

Benjamin Dwyer

Music Autopsies  
Essays and Interviews  
(1999–2022)

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# Contents

Introduction by Barra Ó Seaghdha . . . . . 9

## PART I: IRELAND AND BEYOND...

### *SacrumProfanum*

mapping cultural damage through music. . . . . 25

Second Glance at Ted Hughes's *Crow*—Transcendence Interrupted . . . . . 55

### Joycean Aesthetics and Mythic Imagination

in the Music of Frank Corcoran . . . . . 75

### 'in exile anyway'

Jonathan Creasy Interviews Benjamin Dwyer . . . . . 89

...eleven reflections on Beckett, music and silence... . . . . . 101

### 'insight—deeper'

Benjamin Dwyer Interviews Kevin Volans . . . . . 109

### *Umbilical*

The Story of Oedipus, the Story of Jocasta . . . . . 127

PART II: BEYOND IRELAND...

‘O master of secret configurations’ Reflections on the Adorno-Berg Correspondence... ..	147
Laughing at the Chaos György Ligeti (1923–2006) .....	163
Teleology or Transcendence? Perspectives on Ligeti’s Collusion with Automatism. ....	167
‘... a gentle kind of political...’ Benjamin Dwyer Interviews George Crumb and David Starobin .....	181
Leonard Bernstein Reflections on a Centenary .....	189
‘Dios los cría’ Barry Guy and Maya Homburger. ....	195
Barry Guy’s <i>Time Passing</i> ... ..	201
‘we are using who we <i>are</i> ’ Benjamin Dwyer Interviews Mats Gustafsson .....	207
Toward a Transcendental Philosophy of Improvisation .....	213
Acknowledgements .....	229
Index of Names .....	233

*Dedicated to Jonathan Creasy,  
Barra Ó Seaghdha and  
Nick Roth.*

## Introduction by Barra Ó Seaghdha

The opening paragraph of composer Benjamin Dwyer's programme notes for the first public performance in 2009 of his *Scenes from Crow* reads as follows:

The music in *Scenes from Crow* is inextricably linked to the 1970 edition of *Crow—from the Life and Songs of Crow* by Ted Hughes. However, the influences on the music run beyond the Crow sequence to the broader issues which have dominated Hughes's poetry since his first collection—*The Hawk in the Rain*. These include his interest in the big primitive themes—nature, war, sex and death, and the contexts and methods through which he works them.

Though Benjamin Dwyer's music and thinking have evolved and diversified since then (as this collection of essays and interviews demonstrates), the outline of his creative world is already discernible: the almost operatic embrace of the big primitive themes; the intense engagement with another artist or thinker as central to the creative process; the disregard for the rises and falls of intellectual or literary fashion; and the conviction that art is not a set of games played within a purely formal domain but that it is an essential part of exploring, discovering, and contributing to the world.

We shall of course return to these themes and trace their subsequent evolution, but a few points must first be made. Mention of *Crow* and Ted Hughes at this point is a useful indication to readers, as they hover at the threshold of *Music Autopsies*, that the division of the book into two parts, 'Ireland and beyond...' and 'Beyond Ireland...', clearly signals the absence of a hard border. It simply provides a convenient route into the diversity of material that Dwyer has gathered here. Briefly sketched, the book collects over 20 years' work: essays on Ireland, myth and colonialism; explorations of music and language (Hughes, Joyce, Beckett, Greek tragedy); contributions to broader European and American musicology; and finally steps towards the embrace of free improvisation, and an exploration of music and human consciousness. This material is interspersed with examples of Dwyer interviewing and interviewed. If the appearance of 'Second Glance at Ted Hughes's *Crow*—Transcendence Interrupted' (an essay in which music is not even mentioned) in so prominent a position in the first section occasions surprise, the explanation is simple: it occupies this position because Dwyer's whole trajectory cannot be grasped without an awareness of his evolving engagement with Hughes's work.

Dwyer is passionate about certain issues relating to Ireland, but he does not think one way about music in Ireland, or about matters Irish generally, and another way about music or the wider world. Ireland is his home ground. It is the country

that has shaped him, for better or worse; that draws and exasperates him; with whose history and present-day realities he wrestles; and the gaps in whose music culture he sets out to fill.

