

4-2018

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Martin, Abigail, "“I’m Nobody! Who are you?”: Musical (Re)presentations of Emily Dickinson" (2018). *Student research*. 98.
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**“I’m Nobody! Who are you?”:
Musical (Re)presentations of Emily Dickinson**

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DePauw University Honor Scholar Program

Class of 2018

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis sponsor, Dr. Elissa Harbert, for encouraging my out-of-the-box ideas, patiently guiding me through the process of a thesis, and believing in this project from start to finish. I could not have done it without her. Thanks also to the other members of my committee: Dr. Meryl Altman, Dr. Beth Benedix, and Dr. Eliza Brown. They readily accepted the task of helping guide a student they barely knew through an unusual thesis project, and all three have impacted my thinking in both the recital and paper. I am grateful to Dr. Kevin Moore and Amy Welch for their undying efforts on behalf of the Honor Scholar students, their dedication to supporting each of us, and their always-inspiring love for the interdisciplinary.

Thanks also to all those who played a role in the performance portion of this thesis: professor Pamela Coburn, my voice teacher, who helped me prepare the music; my collaborative pianist, Laura Brumbaugh, who joined me for many hours of extra coachings and rehearsals; Resonance Chamber Ensemble, who agreed to reunite for the concert; and Sarah Hennessy, who not only performed with me but also assisted throughout the thesis process.

My final thank you goes to the many family members and friends who read my work, helped with the behind-the-scenes logistics, and, most of all, continuously encouraged me when the task of creating a thesis was overwhelmingly daunting. A special thank you goes to my parents, for their ready support of anything and everything I have tried for the last twenty-one years and for always being willing to learn something new alongside me. I would not be the student or the person I am without them. To God be the Glory.

“My business is to *sing*.”

*The Poets light but Lamps —
Themselves — go out —
The Wicks they stimulate —
If vital Light*

*Inhere as do the Suns —
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference —*

J# 883¹

On a Friday, somewhere around the year 1862, Emily Dickinson wrote to her friend Elizabeth Holland: “My business is to *sing*.”² Though the reclusive correspondent could not have known it then, the next centuries would see thousands of musicians make it *their* business to sing her poetic words to the larger world. My business is also to sing, and it is her words that I, too, have chosen to share. As a classically trained soprano, I sang my first Emily Dickinson poem in 2015 and immediately loved the way her words fit to music as well as the complex beauty they offered alone. After singing additional settings over the next semesters, I presented a recital of songs based on Emily Dickinson’s poetry on March 16, 2018. I had originally planned to perform a traditional lecture recital as the culmination of a year’s worth of research on musical settings of Dickinson. However, as I explored the songs through both research and practice, I felt they were begging for a different kind of treatment. I heard Dickinson’s words

¹ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 1960), 419. Throughout this paper, poems are identified by “J#,” referring to the number given to them in the 1955 Urtext *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. They are also frequently “titled” by their first line, a common convention when referring to Dickinson’s poems.

² Emily Dickinson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Mabel L. Todd (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1951), 146.

calling for discussion, full of contradiction and possibility—and at the same time offering themselves as unitive and community building. But in a lecture recital, the performer would hold all the power and the audience would passively absorb the music without responding beyond their applause. No one would have a conversation; there would be no contradiction. Emily Dickinson deserved better.

I used my background in Peace and Conflict Studies to rethink the concert format. I decided to turn my performance venue, Music on the Square, into a living room for the evening, a space for conversation and music. I still performed—about 30 minutes of music in total. I lectured for about 30 minutes as well over the course of the evening. Instead of leaving it at that, I also created a variety of interactive activities designed to encourage the audience to use the knowledge they were gaining to explore the music I was performing. In recognizing the creativity and ideas the audience brought to the room, the event encouraged authentic encounters for audience members, both with the human beings around them and with the music they were hearing (and thereby the composers and poet involved in the creation of those works).

As I shaped the new recital format, a focus rose to the surface. If I could highlight for the audience the ways in which composers altered Dickinson's words or narrowed her meaning through their settings, the audience could judge the effects of those changes for themselves. The recital became an exploration of ethics and power in song and performance, a new model for using a single focus (in this case, compositions setting Emily Dickinson's poetry) to explore the way relationships between individuals play out in music and in the experience of music. The particular focus on Emily Dickinson's poetry was natural for someone who so enjoyed singing her words. It also, however, encompassed a variety of important themes in recent American vocal music composition, in part because using Dickinson's words in music is such a common

phenomenon.

