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 he wrote back very quickly, in a letter dated January 20, 1980, and gave me permission to set his 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. 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, etc. Like KRAPP’S LAST TAPE or EH JOE, but instead of an actor responding to recorded 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), 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, 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, etc, 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)
No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine. Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit. Till all white in the whiteness the rotunda. No way in, go in, measure. Diameter three feet, three feet from ground to summit of the vault. Two diameters at right angles

AB CD divide the white ground into two semicircles ACB BDA. Lying on the ground two white bodies, each in its semicircle. White too the vault and the round wall eighteen inches high from which it springs. Go back out, a plain rotunda, all white in the whiteness, go back in, rap, solid throughout, a ring as in the imagination the ring of bone. The light that makes all so white no visible source, all shines with the same whiteshine, ground, wall, vault, bodies, no shadow. Strong heat, surfaces hot but not burning to the touch, bodies sweating.

Go back out, move back, the little fabric vanishes, ascend, it vanishes, all white in the whiteness, descend, go back in. Emptiness, silence, heat, whiteness, wait, the light goes down, all grows dark together, ground, wall, vault, bodies, say twenty seconds, all the greys, the light goes out, all vanishes. At the same time the temperature goes down, to reach its minimum, say freezing-point, at the same instant that the blackis reached, which may seem strange. Wait, more or less long, light and heat come back, all grows white and hot together, ground, wall, vault, bodies, say twenty seconds, all the greys, till the initial level is reached whence the fall began.

More or less long, for there may intervene, experience shows, between end of fall and beginning of rise, pauses of varying length, from the fraction of the second to what would have seemed, in other times, other places, an eternity. Same remark for the other pause, between end of rise and beginning of fall.

The extremes, as long as they last, are perfectly stable, which in the case of the temperature may seem strange, in the beginning. It is possible too, experience shows, for rise and fall to stop short at any point and mark a pause, more or less long, before resuming, or reversing, the rise now fall, the fall rise, these in their turn to be completed, or to stop short and mark a pause, more or less long, before resuming, or again reversing, and so on, till finally one or the other extreme is reached. Such variations of rise and fall, combining in countless rhythms, commonly attend the passage from white and heat to black and cold, and vice versa.

The extremes alone are stable as is stressed by the vibration to be observed when a pause occurs at some intermediate stage, no matter what its level and duration. Then all vibrates, ground, wall, vault, bodies, ashen or leaden or between the two, as may be.

But on the whole, experience shows, such uncertain passage is not common. And most often, when the light begins to fail, and along with it the heat, the movement continues unbroken until, in the space of some twenty seconds, pitch black is reached and at the same instant say freezing-point. Same remark for the reverse movement, towards heat and whiteness.

Next most frequent is the fall or rise with pauses of varying length in these feverish greys, without at any moment reversal of the movement. But whatever its uncertainties the return sooner or later to a temporary calm seems assured, for the moment, in the black dark or the great whiteness, with attendant temperature, world still proof against enduring tumult. Rediscovered miraculously after what absence in perfect voids it is no longer quite the same, from this point of view, but there is no other. Externally all is as before and the sighting of the little fabric quite as much a matter of chance, its whiteness merging in the surrounding whiteness. But go in now brief lulls and never twice the same storm. Light and heat remain linked as though supplied by the same source of which still no trace. Still on the ground, bent in three, the head against the wall at B, the arse against the wall at A, the knees against the wall between B and C, the feet against the wall between C and A, that is to say inscribed in the semicircle ACB, merging in the white ground were it not for the long hair of strangely imperfect whiteness, the white body of a woman finally. Similarly inscribed in the other semicircle, against the wall his head at A, his arse at B, his knees between A and D, his feet between D and B, the partner. On their right sides therefore both and back to back head to arse. Hold a mirror to their lips, it mists. With their left hands they hold their left legs a little below the knee, with their right hands their left arms a little above the elbow. In this agitated light, its great white calm now so rare and brief, inspection is not easy.