This introduction is not biographical in approach. It is primarily concerned with the dynamic qualities underlying Dwyer's approach to music and the music world over two decades or so. But readers unfamiliar with him will rightly expect a brief sketch of his career. (Additional detail and a sense of his personality will emerge in the interviews scattered through the volume.)

Once upon a time (yes, this is a somewhat simplified story), a Hendrix-loving Dublin teenager—from what might be called an entrepreneurial artisan family, rooted in Dublin's popular operatic traditions and connected with artistic Bohemia (itself an unofficial educational world)—ended up, after a distinctly non-musical secondary-school education, choosing to study classical guitar. As it happened, he proved to be quite handy at it. Soon enough, with a Master's Degree in Performance from the Royal Academy of Music London in his pocket, he was launched on a successful career as a recitalist—appearing with the leading Irish orchestras as well as others further afield (from Neubrandenburg to Santos in Brazil), touring Ireland regularly, and working with distinguished figures such as saxophonist Kenneth Edge and tenor John Elwes (notably performing Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin*). Within the existing Irish infrastructure, he made a living—which involved, of course, quite a lot of teaching, principally at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. This was fine for a time but began to feel cramping. Was he to spend his life playing music from the sometimes charming but nonetheless limited repertoire of the guitar, as even the wonderful Julian Bream had done? Such thoughts began to occur to our recitalist. However enjoyable individual performances and Music Network tours of Ireland might be, there was a certain lack of stimulation in producing yet another exquisite performance of Boccherini or Sor or Villa-Lobos. Yes, some relatively challenging or stimulating twentieth-century pieces had been written, but Britten's *Nocturnal, after John Dowland* was one of only a small number of widely acknowledged contemporary classics. Our recitalist began to wonder: could he himself add something distinctive that was not imaginatively constrained like so much of the standard repertoire and the attempts to add to it? Little ideas and ambitions lead to larger and larger ones—and even to radical shifts in self-definition. Dwyer gained a PhD in composition from Queens University Belfast and began to compose across the full range of his interests.

Benjamin Dwyer's real artistic and intellectual education had been triggered by the shock of his first encounter with Ted Hughes's *Crow*. It is not surprising, then, that a work titled *Scenes from Crow* soon emerged. Another pattern reveals itself in the challenges he quickly set himself: building on Villa-Lobos's *Douze Études*, a cornerstone of the guitar repertoire, and animated by György Ligeti's re-imagining of the piano étude, as inherited from Chopin and Debussy, why couldn't

Dwyer tackle an equally innovative project? Thus, a set of twelve études for guitar began to accumulate—conceived, as Debussy’s, Villa-Lobos’s and Ligeti’s were, as formally adventurous concert études. Each one might make a particular demand on the player’s technique, but these were not pedagogical exercises. (Dwyer did produce a full set of such graded pedagogical ‘studies’, of which he plays a set of twelve on the *Irish Guitar Works* CD.)<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin Dwyer doesn’t do things by half. To the two forms of composition highlighted above (the *Crow* project and the *Twelve Études* for guitar) must be added a vein of abstract composition (as in the non-literary part of *In the Ranelagh Gardens*, a joint CD with the poet Macdara Woods,<sup>2</sup> and other works): *Parallaxis* (for two saxophones); *Movimientos I–IV* (for violin and piano); the two piano trios... Beyond composition itself, Dwyer was committed to contributing to the musical life of the world in which he operated. Though this would diversify as to place and activity, with Brian Farrell, he threw himself into organising concerts, events and international exchanges. Originally called Mostly Modern, the series was inaugurated in 1991; it later became MUSIC21, while Dwyer formed VOX21 as ensemble-in-residence. The series ran until 2010. These concerts focused as much on international as on Irish composers: Berio, Scelsi, Boulez, Hallgrímsson, Pärt, Crumb, Piazzolla, Takemitsu, Denisov and Henze were among those featured—a broad mix, not based on adherence to a particular school or tendency. Typically, at a time when his own engagement with jazz of any kind was only peripheral, Dwyer’s enthusiastic response to hearing the Irish-based free improviser, ensemble leader and composer Barry Guy in performance was to throw open the annual festival in 2000 to Guy and his then ensemble, the Barry Guy New Orchestra, for an unprecedented week of small-group events leading to the world premiere of *Inscape – Tableaux*. This was a revelatory experience for some of the young composers and musicians who attended in increasing numbers as the week went on. (Sadly, many would divert into the path of American minimalism in subsequent years or drift into vague poeticism.) Dwyer also curated the *Remembering Ligeti* festival at Liberty Hall, Dublin, in 2007—the first international retrospective of the composer’s work following his death. The musicological conference that was part of the festival led to the publication of the impressively wide-ranging book *György Ligeti: Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds*.<sup>3</sup> Richard Steinitz and Paul Griffiths were among the contributors.