Indeed, though the most famous musical composition using Dickinson's words may be Aaron Copland's 1950 song cycle *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, the tradition of writing music for Dickinson's poetry actually began just ten years after the poet's death. Over three thousand such compositions,³ written by well over two hundred composers,⁴ have followed. Emily Dickinson and her work have been presented in music in a variety of ways, "from works for solo voice and piano to operas, choral works, and instrumental ensembles."⁵

However, the genre on which Emily Dickinson and her writing may have had the greatest impact is art song. As art song scholar Carol Kimball writes, "There are many whose poems have ignited the imaginations of art composers, but perhaps none so consistently as Emily Dickinson. The abundant number of musical settings of her poetry has enriched the American art song repertoire many times over."⁶ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* defines art song as "A song intended for the concert repertory, as opposed to a traditional or popular song. The term is more often applied to solo than to polyphonic songs."⁷ In other words, it is a song written in the Western classical music tradition for a solo singer, accompanied by piano. Additionally, "art song" is most commonly used to refer to compositions that use pre-existing writing (like Dickinson's poetry) rather than new lyrics composed alongside a particular

³ Carol Kimball, "Setting Emily," *Journal of Singing* 68, no. 4 (2012): 461.

⁴ Carlton Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere: Emily Dickinson and Music* (Berkeley, CA: Fallen Leaf Press, 1992).

⁵ Carolyn L. Cooley, *The Music of Emily Dickinson's Poems and Letters: A Study of Imagery and Form* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 121.

⁶ Kimball, "Setting Emily," 461.

⁷"Art Song," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

piece of music. The art song is then considered a “setting” of the text.

Notably, when talking about settings of Dickinson’s poetry, many composers and writers talk about the poet and the poetry as though they are one and the same. Whether it is Kimball, who published an article entitled “Setting Emily;”⁸ composer Stanworth Beckler, who said that one of Emily Dickinson’s poems was “a piece of Emily’s soul, and... a flint from which we may strike our own sparks;”⁹ or reviewer William Fleming, who said that a concert of Emily Dickinson songs evoked “a vivid third presence... on the stage—the figure of the poetess herself,”¹⁰ the way musical settings of Dickinson’s poetry are discussed implies not only that the music honors or pays tribute to Emily Dickinson, but also that it somehow represents her. Likewise, composers talk as though they have personal connections with the poet. For example, Arthur Farwell’s daughter, when asked about her father’s settings of Emily Dickinson, wrote, “I think by the time he wrote them, he was so familiar with the poems and somehow with *her* on every level and in every mode...”¹¹ and Ernst Bacon’s widow said that her husband spoke of a “spiritual marriage”¹² with Dickinson. Though this may not be exclusive to Dickinson, it is certainly particularly striking with her, making settings of Dickinson an excellent case study for how art songs affect poets and their poetry.

⁸ Kimball, “Setting Emily.”

⁹ Stanworth Beckler, letter to Carolyn Cooley, May 7, 1997. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 133.

¹⁰ William Fleming, “Emily Dickinson ‘Returned to Life,’” *The Post-Standard*, April 29, 1966.

¹¹ Sara Farwell, letter to Carolyn Cooley, March 25, 1997. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 128.

¹² Ellen Bacon, liner notes to *Fond Affection: Music of Ernst Bacon*, Janet Brown et al., Composers Recordings, Inc. 890, CD, 2002.

