Samuel Beckett’s *Ping* and Serialist Music Technique

Samuel Beckett’s odd and strangely emotional short work, *Ping* (1966), is characterized by a form of language that is governed almost entirely by what musicologists and linguists alike might call the “statistical arrangement of events.” The development and application of this notion appeared first in the music of serialist composers in the 1950s, most notably Boulez, Cage, and Stockhausen, among others. Karlheinz Stockhausen argued, for example, that electronically controlled manipulations of multiple sounds produced an entirely new form of musical design and performance. A pioneer in the innovative uses of physical space, chance or open forms in composition, “intuitive” music, and other aesthetic and philosophical developments, Stockhausen generated new discussions on the nature of identity and intuition and their relation to music.

Pierre Boulez likewise is very much involved with the significance and impact of personal statement, with the performance as a mode arising out of an invented and seemingly open and flexible material which is, however, realizing and revealing a hard strategy underneath—a ground plan, a path, a map that is in itself a rational, poetic realization of the relationship between the acts of creating and performing, as well as experiencing, a work of art.

At play in Samuel Beckett’s *Ping* is a harmonic language characterized by melodic elements that embody musical concepts similar to those of Stockhausen and Boulez. Particularly notable is how the voicing, vanishing subject expresses emotions that are unconventional in terms of ordinary human feeling. The emphasis is on structure, formalized patterns, artifice, and the undercutting of pathos. There is no doubt that Beckett’s use of repetition and the re-combination of words and phrases reflect
some of the same patterns found in serialist music. Essentially, serialism denotes a musical work in which linear succession, articulation, harmony, and duration (including rhythm and tempo) are strictly derived from a single, all-inclusive principle. A row of musical notes becomes a “set” of values and relationships, strictly defined not only in terms of structure but also of process. Thus the actual unfolding of the piece is a process of permutation within which all these potential relationships are revealed (Salzman 146). So, Beckett’s seemingly scattered or “spastic” language is a deliberately processed and permuted system used to establish a value system between a physical environment and repeated sounds and then to register its effect on a subject’s emotions. In a world of featureless white, the nameless subject in Ping is subjected to intrusions of sound in a confined enclosure and responds with memories of an uncertain past. In addition, he experiences doubt as to the validity of his identity.

The subject’s sense of disorientation arises from the text’s syntax and overall structure as well: Beckett breaks down the basic sentence or phrase structure and in this way moves toward a musically complex pattern of unfixed, or random frequency, content. The highly specified dimension of the cube (“one square yard”) indicates that Beckett assigns importance to structures and their boundaries. The narrative voice painstakingly strives to describe every detail of the structure as well. The words “light,” “heat,” and “white” recur like the electronically generated sounds associated with the music of Stockhausen or Cage, or perhaps even related to the pulse of contemporary techno. In serialist music, it is the isolated sounds themselves that form the essential experience, just as it is in Ping. In many post-Cageian works, for example, a set of activities regulates a set of limitations. Instead of being conceived as sound, a work may be based on visual definitions, ideas of non-sound or silence. Instead of defining time, a piece may be defined by the random passage of time. Instead of a definable identity, there are conceptions whose essence is lack of identity. In Ping, the ranges of light and heat serve as a sort of metaphoric diapason for the image of the subject’s beating heart as it parallels the two- and three-syllable words that break the steady one-syllable pulse of the seemingly randomly generated “pings.”

In this manner, the inner articulations of Ping are structured by units of thought that are reduced to short phrases, partitioned by periods, and repeated and combined in new ways. These strands of expression concern the thoughts of a being that gradually realizes that he is perhaps not alone. In this work the subject’s identity is reduced to a textual partnership of a