

If, to quote Joan La Barbara, “voice is the original instrument,” then the relationship between words and music is as old as language itself. You could even argue that words gave rise to our Western European system of musical notation, recalling that the names of the famous six-note scale attributed to Guido of Arezzo (still used in solfège today) were derived from the Latin syllables of Paulus Diaconus’s *Hymn of St. John*. The rest, as they say, is history—setting texts, both sacred and secular, has been a cornerstone of Western music for eight centuries, from Pérotin to Pulp, motet to Motown, Monteverdi to Monte Cazazza. But what these diverse musical manifestations have in common is a concern for what words mean rather than for what they simply are as musical entities in and of themselves.

Yet it’s precisely that—what the work *is* as opposed to what it’s *about*—that has attracted so many musicians, composers and improvisers alike, to the theater, poetry, and prose of Samuel Beckett (1906–1989). One only has to read Beckett’s words aloud, or hear someone else reading them (ideally Jack MacGowran or Patrick Magee, both of whose cracked and distinctive voices Beckett admired enormously) to become aware of their intrinsic musicality. Beckett’s primary concern was for the words on the page, not for anything they might signify, and references to the comical absurdity of searching for deep hidden meaning where there may be none abound in his work. As he put it memorably in a 1957 letter to the theater director Alan Schneider: “My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them.”

When it comes to Beckett, then, claiming to know what it all means is a dangerous business, so many composers have instead sought to replicate either the predicament his characters find themselves in—the deteriorating coordination of Richard Barrett’s *Another heavenly day* (1990) mirrors Winnie’s inability to communicate, let alone move, in *Happy Days*—or the sense of claustrophobic terror that seems to inhabit much of his work: The distressing urgency of Michael Mantler’s *Communications* (JCOA, 1968) is accompanied in the liner notes by a particularly harrowing passage from Beckett’s *How It Is* which, to quote Mantler, “reflects these feelings better than my own words could.” Others, notably György Kurtág in *What Is the Word* (1991), have concentrated on the extreme condensation/distillation of Beckett’s later work, taking their cue perhaps from the music of one of the few composers the writer actually agreed to collaborate with during his life, Morton Feldman (on 1976’s *Neither* and 1987’s *Words and Music*).

But there’s nothing remotely Feldmanesque or angst-ridden about Scott Fields’s *Samuel*, the second album of compositions based on Beckett’s plays, following 2007’s highly acclaimed *Beckett* (Clean Feed). You could argue though that Fields’s compositions are in fact closer to the original texts than any of the works cited above, for the simple reason that the Chicago-born guitarist and composer actually derives his music directly from them, not only by assigning precise pitches, chords, time values, and rhythms to particular words and phrases in the text and transforming Beckett’s wordplay into clearly delineated melodic lines and harmonic fields, but also by associating his meticulous stage and lighting directions with particular sounds and gestures.

A risky business? Sure—but Scott Fields likes taking risks, and finds surprising connections between music and other art forms in the process. (Not only literary forms, either: One of his recent projects has been a collaboration with the German artist Thomas Hornung, whose drawings Fields transforms into graphic scores by laying them over a matrix of pitch rows and numbers representing playing techniques—check out *Drawings* (Creative Sources). “I like constraints,” he says. “Using images and words is a way to discover patterns that are different from those I might come up with spontaneously.”

Scott Fields's musical roots are, in his words, "haphazard," or to put it kindly, diverse. You'll usually find his albums in the jazz bin, but he says he has "no real jazz background. I started out as a self-taught rock guitarist, and when I was about 15 I discovered the AACM." It's hardly surprising he should be drawn to the groundbreaking work of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, since he grew up in their neck of the woods in Hyde Park, Chicago. The list of musicians he's performed and recorded with since 1991 is long and impressive (Elliott Sharp, Thomas Lehn, Guillermo Gregorio, Matt Turner, Myra Melford, Hamid Drake, Marilyn Crispell . . .), but a casual Google search still throws up AACM connections. True, he did play every week for a year with Roscoe Mitchell ("classical music only, no improvising, and never in public") when they both lived in Madison, Wisconsin, released two albums featuring Joseph Jarman (*48 Motives* [Cadence] and *96 Gestures* [CRI]), produced Jarman's *Connecting Spirits* (Music and Arts), and still enjoys a close working relationship with fellow guitarist Jeff Parker (*Song Songs Song*, Delmark), but his interests run further and wider than South Side Chicago.