As composer David Irving acutely observed, it is not the historical Emily Dickinson being presented by composers. He wrote, “With Emily Dickinson, her personality, her ‘self’ and her poetry coincide—they become the same, and that is what I wanted to try to convey in the music—not the sense of the reality of her or even her poetry, but the reality of *my* perception of her and her poetry.”¹³ Irving is aware, then, that capturing Emily Dickinson is impossible. Instead, the composer presents his or her concept of “Emily Dickinson.” Indeed, literary scholar Vivian R. Pollak expressed a similar idea in her 2017 book.¹⁴ Her title, *Our Emily Dickinsons*, reveals two important themes. First, Pollak uses the plural Emily Dickinsons, rather than the singular, to indicate that more than one idea of Emily Dickinson exists. Second, she uses the possessive *our*. The conceptions of “Emily Dickinson” are not historical reality; instead, they exist in the minds and writings of other people—*us*. While Pollak explores the ways a variety of women poets imagine Emily Dickinson, Irving’s reflection indicates that composers do likewise; they imagine “Emily Dickinsons,” and the “Emily Dickinsons” they imagine are affected by their own positions and biases. No two images are likely to be the same, but, more important, they are never objective. In fact, they have the potential to do great harm—even violence—as they remake her publicly in spite of the private life she led.

What engages poets, composers, and audiences alike about Dickinson’s poetry is, in part, that her femininity and her reclusive lifestyle allow them the opportunity to remake her persona through their own interpretations. As composers, including Aaron Copland, Ernst Bacon, Libby Larsen, and Lori Laitman, set Dickinson’s words to music, their musical decisions, publication

¹³David Irving, letter to Carolyn Cooley, March 2, 1997. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 145–46.

¹⁴ Vivian R. Pollak, *Our Emily Dickinsons: American Women Poets and the Intimacies of Difference* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

choices, and writings about the poet (re)present Emily Dickinson. In the process, those who engage with Dickinson settings destroy her in order to reconstruct a new “Dickinson” in layers. From her own words, to the composers’ interpretations, the performers’ renditions, and, finally, the audiences’ experiences, Dickinson, like other legendary historical figures, is immortalized but also fundamentally altered. A private figure is shoved to the limelight, and the “myth of Amherst” becomes the myth of American art song.

“I’m Nobody! Who are you?”: Finding Emily Dickinson

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you — Nobody — Too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise — you know!*

*How dreary — to be — Somebody!
How public — like a Frog —
To tell one's name — the livelong June —
To an admiring Bog!*

J# 288¹⁵

To explore how composers present Emily Dickinson, one must first have some background knowledge about Emily Dickinson and how she has been understood since her death. Born on December 10, 1830, in Amherst, Massachusetts, to lawyer and politician Edward Dickinson and his wife Emily Norcross Dickinson, Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was the middle child of three. She attended Amherst Academy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary before adopting a reclusive lifestyle.¹⁶ Her older brother, (William) Austin, followed in her father’s

¹⁵ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 133.

¹⁶ Susan D. Stewart and Susan D. Smith, “The Song in Emily Dickinson’s Poems and a Review of Selected Choral Settings of Her Poetry,” *The Choral Journal* 47, no. 3 (September 2006): 9.

footsteps, became a lawyer, and married Emily's friend Susan Gilbert. Like Emily, her younger sister, Lavinia, never married and lived at the Dickinson homestead until her death.¹⁷

As a young person, Emily Dickinson became a "highly accomplished pianist"¹⁸ and improviser. Like other young women of her time, she created a binder of the sheet music she played. Compiled during her teenage years, Dickinson's binder has been the subject of study by many musicologists.¹⁹ Not only is her binder unusually thick, but the music is also notably difficult. Dickinson indicated her own accomplishment when she wrote to her brother (who often procured sheet music for her), "You sent us the *Duett*, Austin. Vinnie cannot learn it, and I see from the outside page, that there is a piece for *two* hands. Are you willing to change it."²⁰ The composition intended as a piano duet (for four hands) was too difficult for her sister, so Emily was requesting the edition published for solo piano (two hands). Evidently, she was the significantly more accomplished pianist of the two. Likewise, Emily Dickinson improvised on the piano, often at night, and had a distinct style.²¹ She also attended singing school.²² In many ways, music was Dickinson's first creative artistic outlet.

¹⁷ Alfred Habegger, *My Wars Are Laid Away in Books: The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Random House, 2001).

¹⁸ Cooley, *Music of Dickinson's Poems*, 13.

¹⁹ George Boziwick, "'My Business Is to Sing': Emily Dickinson's Musical Borrowings," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 8, no. 2 (2014): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196314000054>.

