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Beckett Across the Arts

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Krapp's Last Mixtape

For my final project, I wanted to take my favorite play that we read this semester and bring to it something of my own, which I decided would be music. The moment I saw the suggestion of adapting a Beckett piece to another form, the concept of a musical rendition of *Krapp's Last Tape* jumped into my mind. The most important part of the project, the recording of my performance, is shared on Google Drive, but in this report, I will explain my process regarding lyrics, music, and recording, my limitations, and why I chose to do this.

One of the first things I struggled with was deciding exactly what I was transposing into music and how. I knew tackling both present (69 year old) Krapp and recorded (39 year old) Krapp would be a challenge, especially if I wanted the music to have any sort of logical progression, so I decided to simply record music for Krapp's tape as a 39 year old and to break it up as if the songs were played all the way through for the original recording, rather than including the sudden stops in the composition of the music itself. In this way, 69 year old Krapp is still present in the recording, being the imaginary figure stopping and starting the recording (and at one point popping a cork), but he is otherwise silent unlike in the original play text. For the most part, I included all of his skips and rewinds and so on with one notable exception; I did not include his final pause of the section about his lost love and return to it at the end. Instead, I just let the "Farewell to Love" section run through smoothly after the first rewind for the sake of the listener who probably wouldn't want to hear the same slow section repeated twice in a row,

especially since I did not include the present-day Krapp monologue that would interrupt the repetition in the original text. However, even with cutting all of 69 year old Krapp's dialogue, there was still a great deal of content to sift through, so I decided to only touch on what I thought were Krapp's most important moments on the tape instead of trying to include each character and event.

Once I had decided what I was doing, I had to actually create the music for the project. For the most part, the lyrics and melody came first; I would look at the text and try to make up some tune for Beckett's original words, under which I would then add some chords. As one can see when looking at the lyrics,¹ I usually started out relatively faithful to Beckett's words but as the piece goes on, I had to sacrifice some of his words and add in my own for the sake of consistency in the tune I had created. Adjusting for rhyme and meter, I often shuffled the order of or entirely omitted his words and occasionally added my own. Admittedly, I changed the content of a few of his lines when I wrote in my own words, taking some liberties by missing his nuances and adding my own; for instance, though both his line "the earth might be uninhabited" and my "we might be the last two things alive" paint a rather bleak view of the planet, they have very different implications about the speaker's place in the situation (Beckett, 55). However, many of my changes were less impactful and simply for the sake of musical flow or repetition; I recalled "haven't seen a soul" from Part 1 when I sang "hardly saw a soul" in Part 2, instead of just saying "hardly a soul" as in the original text (53).

The music itself, on the other hand, changes the content of Krapp's tape quite a bit. Music is naturally quite emotive, unless wielded in a most particular and frankly unenjoyable

¹ The lyrics can be found on pg. 5 of this document.

way, so my performance might be more dramatic than Krapp's from the start. Nevertheless, the abrupt emotional changes that Krapp *does* demonstrate in the original text are something I struggled with expressing, even in such a naturally dramatic art form. My composition in Part II is most representative of my attempt at these sudden moments; I tried to align surprising phrases like "mother lay a-dying" with a (hopefully) unexpected B \flat chord and bring out a much more peppy tune in the chorus of that part when I sang about the young beauty and the white dog (53). Overall, I tried to make each part sound different from the next to represent the different stories he was recounting, with the exception of the final lines of Part IV containing the same chord progression as Part I for the sake of cyclicity. The reason I brought the end back to the beginning and ended the entire piece on the B7 chord that begs to be resolved is that I feel that Krapp's sentiment in those last few lines is never-ending and thus so is this song.

The recording process itself went much more quickly than I anticipated. I recorded the songs in full then cut and skipped ahead as 69 year old Krapp would have, adding a few sound effects where necessary. My addition of the cork popping near the beginning of the song is perhaps inconsistent with the rest of my piece, since I don't have any other sounds from Krapp himself and I don't even include all three cork pops that Beckett writes in, but I felt the silent gaps in the beginning should be broken up by something. The only technical aspect of the song I changed in the mix was to dull the lower frequencies in an attempt to get an old tape recorder sort of sound, rather than the clarity I would usually desire when recording music.

