



Notes on IMAGINATION DEAD IMAGINE

Years ago, I met for coffee in London with the drama critic Martin Esslin, author of *THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD*, and coincidentally, my teacher's teacher – we had in fact met several times before. Among other things I told him that someday I wanted to “set some Beckett.” He said, “Well, why don't you just write to him?” Reasonable suggestion, so I wrote to Mr. Beckett c/o his publisher in Paris.

In my I'm sure overly-fawning letter I told Beckett of my meeting with Esslin and about my desire to set something of his, and listed several of his texts as suggestions (I no longer have my letter to him) – –

– and much to my shock and delight, he wrote back very quickly, in a letter dated January 20, 1980, and gave me permission to set his text *IMAGINATION DEAD IMAGINE*.

IMAGINATION DEAD IMAGINE is a great but, musically speaking, fairly long prose piece, about 1100 words, and though I gave it a lot of thought, the idea of it actually being sung by somebody or a group of some kind seemed counter-intuitive – or, in other words, a really bad idea. I knew though that I would eventually have to figure out something.

Eventually can be a long wait, but finally, having thought about it over many years, and technology having made many things I might not have imagined not only possible but almost convenient, I came up with the idea of recording a handful of people reading the text once or twice (or more) each, mixing and lining up all of the voices in pro tools – word by word, syllable by syllable – and then writing a string quartet to go along with, or more accurately, live along with Beckett's text. So, having recorded the voices, I imported them into pro tools, lined them up with a click track, and then composed the Quartet, imagining a scenario wherein the Quartet was hearing the text for the first time and living in it, responding to it, agreeing with it, protesting against it, et al. Like *KRAPP'S LAST TAPE* or *EH JOE*, but instead of an actor responding to recording voices, we see a string quartet. The actors, friends who recorded the text for the project are, from the Stratford Festival in Canada, Geraint Wyn Davies, Dion Johnstone, Seana McKenna, and Lucy Peacock, in addition to Marco Baricelli (actor, artistic director of Shakespeare Santa Cruz), Jessica Jean Erwin (South African actress living in Vancouver), and Robert Joy (Canadian and American actor).

IMAGINATION DEAD IMAGINE is as much as anything a music/theatre piece – even an opera – for String Quartet and recorded voices – ideally, the audience witnesses the Quartet hearing and instructed by the recorded voices and reacting as they see fit – sometimes being ok with it, then fairly often not. It's my hope that in the end, when the voices are gone, and the click track has disappeared, that the isolation and, for want of a better word, loneliness of the string quartet is felt rather strongly, akin to how an actor might feel (and how we might feel observing the actor – or Didi or Gogo, et al, as the case may be) while performing in a Beckett play, or how we might feel after experiencing Beckett's work in any other context.

The rhythmic notation in the vocal line is an approximation of the recorded voices – it's fairly accurate and workable, I wrote it out as a rough transcription so I could write the Quartet around the recording, the voices were never recorded with any rhythmic ideas in mind at all, the actors just read the text, and then I lined up everything they did in a way that seemed intuitively good and fairly clear.

The music is, for want of a better term, *molto espressivo* – that is to say, very expressive, not dry or cold – members of the Quartet should experience the piece emotionally as well as intellectually, and not be afraid of that. Also, if possible, the Quartet should not sit in a traditional position, facing each other, the violinist and cellist on the outside – rather they should all face out to some extent so we see them all rather evenly, and so we can see them respond to what's happening to them. When they are forced to play together with no click, if they want to somehow face each other and/or move closer, they certainly should. (MR-2013)