²⁰ Emily Dickinson, letter to Austin Dickinson, January 28, 1852. In Thomas H. Johnson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Quoted in Boziwick, "My Business Is to Sing," 144.

²¹ Cooley, *Music of Dickinson's Poems*, 18.

²² Carol D. Andrews, "Thinking Musically, Writing Expectantly: New Biographical Information about Emily Dickinson," *The New England Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (June 2008): 332.

Dickinson also enjoyed attending musical performances. In 1851, she saw famed Swedish soprano Jenny Lind perform and wrote to her brother, “How we all loved Jennie Lind, but not accustomed oft to her manner of singing didn’t fancy *that* so well as we did *her*... *Herself*, and not her music, was what we seemed to love—”²³ In many ways, Dickinson looked at Lind in much the same way that composers and scholars have looked at her—as fascinated (or even more fascinated) by the artist as a person as with the artwork she produced. After hearing Anton Rubinstein play piano, Dickinson also expressed sadness to her cousins that she could not master music.²⁴ Whether it was due to a feeling of inadequacy or simply reaching adulthood, when most music binders were completed,²⁵ Dickinson shifted her artistic attention from music to poetry as she grew older.

However, Dickinson’s musical youth continued to influence her poetry. As scholar Carolyn Cooley notes, “Dickinson found creative expression in her improvisational melodies, expression which would eventually spill over into her poetic endeavors.”²⁶ Likewise, a substantial portion of her poetic work contains musical references, often multiple times in a single poem.²⁷ Additionally, Dickinson continued to use poetry as a response to music, as shown in an anecdote told by Mabel Loomis Todd, Austin Dickinson’s mistress. Interestingly, though Todd and Emily Dickinson never met in person; Todd encountered Dickinson through her

²³ Dickinson, *Letters*, 69.

²⁴ Jay Leyda, *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*, vol. II (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1960), 273. Cited in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 20.

²⁵ Boziwick, “My Business Is to Sing,” 133.

²⁶ Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 18.

²⁷ Cooley, 21.

writings and even became the custodian of those writings after Dickinson's death. Todd reports that she "usually sang to Emily for an hour or more, playing afterwards selections from Beethoven and Bach or Scarlatti, which she [Emily] admired almost extravagantly."²⁸ Ever-reclusive, Dickinson simply sat outside the room and listened. She would then send Todd "a glass of wine on a silver salver, and with it either a piece of cake or a rose—and a poem, the latter usually impromptu, evidently written on the spot."²⁹

Indeed, as Dickinson grew older, she became increasingly reclusive and kept in touch with others mainly through letters—even with those inside the same building. In what Emily Dickinson scholar Stephanie A. Tingley argues is Dickinson's particular fulfillment of the women's culture of her time (which demanded maintaining the family's social network), Dickinson sent poems, letters, and other tokens to friends, even to those friends who were physically close enough to visit in person.³⁰ Though she shared her poetry in correspondence, it was not until after her death that the full wealth of her writing was discovered. Indeed, only ten of her nearly 1800 poems were published in her lifetime,³¹ and most were heavily modified.³² Much of her poetry was personal in nature, both in how it was written and in subject, notably the

²⁸ Millicent T. Bingham, *Ancestor's Brocades: The Literary Debut of Emily Dickinson* (New York, NY: Harper, 1945), 12. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson's Poems*, 9.

²⁹ Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 261. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson's Poems*, 9–10.

³⁰ Stephanie A. Tingley, "'Blossom[s] of the Brain': Women's Culture and the Poetics of Emily Dickinson's Correspondence," in *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters: Critical Essays*, ed. Jane D. Eberwein and Cindy Mackenzie (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk6f4.8>.

³¹ Peter Dickinson, "Emily Dickinson and Music," *Music & Letters* 75, no. 2 (May 1994): 241.

³² Phillip George, "Music of Emily Dickinson," *21st Century Music* 15, no. 10 (October 2008): 1.

“categories [of] ‘Life,’ ‘Love,’ ‘Death,’ ‘Nature,’ and ‘Immortality,’”³³ though many of the poems overlap those themes.