In the mid 1990s, Fields the composer started "playing around with serialism," but was frustrated by much of what he heard, or rather *couldn't* hear: "With the advanced serial stuff, you can't really hear those arrays as they go by, and [Milton] Babbitt's idea of serializing rhythm and dynamics always seemed pretty hypothetical to me." But it was the work of one of Babbitt's students, Stephen Dembski, currently a professor of composition at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that Fields found particularly inspiring. Not surprisingly, perhaps, since Dembski has also improvised in a student group under the direction of Cecil Taylor (who I'd argue is the first musician to demonstrate that pitch-class precision and fiery passion can go hand in hand). For more details on Dembski's circle theory, readers are recommended to consult Scott Fields's own informative and highly entertaining article on the subject at <http://www.scottfields.com/dembski.html>.

The Beckett project follows on from 2001's *Mamet* (Delmark), Fields's trio outing with bassist Michael Formanek and percussionist Michael Zerang, which explored similar techniques of text-to-music transformation, taking as its starting point the work of the Chicago-born playwright David Mamet. But if the punch and strut of Mamet's writing seems particularly well-suited to jazz (if that's what Fields's music is—"tell me what jazz is and I'll tell you whether it's jazz or not," he says), what about the existential austerity of Beckett? In any case, Beckett's characters don't strut. They might pace back and forth across the stage (*Footfalls*) or shuffle round in a circle (*Quad*), but more often than not they hardly move at all, being either imprisoned in funeral urns (*Play*) or buried up to their necks (*Happy Days*). Of course, it's less a question of what the characters do than of what they say, and how they say it—and on the verbal level Mamet is closer to Beckett than you might think. And to Harold Pinter, who directed Mamet's *Oleanna* in London and also played The Director in Mamet's controversial short film of Beckett's *Catastrophe* (2000). For Scott Fields, Pinter was also a link: Seven years ago, prior to starting work on the Beckett texts, he was deeply impressed by productions of *The Room* and *Celebration* in London, directed once more by Pinter himself, and even began work on an adaptation of *The Room* before putting it aside in favor of Beckett.

Oddly enough, Fields has seen only one Beckett play performed live: *Krapp's Last Tape*, which he saw as a teenager in Chicago. Though it didn't exactly blow him away at the time ("I was at an age when I wasn't going to be blown away by anything"), it did stick in his mind, and it was the first Beckett text he set about transforming into music. The original idea was to use live sampling to represent the different periods of Krapp's earlier life, as heard in the voices on the tape recordings he listens to, but Fields admits the first draft of the piece ended up being "too complex and too long." Moreover, plans to work more on the project with Formanek and Zerang were shelved at the end of a brief tour, because Fields didn't feel he'd realized the compositions sufficiently to result in a good recording at the time.

When he returned to Beckett, it was with a different band in a different country. “Since I moved to Cologne in December 2003 I’ve been amazed by the musicians I’ve found here,” he says. “To be able to find 24 musicians for a project like *Ozzo* and *Moersbow* (my recent super quiet homage to Merzbow!) is great.” To join him on the Beckett project he recruited the tenor saxophonist Matthias Schubert, cellist Scott Roller—“with the guitar, three instruments with essentially the same pitch range, so they could be interchangeable”—and drummer John Hollenbeck.

Hollenbeck concentrates on unpitched percussion, and is therefore not required to negotiate the intricacy of Fields’s melodies, but his role is of critical importance, both as coordinator and colorist, painting the backdrop to Fields’s tableaux with an impressive palette of subtle timbres executed with discreet precision. Matthias Schubert has long been one of Germany’s most highly respected and sought-after tenor saxophonists. As a member of the Klaus Koenig Orchestra, he appeared on several fine outings on Enja in the early nineties, before forming his own quartet with the pianist Simon Nabatov, bassist Lindsey Horner, and drummer Tom Rainey, and is, to quote Fields, “a remarkable virtuoso with a great control over intonation—he was initially an oboe player. I can write things for Matthias, John, and Scott without having to worry about whether they’re playable or not.” The cellist Scott Roller, Texas-born but based in Germany since 1984, is the quartet’s unsung hero, providing the music’s essential harmonic foundation and charting a path through the composer’s pitch fields with consummate skill. And Fields himself, like Beckett, is the *éminence grise*, his limpid tone and keen ear for structure at both micro and macro level steering the music forward with masterly assurance.