Sweat and mirror notwithstanding they might well pass for inanimate but for the left eyes which at incalculable intervals suddenly open wide and gaze in unblinking exposure long beyond what is humanly possible. Piercing pale blue the effect is striking, in the beginning. Never the two gazes together except once, when the beginning of one overlapped the end of the other, for about ten seconds. Neither fat nor thin, big nor small, the bodies seem whole and in fairly good condition, to judge by the surfaces exposed to view. The faces too, assuming the two sides of a piece, seem to want nothing essential. Between their absolute stillness and the convulsive light the contrast is striking, in the beginning, for one who still remembers having been struck by the contrary. It is clear however, from a thousand little signs too long to imagine, that they are not sleeping.

Only murmur ah, no more, in this silence, and at the same instant for the eye of prey the infinitesimal shudder instantaneously suppressed. Leave them there, sweating and icy, there is better elsewhere.

No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere, and no question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they still lie still in the stress of that storm, or of a worse storm, or in the black dark for good, or the great whiteness unchanging, and if not what they are doing.
Imagination Dead Imagine  
text by Samuel Beckett  
music by Michael Roth  
(composer's revised draft, not fully edited yet....)

A laptop is onstage with the pre-recorded voices and the click track - accordingly, it should be clear that the members of the Quartet are pressing the space bar them selves and entering into Beckett's text willingly, voluntarily - for the four players, the purpose of the first few bars, of stopping and starting the pre-recorded text etc., is to make sure that for their purposes, they can hear the text clearly and hear the click track clearly, and that all is technically working and good. For the audience, it should be clear that the four members of the quartet are deciding to enter into the world of the piece and deciding to stay there, to keep it going - to give it a whirl - and throughout, we see that they are in fact listening, and that they're responding to the text, to the event of the text as Beckett lays it out - the Quartet is experiencing it, we are experiencing it through the Quartet - and witnessing the Quartet's responses to what's happening to them.

The Quartet enters and approaches the laptop. One member of the Quartet, perhaps Violin 1, gets his/her earphones ready and in position - the other three players do the same, and Violin 1 presses the space bar. We hear:

\[\text{No trace anywhere of life,}\]

\[= 100\]

Vln1 presses the space bar to stop it - and assuming that he/she has heard the click and the voices, and that all is well and clear, Vln1 gets ready to play, and now, similarly, Violin 2 presses the space bar - We hear:

\[\text{No trace anywhere of life,}\]

Vln2 presses the space bar to stop it - and assuming that he/she has heard the click and the voices, and that all is well and clear, Vln2 gets ready to play, and now, similarly, the Violist presses the space bar - We hear:

\[\text{No trace anywhere of life,}\]

The Violist presses the space bar to stop it - and assuming that he/she has heard the click and the voices, and that all is well and clear, the Violist gets ready to play, and now, similarly, the Cellist presses the space bar - We hear:

\[\text{No trace anywhere of life,}\]

The Cellist presses the space bar to stop it - and assuming that he/she has heard the click and the voices, and that all is well and clear, the Cellist gets ready to play -

If anyone needs to hear it again for any reason, they should play it again - once all things are set and everyone has heard the first line and the click, finally, one of the members of the Quartet, perhaps Violin 1 presses the space bar one final time, and now the piece proper begins:
No trace a ny where of life, you say, you say.

No trace a ny where of life, you say, you say.

No trace a ny where of life, you say, you say.
Voices

pah, pah, pah, pah, pah, pah,

forcefully

no difficulty there,

forcefully

no difficulty there.

forcefully

imagined not dead yet, not dead yet

yes, dead, good,

good
good

pizz.

sfp

sfp

sfp

sfp
Voices:

White in the white-ness, the ro-tun-da. No way in, No way in, go in.

measure. Di-a-me-ters three feet, three feet from ground to sum-mit of the vault, to sum-mit of the vault.

Two di-a-me-ters at right angles A B C D A B C D di-vide di-vide di-vide the white ground
in to two semi-circles divide the white ground in to two semi-circles A C B

Ly-ing on the ground Ly-ing-on the ground

two white bodies, two white bodies, each in its semi-circle. White too the vault White too the vault and the
Voices: Go back, Go back, a plain run da,

Out, Go back out.

Round wall, eighteen inches high, from which it springs, springs.

White in the white-ness, go back in rap, rap, arco so lid through
in the imagination the ring of bone

The light that makes all so white

exp

in the imagination the ring of bone

all shines with the same white shine,

source

ground, wall, vault, bodies, no shadow.
110
Voices
Strong heat, Strong heat, sur fa ces hor... but not bur ning to the touch, bo-dies swea-ting.