After Emily Dickinson’s death in 1886, Lavinia Dickinson discovered her older sister’s poetry. In 1890, Mabel Loomis Todd and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson’s friend and mentor, published the first (highly edited) edition of her poetry, simply entitled *Poems*.³⁴ Martha Dickinson Bianchi, the poet’s niece, inherited her aunt’s work upon the death of Lavinia Dickinson and published her own edited versions of the poetry in several collections, including *The Single Hound* (1914) and *Further Poems* (1929).³⁵ A dispute over inheritance between Todd and Lavinia Dickinson resulted in Todd locking more than half of Emily Dickinson’s poems away in a chest, but they were rediscovered in 1929 by Todd’s daughter, Millicent Todd Bingham, and published as *Bolts of Melody* in 1945.³⁶ These early publishers not only edited but also often gave titles to Dickinson’s poems, which the poet had overwhelmingly left untitled. Not until 1955 was a mostly complete and accurate text available, the three-volume *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, who numbered the poems chronologically to the best of his ability.³⁷ The Johnson collection continues to be respected as the definitive edition.

Dickinson’s privacy as a poet, however, raises an important question about whether she

³³ Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 24.

³⁴ George, “Music of Emily Dickinson,” 1.

³⁵ Ruth C. Friedberg and Robin Fisher, *American Art Song and American Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012), 65.

³⁶ Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 21–22.

³⁷ George, “Music of Emily Dickinson,” 1.

would have wanted her works published, a question that has interesting ethical ramifications for composers' use of her words. This question becomes all the more intriguing given the theme of immortality and remembrance in many of Dickinson's poems. In J# 945, "This is a Blossom of the Brain," Dickinson writes about poetry and the reaction of those who read it. The first and last stanzas of the poem read,

This is a Blossom of the Brain —
A small — italic Seed
Lodged by Design or Happening
The Spirit fructified —
...
When it is lost, that Day shall be
The Funeral of God,
Upon his Breast, a closing Soul
The Flower of our Lord.³⁸

The speaker implies that when the poetry is forgotten, the result is death—indeed, the death of God. In interpreting this poem, Stephanie Tingley writes, "Clearly the speaker considers her legacy of language to be her best hope for immortality."³⁹ For Tingley, this becomes evidence of Dickinson's "hope for posthumous fame."⁴⁰ Vivian Pollak draws a similar conclusion based on J# 444, "It feels a shame to be Alive," which discusses the "Men so brave" who died fighting in the American Civil War. The speaker questions,

³⁸ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 443.

³⁹ Tingley, "Blossom[s] of the Brain," 76.

⁴⁰ Tingley, 76.

Do we deserve — a Thing —
That lives — like Dollars — must be piled
Before we may obtain?⁴¹

In the speaker's "shame," Pollak reads a desire to be able to contribute in equally meaningful ways. She argues, "the speaker who craves intimacy with the dead also wants to write words that are publicly recognized and that last."⁴² Pollack then extends this to discussing "a Dickinson who was driven by a sense of unrealized potential."⁴³ Both Tingley and Pollak arrive at the conclusion that Dickinson wanted to be remembered.

The arguments of both Tingley and Pollack raise another important question. The evidence both use to support their ideas comes not from Dickinson's letters, in which she is presumably speaking for herself, but from her poetry, in which this assumption becomes more problematic. While both seem to acknowledge this in identifying what "the speaker" of the poem is seeking, both nonetheless extend the speaker's desires to apply to Dickinson herself as well. It is certainly possible to conclude from the poems that Dickinson wrestled with the role of poetry and the ability (or even right) to be remembered. To conclude that any speaker's perspective is also Dickinson's, however, is to make too large an assumption. Indeed, Dickinson herself even warned against others viewing her as the speaker of the poem when she wrote in a letter to Thomas Higginson, "When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 213.

⁴² Pollak, *Our Emily Dickinsons*, 2.

⁴³ Pollak, 3.

⁴⁴ Dickinson, *Letters*, 257.