It’s no coincidence that Scott Fields has so far chosen to work with Beckett’s plays, rather than his prose or poetry, since a sense of character and identity—or loss thereof—is as central to his music as it is to Beckett’s dramaturgy. Where possible, he assigns a character and a particular pitch field to each instrument, before embarking on a detailed analysis of the text, identifying recurring words and associating them with a pitch and time value, so that key phrases become key musical events. Beckett’s stage directions and camera movements are also incorporated into the structure: In *Eh Joe*, Joe’s stage business—getting up, walking to the window, looking out of it, opening and closing it, and drawing the curtain—are all represented audibly. But there’s no question of this music merely imitating the words and aping the actions: Fields follows Beckett’s text closely (and includes it in his scores as a guideline). The melodic and harmonic material has its own distinct identity and the compositional process, once set in motion, functions according to its own purely musical logic. The composer discusses the text in rehearsals with his musicians but doesn’t insist they read it for themselves. In short, you don’t have to be familiar with Samuel Beckett’s play to appreciate Scott Fields’s music—but a little background information won’t go amiss.

Not I, a twenty-minute monologue written in 1972, takes place in near total darkness, with the mouth of an actress “about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below” illuminated by a single spotlight, while a djellaba-clad hooded figure, the Auditor, stands listening diagonally across stage. Auditor never speaks, but four times during the play raises his/her arms and lets them fall back in “a gesture of helpless compassion.” Fields’s composition, like the play, concentrates on one lead voice—here Schubert’s tenor saxophone—and is, the composer admits, “a real test of endurance.” Like Beckett, Fields divides his work into four sections, with solo opportunities for each musician. In rehearsals for the New York premiere of *Not I*, Beckett indicated to the actress Jessica Tandy (Mouth) that he wanted it to “work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect,” and that’s is a pretty good description of Fields’s piece, too.

In *Ghost Trio*, a play conceived for television and first broadcast by the BBC in 1977, Beckett specified the use of seven passages from the Largo of Beethoven's *Piano Trio Op. 70, No. 1* (nicknamed "The Ghost" by Karl Czerny, hence the title). Fields was initially tempted to follow suit and use the Beethoven piece as raw material, but eventually thought better of the idea and "dumped it in favor of a jazz ballad." He did, of course, respect the tripartite structure of the play, and the music's AAB form is clearly discernible. So, thanks to the piece's slow heartbeat, is the composer's pitch procedure: There's a distinct sense of melodic and harmonic identity (tonality, for want of a better word, though that shouldn't imply that the music is in any key as such, in the traditional sense).

Beckett's first play for television, which he started work on on his 59th birthday in 1965, was *Eh Joe*, first broadcast in July 1966 on BBC2 with Jack MacGowran in the (non-speaking) title role and Siân Phillips as Voice ("the voices which he cannot kill," said Beckett). Fields sees the play as "moving from weak, incoherent to a more coherent sense of dread and guilt," and represents this musically by a gradual drift toward rhythmic regularity, a kind of torpid swing, and a corresponding clarification and illumination of the melody instruments' pitch material. As the piece progresses, the scales Fields specifies become more linear, using the same pitches at each octave transposition. It's clear throughout *Samuel* that Fields has proved that complex, even forbidding, set theory can, in the right hands, yield music whose theoretical coherence can be heard—and felt.

And *that*, ultimately, is what matters. Samuel Beckett's works, though crafted with extraordinary precision down to the tiniest punctuation mark ("will you make those three dots two dots?" he asked Billie Whitelaw in rehearsals once for *Happy Days*), is no mere exercise in sterile formalism. It plumbs the dark depths of the human condition, delighting and disturbing a little more each time you return to it. So does the music of Scott Fields.

—Dan Warburton

Paris-based composer/improviser/journalist Dan Warburton is Editor-in-Chief of Paris Transatlantic Magazine (www.paristransatlantic.com) and a regular contributor to The Wire.