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1 *Benjamin Dwyer & the Callino Quartet: Irish Guitar Works* (Cortijo Records, 2012). The Studies were commissioned by the Royal Irish Academy of Music with assistance from the Arts Council of Ireland (An Chomhairle Ealaíon), and subsequently became a cornerstone of the classical guitar performance curriculum at the Academy.

2 *In the Ranelagh Gardens: Macdara Woods and Benjamin Dwyer* (Gamelan Records, 2006).

3 Louise Duchesneau and Wolfgang Marx, eds., *György Ligeti: Of Foreign Lands and Strange Sounds*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2011.



Dwyer went from writing articles (on music culture and history in Ireland—initially, as seen from distant Málaga—for the *Journal of Music in Ireland*; later, on other topics, for such outlets as *The Musical Times*) to making an impressive contribution to Irish musicology through his book projects. *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland*, the first of his books for Wolke Verlag, is a collection of interviews with twelve contemporary Irish or Irish-based composers, introduced by a substantial and innovative 60-page historical essay.<sup>4</sup> In this, Dwyer sets himself against recent Irish historical musicology, which has tended to consider the task of thinking accomplished for a generation by Professor Harry White's *The Keeper's Recital*.<sup>5</sup> Dwyer was not going to be satisfied with the reiteration of a limited and schematic set of ideas on the history of classical music in Ireland.

Unlike many of his academic contemporaries, Dwyer has not staked a claim on a particular piece of territory and then subjected it to intensive monocultural farming. Instead, as with his composing, each work is a separate project, with its own language and structure. Thus, *Britten and the Guitar: Critical Perspectives for Performers* is addressed to a very different audience from his *Different Voices*.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, one contribution to *The Musical Times* ('Joycean Aesthetics and Mythic Imagination in the Music of Frank Corcoran') sets out how James Joyce's work and example constitute a creative force, and not simply the glib invocation of a prestigious name, in the work of the composer Frank Corcoran; another, a review of the Berg-Adorno correspondence ('O master of secret configurations'), lays out sympathetically the effect of the slowly mounting of pressure on Jews in Germany in the 1930s and observes the danger for creative music in the confinement imposed on it by a form of critical absolutism whose most prestigious proponent would eventually and secretly begin to doubt. Dwyer writes when he has something to say, not out of habit or as a routine career-enhancing activity. When he writes about his own music, he avoids indulgent self-obsession but rather points outwards towards the themes, ideas and influences that inspired it.

It is no surprise, then, that Dwyer curated many debates as part of MUSIC21 events. As such activity accumulated and expanded alongside his musicological publications, it is probably true to say that the Irish music world and Irish educational establishments were slow to recognize how he had grown and to offer him an environment in which his talents and interests might flourish. (He had by now been made an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music (ARAM) and elected a member of Aosdána, the affiliation of creative artists in Ireland.)<sup>7</sup> It took an outside

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4 Benjamin Dwyer, *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2014).

5 Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland 1770–1970* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998).

6 Benjamin Dwyer, *Britten and the Guitar: Critical Perspectives for Performers* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2017).

7 <http://aosdana.artscouncil.ie>

institution (Middlesex University, London) to recognize his full range and potential: suddenly, and to the surprise of many who thought they knew him, Dwyer took up the full professorship that was offered him. Instead of settling comfortably into his new position, he has continued to teach, to work on his composing and recording projects, to write, to perform and to organise contexts in which creative and intellectual activity by others can flourish.