Dickinson can and does use speakers in different poems to portray different aspects of a complex concept. Feminist literary scholar Ursula Caci demonstrates this in her article about gender in Dickinson's poetry. As Caci shows, some of Dickinson's (presumably female) speakers portray a male figure as oppressive, while other speakers portray a comparable male figure as desirable.⁴⁵ Through multiple poems, Dickinson grapples with the complex relationship between the genders through multiple speakers who arrive at different conclusions. In some poems, Dickinson intentionally uses a speaker who holds distinctly different identities—a boy or a married woman, for example. In many ways, Dickinson's poetry embodies the words of Walt Whitman, her direct contemporary, who wrote in his "Song of Myself,"

Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then, I contradict myself.
(I am large, I contain multitudes).⁴⁶

Particularly because of the quiet and reclusive lifestyle that made Dickinson a "myth" even during her life, it may be tempting to look to the speakers of her poetry as reflections of her own experience, as both Tingley and Pollak were inclined to do. One can easily say Dickinson explored particular topics, e.g. the idea of fame, but rarely that she reached a consistent conclusion. Indeed, the attempt to confine her to a given conclusion may actually reflect more about the interpreter than the poet. As Dickinson scholar David Porter highlighted, "In the

⁴⁵ Ursula Caci, "Interchangeability and Mutuality: The Relativity of Power in Dickinson's Gendered Relationships," *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 23, no. 2 (2014): 73, <https://doi.org/10.1353/edj.2014.0011>.

⁴⁶ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1965), 88.

unruly body of [Emily Dickinson's] poetry there may be found a theme to fulfill every critic's predisposition."⁴⁷

While Tingley and Pollak suggested Dickinson wanted immortal fame, other speakers in Dickinson's poetry clearly see fame as oppressive. For example, in J# 288, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?," Dickinson writes,

How dreary — to be — Somebody!
How public — like a Frog —
To tell one's name — the livelong June —
To an admiring Bog!⁴⁸

In the above, Dickinson's speaker finds fame revolting, and prefers, instead, to be "Nobody." Tingley's and Pollack's conclusions are just as likely due to their own predisposition as to any definitive conclusion of Dickinson's.

Even given that one cannot conflate the views of Dickinson's speakers with her own, a close connection between Dickinson and her poetry still exists. As Tingley writes, Dickinson "does not separate herself from what she writes any more than she can entirely separate herself from the act of making a garment or a loaf of bread."⁴⁹ Tingley argues, in fact, that Dickinson may have actually intended her poetry to be a substitution for her person. In her 2009 article, "Blossom[s] of the Brain," Tingley argues that, as Dickinson became more reclusive, "her written words... gradually take on more and more significance because they more and more

⁴⁷ David Porter, "Searching for Dickinson's Themes," in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*, ed. Gudrun Grabher, Roland Hagenbüchle, and Cristanne Miller (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 183.

⁴⁸ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 133.

⁴⁹ Tingley, "Blossom[s] of the Brain," 7.

often substitute for her physical presence,”⁵⁰ and, as a result, “writer and written message... [became] one, their voices eerily indistinguishable.”⁵¹ In this light, Dickinson’s strange interactions with Mabel Loomis Todd, in which Dickinson sent Todd poetry in response to Todd’s piano playing, become conversations in which the two are present to one another only through their art.

Perhaps, then, those who speak of interactions with Dickinson’s poetry as interactions with her are not entirely wrong. However, during her lifetime, Dickinson controlled the ways and contexts in which others read her writings. The variety of perspectives presented by speakers in her poetry (and the comparatively little information about her adult life) contributes to the number of Dickinsons it is possible to imagine or to create by picking and choosing from her writings after her death. In her work on Aaron Copland’s *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, American literature scholar Dorothy Baker identified just some of the “Emily Dickinsons” scholars have created, including “the erotic,” “the virginal,” “the homoerotic,” the “religious,” the “profane,” and “the domestic.”⁵² She claims this variety emphasizes two things: 1.) Each scholar only captures a portion of the truth about Emily Dickinson, and 2.) The work of each scholar on Emily Dickinson also reveals something about the scholar herself.⁵³ While Baker applies this framework exclusively to Copland’s settings, it is true that all composers likewise reveal only certain aspects of Dickinson in a given setting and that the aspects they choose

⁵⁰ Tingley, 65.

⁵¹ Tingley, 66.

⁵² Dorothy Z. Baker, “Aaron Copland’s Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson: A Reading of Dissonance and Harmony,” *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 12, no. 1 (2003): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1353/edj.2003.0002>.

⁵³ Baker, 2–3.

appear to have as much to do with them as with Emily Dickinson.