As a teenager in Chicago **Scott Fields** played guitar, sang, and wrote songs for rock and blues bands. Early on, however, he became interested in New Music and avant-garde jazz, largely by exposure to musicians who were active in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music, which was centered in the South-Side neighborhood in which Fields was born and raised. At the age of 17 Fields formed the trio Life Rhythms, in which he played guitar, tenor and soprano saxophone, flute, clarinet, and sundry percussion. Two years later the group disbanded. For the next few years Fields freelanced but did not play in any fixed ensembles. In 1975 he stopped performing entirely and moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where he took classes in composition and music theory at the University of Wisconsin and studied classical guitar with George Lindquist and Javier Calderon and jazz guitar with Carl Michel and Roger Brotherhood.

In 1989 Fields resumed working as a musician. Since then, as leader of his own ensembles and as a sideman, Fields has toured throughout North America, Europe, and Asia. He has also released more than twenty CDs as a leader. In 2004 Fields relocated to Cologne, Germany. In the past sixteen years Fields has focused on two aspects of music composition and performance. One focus has been creating structures that blur the dichotomy between notated and improvised music. The other has been developing new total and rhythmic organizations for notated and improvised music.

John Hollenbeck builds on a wealth of experience in jazz and world styles as well as a deep interest in contemporary composition and spiritual practice to forge an accessible, expressive, advanced, and lyrical musical language. After receiving degrees in percussion (B.M.) and jazz composition (M.M.) from the Eastman School of Music, Hollenbeck moved to New York City in the early 1990s. Hollenbeck's Large Ensemble debut, *A Blessing* (Omnitone), was nominated in 2005 for a Grammy, and in 2007, Hollenbeck was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship. His ensemble The Claudia Quintet was named the Rising Star Jazz Group by DownBeat magazine's 2008 Critics Poll. His previous recording with Fields is *Beckett*.

Scott Roller was born in Amarillo, Texas, but has lived in Germany since 1984. He studied cello and composition at the University of Texas at Austin, L'École Normale de Musique in Paris, and North Texas State University. He has won grants from such organizations as the Texas Commission on the Arts, Chamber Music America, and the Atlantic-Richfield Foundation. Roller was a member of the Dortmund Philharmonic from 1987 to 1989 and since then has been active with such ensembles as Musikfabrik, NRW (Düsseldorf), and Ensemble 20/Der Gelbe Klang. He has performed at festivals of contemporary music in Germany, Holland, England, Italy, Finland, Portugal, Croatia, Mexico, and the USA. His previous recordings with Fields are *Beckett* and *Music for the radio program "This American Life."*

Matthias Schubert started his musical life as an oboist but switched to saxophone in his late teens. He studied at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hamburg. Schubert has been well-known in European jazz circles as a saxophone virtuoso since his early twenties, when he joined such ensembles as the Graham Collier Band, the Marty Cook Group, and the small groups of Albert Mangelsdorff and Manfred Bründl. His own ensembles have recorded for such labels as Enja, Enemy, Moers Music, and Red Toucan. Since 2001 he has taught at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hannover. His previous recordings with Fields are *Beckett* and *We Were The Phliks*.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

48 Motives. Cadence CJR 1064.

96 Gestures. New World/CRI NWCR 2001 [3CDs].

Beckett. Clean Feed CF 069.

Bitter Love Songs. Clean Feed CF 102.

Christangelfox. 482 Music 482-1029.

Dénouement. Clean Feed CF088.

Disaster at Sea. Music & Arts CD 961.

Drawings. Creative Sources CS 130.

Five Frozen Eggs. Music & Arts CD 987.

From the Diary of Dog Drexel. Rossbin RS008.

Mamet. Delmark DE 527.

Music for the radio program "This American Life." NEOS 40806.

We Were The Phliks. Rogue Art ROG 0007.

Producer: Scott Fields

Recorded and mixed by Reinhard Kobialka.

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions, Inc., NYC

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Scott Fields plays a custom CP Thornton Jazz Elite guitar.

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SCOTT FIELDS (b. 1955)

SAMUEL

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|----|-------------------|-------|
| 1. | <i>Not I</i> | 24:16 |
| 2. | <i>Ghost Trio</i> | 19:35 |
| 3. | <i>EhJoe</i> | 20:52 |

TT: 64:57

Scott Fields, electric guitar

John Hollenbeck, percussion

Scott Roller, cello

Matthias Schubert, tenor saxophone

All compositions by Scott Fields (GEMA).

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