Rather than list these activities, we shall let them emerge from motifs studied through the writings and interviews gathered here. Let us then start on our journey through *Music Autopsies* with the first essay, 'SacrumProfanum—mapping cultural damage through music', where Dwyer lays out his creative process in this one (but representative) case. He also engages with Irish material, making it immediately obvious what a distance there is between his intellectual-historical-musical approach, centred on an 'aesthetics of damage', on the one hand, and, on the other, the image of Ireland as retailed in commercially successful groups or in Trad-inflected orchestral music—whether programmatically exultant, unchallenging or melancholically pseudo-Celtic; untroubled, in any case, in their assumed connection or continuity with an ancient past. At bottom, what astounds Dwyer is that a whole sector of the music world can invoke a centuries-long tradition while the body of the music glides over the historical context of colonialism, violence, dispossession and trauma.

Let us outline the process laid out in the essay. (a) Dwyer dives in with an angry outburst against a casual example of complacent, colonialist thinking. (b) He recounts his own first encounter with, and inklings of, the territory he goes on to explore through the grotesque medieval, female Sheela-na-gig stone carvings. (c) Next comes the 'literature review', as it were, in which he offers a full and forthright (sometimes quite unacademically phrased) but scrupulously fair assessment of the claims and theories of the authorities in the field. (d) He then opens up richer perspectives through Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, with its re-interpretation of the role of popular culture, carnival and the grotesque in the medieval world.<sup>8</sup> Dwyer highlights the mutual relation between the serious, bureaucratic body politic and comic, carnivalesque ritual. (e) Dwyer uses Bakhtin's concept of the 'biocosmic icon' as a way of setting the Sheela-na-gig in both an Irish and a trans-European framework. (f) He makes creative use of the Sheela (in all its ambiguity and grotesquerie) as a focus for his own confrontation with 'Ireland's colonial history, its oppressive institutions (both ecclesiastical and state), and its more recent attempts to present itself culturally to a global audience.' (g) Among other fascinating points, Dwyer lays out why he rejects the vision of art as contributing to an autonomous, transcendent, aesthetic domain.

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8 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009).

As the attempt to summarise the concluding pages of ‘*SacrumProfanum*—mapping cultural damage through music’ would end up as mere repetition of material that readers have close to hand, I pick out some formulations that have a resonance beyond this one, specific project.

First:

I wanted *SacrumProfanum* to be grounded in the material conditions of the sufferer and the subaltern. As such, it doesn’t transcend, as aesthetic art forms often do, such unpalatable elements as politics, culture and power relations. In this I follow Adrienne Rich’s formulation in believing that, like language, music needs to ‘account for itself politically, consciously situate itself amid political conditions, without sacrificing intensity of language.’ In this regard, *SacrumProfanum* endeavours to respond to such political conditions, where response also assumes responsibility. My engagement with the Sheela-na-gig has reinforced a conviction that music can conduct autopsies on received historical narratives and current ideologies of power and exploitation; it can tell things as they were, as they are, and perhaps, as they could be.

The whole journey towards the creation of *SacrumProfanum* should be fascinating—and not only for those with an already established interest in contemporary (Irish and other) music. It provides challengingly new perspectives grounded in history, in the visual arts, in feminism, in literary theory and in literary history. But Dwyer’s writing also brings us to what an essay can invoke but not replace, the experience of listening to a work, in this case one that embodies Dwyer’s ‘aesthetics of damage’.

Second:

In this sense, *SacrumProfanum* attempts to capture sonically Bakhtin’s ‘first aspect of the material body’ in music that manifests the abject, the fractured and the degraded, as opposed (and in opposition) to music that embodies [Walter] Benjamin’s ‘aura’, music that emerges out of a creativity self-conscious and desirous of heightened aesthetic essences, which has been Western civilization’s cult of beauty. By composing music avidly attentive to Bakhtin’s formulations, by subjecting it to processes of decay and degradation, I tried to echo sonically the cultural loss the Sheela has both endured and witnessed; to reflect in music and text her abject-based rejection of colonial pillage, patriarchal hegemony, and a re-packaging of Irish culture as an entrepreneurial function of liberalism.

It should be noted that Dwyer is rejecting a particular idea of the transcendent, and not at all the transcendental as such. He is also engaging with the female—concretely, through the Sheela in historical context, but also metaphorically (‘the Sheela as activist’). We might say that Dwyer’s goal is to work what are too easily seen as separate dimensions of experience into a unity.

In what follows, I would like to negotiate between some commentary of my own, the broad range of Dwyer’s writing as mentioned, and this search for unity. One of the surprises in this book may be the article on Leonard Bernstein, the famed and controversial American conductor, composer, broadcaster, activist and socialite.