114
Voices
bo dies swea-ting. swea-ting. Go back out, Go back out. Go back out, move back,

120
Voices
the lit-tle fab ric va-ni-

ID1-11
12/5/13
white-ness
wait, the light goes down, the light goes down, all grows dark together, to-

gether
ground

ground, wall vault, bodies, say twenty seconds, all the grays

the light goes out, the light goes out, out, all vanishes. At the same time

the same time wait, the light goes down, the light goes down, all grows dark together, to-

gether
ground

ground, wall vault, bodies, say twenty seconds, all the grays

the light goes out, the light goes out, out, all vanishes. At the same time

the same time
the temperature goes down, to reach its minimum, say freezing point, freezing point, freezing point, at the

same in stant that the black is reached, which may seem strange, which may seem strange. wait, wait, wait,

wait (wait)

more or less long, light and heat come back, forcefully

forcefully

forcefully

forcefully
all grows white and hot to geth,
ground, wall, vault, bodies, say twen ty se conds, all the greys,

Vln2

Vln1

Vla

VC

Vln2

Vln1

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vla

VC

160

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

164

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

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Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

156

Vln2

Vln1

Vla

VC

164
for there may in ter ve, ex pe ri ence shows, be-tween end of fall and and

excitedly, anxiously

be gin ning of rise, pau ses of va ry ing length, pau ses of pau ses of va ry ing length,

from the fraction of a se cond to what would have seemed.

excitedly, anxiously

excitedly, anxiously

excitedly, anxiously

excitedly, anxiously
Score

177

in other times, as other times other places, an eternity.

180

Same remark for other pause, same remark for other pause, between end of rise and beginning of fall.

183

The ex-
tremes, as long as they last, are perfectly stable. are perfectly stable which in the case of the

which in the case of the temperature may seem strange, may seem strange, in the beginning. (in the beginning) It is

pos-sible too, experience shows, for rise and fall to stop short at a-ny point at a-ny point and mark a pause.

\( \text{Score} \)

\( \text{Voices} \)

\( \text{Vln1} \)

\( \text{Vln2} \)

\( \text{Vla} \)

\( \text{VC} \)

\( \text{IDN-18} \)

\( 12/5/13 \)
mark a pause

more or less long, more or less long, before resuming, or reversing, the rise now

fall, the rise now fall

the rise now fall the fall the fall rise, these in their turn to be com-ple-ted,

these in their turn to be com-ple-ted, or to stop short and mark a pause, and mark a pause more or less long, more or less long.
less long, before resuming, or again or again reversing, and so on, and so on till finally.

(as before)

one or the other extreme is finally reached.

Such variations of rise and fall, combining in countless rhythms,
commonly attend the passage from white and heat to

black and cold, and vice versa. Vice versa. And vice versa. The extremes alone are stable

The extremes alone are stable as is stressed by the vibrations to be ob-
served when a pause occurs at some intermediate stage, no matter what its level and duration.

Then all vibrates, then all vibrates, ground, wall, vault.

bodies, ashen or leaden or between the two, as may be. But on the whole, but on the whole...
Voices

ex per i ence shows, shows such un cer tain en - cer - tain pas sage is not com mon.__ And

most of - ten and most of - ten when the light be gins to fail, and a long with it the heat, the

move ment con tin ues un bro ken til, in the space of some some twen ty se conds, pitch black is reached

And
and at the same instance say free zing point. Same remark for the re verse

move-ment, towards heat and white ness. Next most fre-quent is the fall or excitedly, rhythmically, as before pizz.

rise with paus-es of paus-es of va-ry-ing length in these these fe-ve-ri sh greys, arco
feverish greys, without at any moment reversal of the movement.

But but what- ever its uncertain ties uncertainties the return sooner or later to a temporary calm.
calm to a temporary calm calmly-smoothly calm seems seems assured for the moment, in the black
calmly-smoothly tr tr tr
calmly-smoothly
calmly-smoothly

dark or the great white-ness, with attention temp-er-ature, world still proof against enduring

 anxiously pont
 anxiously pont
 anxiously pont
 anxiously pont


 exp mp
 exp
 mp
 exp
 exp mp
all is before

and the sighting

of a little

fabric

quite as much

of chance,

its whiteness

merging in the surrounding whiteness.
But go in now. brie-fer lulls brie-fer lulls and never twice the same storm.

