with large orchestra titled “Neither,” to a given text by world-renowned poet and playwright Samuel Beckett.

A contract has been signed with Rome Opera, where it will be given eight performances under guest conductor Marcello Panni beginning May 15. Panni is maestro of the Venice Biennale.⁴

The work is 50 minutes long. The program will open with Erik Satie’s rarely-done ballet “Mercure.”

The opera plan is to use a young Buffalo-based soprano, Martha Hanneman.

“I visualize a pure young voice and an acute musical sense,” says Feldman, “and Martha seems to fill the bill.”

Miss Hanneman emerged from apprentice status into considerable prominence in the 1976 June in Buffalo Festival, with her surprisingly sophisticated solo performance in the Madrigals of George Crumb. The critical press gave her considerable attention and approval.

An extraordinary aspect of the opera is the contribution of original lines by Beckett, who is as reclusive and ordinarily as inaccessible as he is world-famed.

“All I could do was hope,” said composer Feldman, “but I knew that I needed original lines by Beckett, and nothing else would do.”

Feldman obtained them in a Berlin-theater meeting with Beckett in September, under strange circumstances.

“I came to the door of the Schiller Theater in Berlin,” says Feldman, “and was ushered inside by a kaffee-knabe⁵, a boy of all work.

“I was led from daylight into a dark theatre, onstage, where I was presented to an invisible Beckett. He shook hands with my thumb and I fell softly down a huge black curtain, to the ground.

“The boy giggled. There were murmurs. I was led down steps and to a seat in the front aisles.

“I was, as you see, in a Beckett play. And when Beckett himself joined me as one of the principal characters, the illusion was complete.

“It still has the feeling of a phantasm, as I recall it. But I have the original Beckett text I went to seek in Berlin, and that’s my joyful hold on reality.

“As Beckett would say, pardon. I must work on my opera.” (Silence.)

⁴ Marcello Panni frequently conducted concerts of contemporary music at the Venice Biennale, including Feldman premieres in 1971 and 1976.

⁵ German: coffee-boy