Here Dwyer, while facing up to the elements in Bernstein's thinking and activity that he deplors, is loyal to the Bernstein who, for his young self, threw open the doors of musical perception. Watching Bernstein's *The Unanswered Question*, the 1973 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard (on this occasion filmed), especially, had a galvanizing effect. Beyond that, however, is the crucial point: Bernstein can be seen as an inheritor and re-newer for his time of the performer-composer-teacher nexus exemplified for their times by Bach, Liszt and Mahler. This can be set against the trend towards an increasingly specialized and modularized academia in the second half of the twentieth century.

Dwyer's (critical) loyalty to early influences and enthusiasms can also be seen in his appreciation of George Steiner, who remains active as an influence through his writing on tragedy and his elevated view of art. It is no surprise either—though Steiner might have raised an eyebrow at finding himself in such company—that Hendrix makes an appearance in the interview with Mats Gustafsson. (In fact, in this meeting of minds, the guitarist draws the saxophonist far beyond the maintaining of a certain 'cool' image into which his interviews, unlike his powerful playing, can sometimes slip.) As mentioned earlier, Dwyer has remained unswervingly loyal, too, to Hughes as an artistic exemplar. This raises an interesting point. It strikes me that he is remarkably free of the anxiety of influence. His early ventures into composition do not come across as weak imitation of or homage to his primary influences. We shall have reason to mention Ligeti again but, in this regard, his importance is not all confined to his *étude*-writing.

Dwyer's curiosity and respect is not at all confined to those who think like him. Thus, as John Buckley's meticulously detailed mini-essay in the sleeve notes to the *Irish Guitar Works* CD attests, the long friendship and mutual appreciation between the two composers go back to Dwyer's years as a recitalist and on to the fine recording of Guitar Sonata No 1, a work that Buckley wrote for him. Their friendship has survived both Dwyer's writing a book about Buckley (*Constellations—The Life and Music of John Buckley*)<sup>9</sup> and Dwyer's emphatic divergence from Buckley's artistic vision of the artwork as aspiring to formal perfection within an autonomous aesthetic realm. The composers interviewed in *Different Voices* are not members of a particular tendency or school. Dwyer shows attentive and informed respect for such diverse composers as Jane O' Leary and Nick Roth. The interview with the latter is particularly lively. In part, this is a matter of Roth's own intellectual and creative energy and sheer articulacy, but it is also, despite the numerous differences between them as creative personalities, a matter of affinity: here is a contemporary whose music-making is inseparable from a charged engagement with, or immersion in, some aspect of the world (be it rare orchids, trees, currency fluctuations, the migration patterns of birds, or ritual) and so reaches out to the world as a

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9 Benjamin Dwyer, *Constellations: The Life and Music of John Buckley* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011).

whole. Roth also performs, teaches and lectures, and serves the wider music community through the range of music he releases on his Diatribe label.<sup>10</sup>

In this regard too, for readers aware of the Irish music world, one of the surprises in *Music Autopsies* may be the interview with Kevin Volans—a composer whose aesthetic contrasts sharply with Dwyer's. In his early decades as a composer, Volans, who spent years in Cologne and Darmstadt, moved among, and sometimes away from, figures such as Stockhausen and Kagel, and was part of the rejection of the dogmatism and willed complexity of the German inheritors and developers of serialism. Volans's interest in painting, as he says, goes back to his own practice of painting in youth, but his affinity with Morton Feldman lies, beyond personal acquaintance, in the way reflection on painting enriches his testing of the fundamentals of music. Volans has been listened to, and labelled, in certain phases of his career, as an exponent of Minimalism or as a contributor to so-called World Music—to an extent that he would find exasperating. In the interview presented in this volume, he emerges as a fastidious proponent of abstract music. Volans moved to Ireland decades ago and, before long, became an Irish citizen. He is not alone among senior Irish or Irish-based composers in lamenting the restricted space available for their music and thinking in the Irish cultural sphere.

The thought occurs: though the point is irrelevant to the composing process of each, is it not possible for us listeners to feel a non-genetic kinship between the driving rhythmic logic of sections of the original version of Volans's *White Man Sleeps* and, for example, the 'Exorkismos' movement of Dwyer's *Umbilical*? Is there not a hint of this in the quotation from Volan's friend Bruce Chatwin that features on the homepage of the composer's website: 'I believe this to be devotional music of the highest order'? The fact is that, though composers may create, or work to create, the interpretative framework by which they are to be understood (and may even wish to police it), the world ultimately goes its own way and may initiate small revolts or even largescale revolution against composers' intentions.