Light and heat remain linked as though supplied.
by the same source of which still no trace.

Sweetly-still rhythmically

Sweetly-esp

Still on the ground, bent in three,
head against the wall at B, the feet against the wall between C and A, that is to say, to say inscribed in the semi-circle A C B, merging in the white ground.
were it not for the long hair of strangely imperfect white ness,}

per-fect white ness, the white body of a wo-man a wo-man fi-nal-ly. fi-nal-ly. the white

body of a wo-man fi-nal-ly fi-nal-ly a wo-man
Voices: Si-mi-lar-ly inscribed in the other semi-circle against the wall his head at A, his arse at B, his knees between A and D, his feet between D and B, D and B, the par-t ner.

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Score

IDI-33
12/5/13
Hold a mirror to their lips,
Hold a mirror to their lips,
Hold a mirror to their lips,
Hold a mirror to their lips,
Hold a mirror to their lips,
Hold a mirror to their lips,
Hold a mirror to their lips,
Hold a mirror to their lips,
left hands they hold their left legs a little below the knee with their
right hands with their right hands their left arms a little above the elbow.
this a-gi-ta-ted light, a-gi-ta-ted light its great white calm now so rare and brief,
in-spec-tion is not easy.

Sweat and mir-ror & never & never

not-with-standing

not-with-standing

they might well pass for in-a-ni-mate

in-a-ni-mate but for the left eyes but for the left eyes
Voices

open wide and gaze in un-blin-king ex-po-sure long be-yond what is hu-man-ly

Voices

is hu-man-ly pos-si-ble Pier-cing pale blue the ef-fect is stri-king in the be-gin-ning.

Voices

in the be-gin-ning. Ne-ver the two ga zes to-ge-ther ex-cept once, ex-cept

Voices
Except once when the beginning of one overlapped the end of the other,

For about ten seconds

excitedly, rhythmically,
as before

Neither fat nor thin,
big nor small, the bo-dies seem whole and in fairly good condi-tion,
fa·ces too, as·sum·ing the two sides of a piece, piece piece,

seem to want no-thing seem to want no-thing es-
to·tal. Be·tween their ab·so·lute still·ness and the con·vul·si·ve light the con·trast is stri·king,
in the beginning, for one who still remembers having been struck having been

struck by the contrary, It is clear however, from a thousand little signs a thousand

little signs From a thousand little signs too long to imagine, that they are not that they are not that they are not
that they are not

sleeping. That they they are not sleeping.
sleeping.

On - ly mur-mur on - ly mur-mur mur-mur
Voices

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

Wednesday, no more, ah, in this silence, in this silence, ah, on-ly mur-mur

pizz.

arco
in-stan-ta-ne-ous-ly

leave them there,

sweating and i-cy.
(as before)

there is better elsewhere.

pizz.

there is better elsewhere.
There is better elsewhere.

There is better else where.

Else where.

Else where.

Else where.

Else where.
No, anxiously, energetically cut off as you feel

No, anxiously, energetically cut off as you feel

No, anxiously, energetically cut off as you feel

No, and no, and no,
there is nothing else where.

No nothing No else where,

No nothing and No,

and No, question now of ever finding No,
No. still lie No, still lie still No in the

storm.

of that storm, that storm No of that storm, that

pizz.

or of a worse storm,
Voices

No, a worse storm, worse storm, No, No,

or in the black dark for good, No the black dark or in the

black dark for good, or in the
Voices

No not No what they are doing what they are doing?

Voices

what they are doing
Voices

No they are doing No they are doing No they are doing

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

No what No what No what

Voices

what they are doing

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

what they are doing

Voices

what they are doing
have stopped the voices
Voices

Vln1

Vln2

Vla

VC

notice the voices have stopped

notice the voices have stopped

notice the voices have stopped

notice the voices have stopped

notice the voices have stopped

notice the voices have stopped

notice the voices have stopped
the click becomes more and more audible to the audience
all gradually ad lib - quieter, smoother, fading away one by one - as long as it takes -
as every one bit by bit disappears and stops playing

Hard Col Legno Hits - ad lib
(not unlike CPR - - )