Unfortunately, I had many limitations in the creation of this project. Not only am I not a professional composer, piano player, or singer, but I am also a female, so right off the bat I have lost some of Krapp's character in my performance. I also did not have the time or resources to

compose music for the entirety of the text, which is an injustice to Beckett. Moreover, I do not have Beckett, famous for being quite particular, telling me exactly what he'd want, and I rather suspect he would not like my rendition at all.

Despite all these problems, however, creating this music was both enjoyable for and important to me. By placing myself in Krapp's shoes and actually recording my own voice saying a combination of Beckett's and my words, I developed a much deeper understanding and appreciation of the play as a whole. Furthermore, though I was studying and working with someone else's art, I was able to stretch my own creative boundaries in the process and think about my own artistry. Krapp's struggle in this tale is one many artists and thinkers go through: finding the balance between our art or epiphanies and the world that is occurring outside of them.

The following is a transcription of the lyrics to the pieces I sang in the recording. Lyrics that have not been directly taken from Beckett's words and are rather inventions or paraphrases of my own are in *italics*. Some lyrics were directly taken from Beckett's sentences with a few words omitted and the order of some lines was shuffled, which one can easily see in a text by text comparison but I did not emphasize here. I also did not include the breaks and various rewindings; this more resembles an incomplete transcript of the tape had it been played in full without interruption.

PART I: Opening

Thirty-nine today, sound as a bell
 Apart from my old weakness, and intellectually
I am probably the best I'll ever be

Came to the Winehouse, haven't seen a soul
 Sat before the fire and jotted down *some* notes
 On the back of an envelope

Have just eaten, I regret to say, three bananas
 Fatal things *for one with the condition to which I'm prone*
But the light over my table is a great improvement
 With all this darkness round me, I feel less alone

Been listening to *a tape*, ten or twelve years *old*
When I was with Bianca, *and I had so much hope*
 The aspirations! Resolutions! *So bold.*

Said I would drink less, *pursue* happiness
Finally achieve that unattainable laxation
Get some time to work on my opus... magnum

Get some time to work on my opus... magnum

PART II: The Black Ball

When I look back on the year that is gone
With what I hope is a glint of the old eye to come
There's the house on the canal where mother lay a-dying
In late autumn, after her long viduity

And the bench by the weir from where I can see her window
There I sat, in biting wind, wishing she *would just go*
Hardly *saw* a soul, just *some* regulars, *young and old*
I got to know, by appearance *only*

One dark, young beauty I *recall*, particularly
Whene'er I looked, she had her eyes on me
Yet when I was bold enough to speak *candidly*
She threatened to call *the damn police*

Ah, well

I was there when the blind went down
One of those roller affairs, *all* dirty *and* brown
I was throwing a *black* ball for a little white dog
When there it was, all over and done with

A small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball *in my hand*
I shall feel it *till* my dying day
Moments. Her moments. My moments. The dog's moments.
I might have kept *the ball*, *but I gave it away*

Ah, well

PART III: Memorable Equinox

Spiritually a year of profound gloom and indigence until that memorable night...

Suddenly, I saw the whole thing. The vision at last.

This is *why I am here* this evening. *The die has been cast.*

What I suddenly saw then was this; the belief that I had

Been going on all of my life, namely *tha--*

Great granite rocks the foam flying *upwards*

The wind gauge spinning like a propeller

I realized that my darkness inside

Is in reality my most--

... unshatterable association with my dissolution

Of storm and night with the light of understanding and the fire--

PART IV: Farewell to Love

... upper lake, with the punt, bathed off the bank

Then pushed out into the stream and drifted

She lay *there* with her eyes closed and her hands under her head

Sun blazing down, water nice and lively

There was a perfect level of breeze

I noticed a scratch on her thigh and asked her how *it came to be*

She said *she was* picking gooseberries

I said again I thought going on was hopeless
And she agreed without opening her eyes
I asked her to look at me and after a few moments...
After a few moments she did, but the glare *reduced them to slits*

I bent over her to get *her eyes* in shadow
And *eventually* they opened... let me in
We drifted *along until we stuck in* sighing *ferns*
I lay down with my face in her breasts and my hands on her

We lay there *still* but under us *everything* moved
And moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side
Past midnight, never knew such silence
We might be the last two things alive

Here I end this reel, box three, spool five
Perhaps my best years are gone
But I wouldn't want them back
Not with the fire in me now
No, I wouldn't want them back

Works Cited

Beckett, Samuel. "Krapp's Last Tape." *The Collected Shorter Plays*. United States of America: Grove Press, 1984.