Let us proceed then with our mapping. I have mentioned *Umbilical* and tragedy. This piece is bound up with an intense investigation of the Oedipus tragedy from the point of view of Jocasta—symbolically giving a central role in the music to the usually silent, silenced or peripheral female character, whether we are talking about Greek tragedy or about Western cultural history through the centuries. The complete analysis of and challenge to this tradition is laid out in gripping detail in Dwyer's essay '*Umbilical*—The Story of Oedipus, the Story of Jocasta'. *Umbilical* may be more fully successful—Racinian, even—in imposing itself from beginning to end as a coherent work of art and as a form of ritual process, than the earlier works whose shaping we have followed. Certainly, Dwyer was fortunate that the

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10 It is worth mentioning at this stage that both Diatribe Records and Farpoint Recordings have lavished special care on the visual and written material that accompanies their recordings of Dwyer's music. See [www.diatribe.ie](http://www.diatribe.ie) and [www.farpointrecordings.com](http://www.farpointrecordings.com)

musicians involved in the recording—Maya Homburger, Barry Guy and David Adams—fully entered into the music as both psychic drama and as challenging technical task. Hughes’s *Crow*, and Dwyer’s *SacrumProfanum* and *Umbilical*—all seem to share something of the spirit of Michel Leiris’s ‘La littérature considéré comme une tauromachie’/‘On Literature Considered as a Bullfight’, the prefatory essay to his *L’âge d’homme*. There the writer stated that, in coolly revealing his personal obsessions, he sought to ‘introduce into a work of literature at least the shadow of a bull’s horn’ (‘introduire ne fût-ce que l’ombre d’une corne de taureau dans une oeuvre littéraire’).

Barry Guy and Maya Homburger were again among the artists who committed their talents to the realization of two of the three works that constitute the recording *what is the word*.<sup>11</sup> The central work of that name, based on Beckett’s last text, requires close, and indeed, musical collaboration between the reciting actor and the trio of Guy, Homburger and Dwyer. (Conor Lovett performs—brilliantly—on the recording, but leading Irish actors Barry McGovern, Owen Roe and Mark D’Aughton have performed the role with great distinction in concert.) Insofar as mention of Beckett (as of Joyce) can be a matter of routine genuflection for Irish writers—and pub decorators—and insofar as Dwyer’s whole trajectory thus far has been marked by intense, almost operatic, engagements with various artists and territories, his remaking of himself in the light of Beckett was a courageous move. It was as if he needed to subject his artistic process to radical scrutiny, to test the fundamentals of his expressive resources and possibilities, in the crucible of Beckett’s art and implicit vision. So it was that Dwyer emerged with the splintered, compacted and intense drama of *six residua (after Beckett)* for violin, with *what is the word (triptych with interludes)* for violin, guitar, double bass and narrator, and with *five disjecta (after Beckett)* for guitar. As the ‘...eleven reflections on Beckett, music and silence...’ attest, Dwyer’s own habitual style of writing was (temporarily at least) splintered and haunted by the stuttering language of Beckett’s searchings.

A few other comments on *what is the word*:

First, Dwyer’s avoidance throughout his career of anything approaching conventional opera is intriguing—as if it were only with his attention so fully on Beckett’s endgames that, almost outwitting himself, he could in some fashion give voice to the impulse. As some of the material in the finished *Music Autopsies* did not surface immediately, I found that my own tentative wonderings about this issue were echoed and reinforced by conductor David Brophy’s exclamation—‘this is an opera!’—as quoted by Dwyer in his lively interview with Jonathan Creasy. Second, we can again register the absence of the anxiety of influence in Dwyer’s artistic relationship with Barry Guy. Thus, in addition to committing themselves fully to realizing each other’s projects, both are untroubled by the fact that they share an obsession with Beckett, that Beckett is an inspiration (is that the word?) underlying

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11 <https://diatribe.ie/product/what-is-the-word>

more than one work, and that each pursued a project based on *What is the word*. Both also tend to work through a suite of takes on a subject, with its own internal logic, rather than through a given form like the sonata or symphony. (Another link between the two composers is that Jonathan Creasy, who directed a long documentary film on Guy's *The Blue Shroud*, has, since they first met, also been a committed supporter and friend of Dwyer's.)<sup>12</sup>

Let us take a few further steps before offering a synthesizing overview of the diverse territories in which Dwyer operates. Our route will first pass through Spain—obviously, a country closely associated with the guitar and its repertoire (Dwyer had the guitars used in all his recordings made by the great Joaquín García),<sup>13</sup> but also a country where he spent several years, a country whose impress both he and George Crumb have felt (see the interview with Crumb and guitarist David Starobin in this volume), and where another of his transformative encounters, this time with the life and work of Lorca, took place.

In the essay, an affectionate homage, that he contributed to the special feature on Barry Guy and Maya Homburger in the journal *M & L (Music & Literature No 5)*—the piece on *Time Passing...* provides a stricter analysis of Guy's creative methodology—Dwyer approached the impact on him of their creative presences and of their music-making through reference to, and in terms associated with, flamenco; in particular, he evoked the notion of the *duende*, as most famously and dramatically defined, or perhaps formulated, in Lorca's stunning essay 'Juego y teoría del duende'.<sup>14</sup> The *duende* is not something that musicians pack carefully in their luggage before heading off on the train to Madrid or Málaga for the Spanish equivalent of such celebrations of national culture as the Welsh Eisteddfod or the Irish Feis; it is not something that can be switched on or off, or found when and where one wants it. Rather, it is a rare, privileged moment or state attained when singers lose themselves, transcend the limitations and ordinary conditions of flamenco, and become channels of a tragic and ecstatic force in a fusion of song, audience and singer. Lorca describes the scene as the great singer Pastora Pavón, la Niña de los Peines, sings in a way that the aficionados mock as inadequate until, in shock and a kind of despair at her own failure, la Niña goes beyond humiliation and the social self and releases the full force of the song. The skin of ordinary day-to-day life or routine singing is pierced and something transcendental breaks through. Let us misuse the theological vocabulary and say that what occurs is con-substantiation, not transubstantiation—not the removal of the ordinary in favour of an ascension to the transcendental, but the moment when the ordinary shines with a rare light.

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12 <https://www.theblueshroud.com>

13 A charming documentary by Brian Kavanagh entitled *Five Swords at the Crossroads* explores the relationship between Benjamin Dwyer and Joaquín García. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLUofQIZUiI>

14 Federico García Lorca, *In Search of Duende* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1998).

We are now in a position (at the unavoidable risk of oversimplification) to move towards a common factor in the inner logic of quite a disparate collection of projects and passions. Ted Hughes is an assertively male writer in the old style. Meaning is seized and transfixed, almost as in an encounter with the White Goddess, as articulated by Robert Graves in his book of that title (or most concisely in his poem 'On Portents'). In this sense, the music of *Scenes from Crow* (no matter what the rises and falls in intensity, no matter what the psychic drama) is suffused with a shocked sense of living in the aftermath of an apocalyptic moment of breakthrough. In *The Ironic Harvest: English poetry in the twentieth century*, his fine study and critique of recent English poetry—and, I confess, the only one of his books that I know—Geoffrey Thurley grapples enlighteningly with the challenge of Hughes's poetry, and of *Crow* in particular.<sup>15</sup> I must pass over the details of his appraisal here, bypassing also the literary controversy surrounding the role of Sylvia Plath in Hughes's life and work, and identify the crucial point for present purposes. If Thurley sees Hughes as outstanding amongst his contemporaries for the intensity of his quest ('Hughes strikes through to a primal violence existing within the civilized man that is at the same time an intimation of a new awareness, a mutation almost, ready for the future'), he, almost reluctantly, attempts to define what blocks Hughes from attaining the complete vision he seeks in terms of 'a refusal to allow the feminine its due.'<sup>16</sup> He suggests that the individual lyrics of *Crow* 'represent a final concentration of Hughes's masculine energy.'<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the extent of Dwyer's engagement with this issue when composing *Scenes from Crow*, his later essay makes use of the published letters and the insights gained from his own investigations and interviews to detail how Hughes had intended to conclude *Crow* with a reconciliation between, or balancing of, masculine and feminine, but found himself creatively blocked as one personal disaster piled on another. This essay of Dwyer's, the other essay that accompanies the CD of *Scenes from Crow*, as well as the central place of the feminine voice in *SacrumProfanum* and in *Umbilical*—all demonstrate how fully Dwyer has grappled with the issue in his own search for an artistic way forward from the tragic dilemma enacted in Hughes's writing. (Though their book is written from a quite different perspective, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* has a certain relevance here, even in the subtitles of its three main chapters: Inhibited Reading, Blocked Vision, Stalled Movement).<sup>18</sup>

In this light, what can we say of *SacrumProfanum*? Here the music follows a ritual process where, rather than a psychic drama, we witness the acknowledgement

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15 Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest: English poetry in the twentieth century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974).

16 Ibid., 182–183.

17 Ibid.

18 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).



(not an absolution or easy resolution) and musical enactment of centuries of colonial trauma and oppression. The abject, suffering silenced female is the channel through which the breakthrough to knowledge occurs. But still the journey is from lament to Irish keening (whether ritual crying or poetic outburst around the corpse), from ‘Lamentum’ to ‘Caoineadh’—even if the latter is suffused with ritual knowledge. The way forward is still blocked. We are still in the aftermath of a tragic history. *Umbilical*, as we have seen, is tragedy, even if a musical reimagining of one. The surface of ordinary experience is pierced and awe-ful knowledge attained. Again, this is a music of tragic aftermath. And Beckett, as mentioned above, and as readers would recognize, is the supreme writer of the aftermath.

A brief digression is required at this point. Where does Ligeti stand in relation to this quest? For technical analysis of the Hungarian composer and his procedures, we may look to the essays devoted to Ligeti in this collection. Ligeti is not a model to be mechanically imitated. In the post-WWII era of music in the classical tradition, Ligeti’s work represents an assertion of freedom (freedom to advance in any direction, freedom to escape from the chains he has forged for himself in each work, freedom to create new sounds). What has happened in recent years? Ligeti remains what he always was for Dwyer—an inspirational figure, then. But in the years since Dwyer wrote and recorded his *Twelve Études* for guitar, since he stepped into improvising with the guitarist Mike Nielsen (resulting in their joint CD, *Evolution*),<sup>19</sup> Dwyer’s abilities as an improviser have developed—to the point where he was invited in 2014 to become part of Barry Guy’s Blue Shroud Band. The essential point here is that this band encompasses musicians of rare quality (who could forget Savina Yannatou’s vocal contribution to Guy’s recent recordings?), many of them exceptional composers or soloists in their own right (Michael Niesemann, Lucas Niggli and Torben Snekkestad, for example) who are happy—as I witnessed and as Creasy’s film amply attests—to pool their talents in a structure guided by Barry Guy but one that allows plenty of space, within an overarching structure, for individuals to express themselves to their fullest capacity.<sup>20</sup> Being accepted into this company and community has been a validation for Dwyer’s sense of himself as a creative musician.

Recently, Dwyer put together *New Pathways in Improvisation@MDX* at Middlesex University.<sup>21</sup> This gathering of composers, players, students, and teachers fully realized the concept of practice as research, so that what is always at risk of lapsing into institutionalized routine became instead a vibrant demonstration of mutually enhancing composition, improvisation, analysis and teaching.

At the first and, one hopes, not the last, of these gatherings, Dwyer delivered an early version of the concepts laid out in more finished form in ‘Towards a Tran-

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19 *Evolution: Mike Nielsen and Benjamin Dwyer* (Gamelan records, 2005).

20 For a detailed list of the Blue Shroud Band musicians, see <https://www.theblueshroud.com/band>

21 See <https://www.newpathwaysinimprovisationatmdx.com>

scendental Philosophy of Free Improvisation', the essay that concludes the present collection. For our purposes (and intellectual adventure awaits readers of the full essay), we may highlight just a few elements: it brings together a non-Darwinian philosophy of existence, the transcendental dimension of human experience that has preoccupied Dwyer for decades (he has practised Transcendental Meditation since his teenage years), and the creative, knowledge/structure-carrying improvising musician as the fullest expression of human creativity.

As he builds his organizational, intellectual and musical-creative selves into a unified whole, Benjamin Dwyer is articulating a positive vision of the truly creative musician, and granting himself the freedom to move in new directions.