“Bolts of Melody:” From Poem to Art Song

*Nor would I be a Poet —
It's finer — own the Ear —
Enamored — impotent — content —
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts of Melody!*

From J# 505⁵⁴

Composers, as they choose poems to set to music, reveal their predispositions. As the poetry is then used in song, it is fundamentally changed in the process. While the final product is a new artwork that combines the poem and the composer's music, it is not actually a collaboration—the poem is presented entirely through the eyes of the composer. The result, as philosopher Susanne Langer famously argued, is that the words and music do not occupy equal positions in this new artwork. “When words and music come together in song, music swallows words; not only mere words and literal sentences, but even literary word-structures, poetry. Song is not a compromise between poetry and music, though the text taken by itself be a great poem; song is music.”⁵⁵ Exploring this same poem-music relationship, music writer Joseph Coroniti stated, “In a very real way... when the poetic text makes room for music it has less room for itself.”⁵⁶ Coroniti's analysis, however, misses a fundamental truth Langer does not: In most art

⁵⁴ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 246.

⁵⁵ Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 152.

⁵⁶ Joseph A. Coroniti Jr., *Poetry as Text in Twentieth-Century Vocal Music: From Stravinsky to Reich* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1992), 4.

songs, the poet and her text have not consented to making room—the composer and the composer’s music have *forced* them to occupy a secondary position. Especially if, as in the case of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, the poems are in the public domain, the poet does not need to give her consent for her words to be used. Indeed, composer Lori Laitman cited the public availability of Dickinson’s poetry as a distinct “bonus” for composers.⁵⁷ Especially when, as in the case of Dickinson, a poem is not simply being taken as a poem but as an embodiment of the poet, then, the poet, as well as her work, is being “swallowed” by the music and forced to “make room” for the composer.

Many composers do intentionally use their ideas about Emily Dickinson in their settings. As Cooley demonstrated, composer Roy Hinkle considered not only the text of J# 324 for his setting, “Some Keep the Sabbath,” but also his conception of Dickinson. “In spite of being rather reclusive by nature, Emily Dickinson seems to have enjoyed her life and had fun in her own way, he believes.”⁵⁸ In his composition, then, he used running parallel thirds to mimic her playful nature.⁵⁹ In discussing her setting of J# 1420, “One Joy of So Much Anguish,” composer Alice Parker actually described the Emily Dickinson she imagined. “This poem more than any other brings Emily to my mind’s eye—the sleepless nights that she spent at her little desk, wrestling with huge thoughts undreamt of by her family—and what she must have felt, in the earliest dawn, when the birdsongs arose around her. The sweet joy mixed with her own anguish

⁵⁷ Mary Crawford, “Dickinson Sings: A Study of a Selection of Lori Laitman’s Settings for High Voice” (DMA diss., University of Cincinnati, 2013), 74.

⁵⁸ Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 141.

⁵⁹ Cooley, 141.

stood in stark contrast—as night and day, as human despair and natural rebirth.”⁶⁰ In Parker’s setting for soprano accompanied by string quartet, horn, clarinet, and flute, the drone of the horn and clarinet underneath a minor, chromatic melody of long, sustained tones creates a stark, lonely feeling, while the flute sings light, quick birdsongs overtop. That the potential joy of the birdsong does not carry into the vocal line directly expresses the way Parker imagined Dickinson—a figure drenched with pain, contrasting with (instead of adopting) the hope around her. It is not just that composers are conflating Emily Dickinson with her poetry; many of them are actually attempting to set *her* to music as well, “swallowing” her in the process.

Regarding Emily Dickinson, it is impossible not to read this phenomenon as gendered. Notably, though I focus on an equal number of male and female composers in this project, the majority of the composers setting Dickinson’s texts (as well as poetry in general) are male. Historically, spaces like the home and kitchen have been associated with the feminine, while external, public spaces are often associated with the masculine. While Dickinson’s poetry is on the page, it has a domesticity to it; it is confined. Setting the poetry to music presents this work in a public (read: masculine) space. In the process, it reframes a woman’s work for presentation to the public by the male composer, as though to leave the domestic, it must be “swallowed” and presented by the male. While this is true of all art song, it is particularly potent when the relationship between the poet and her poetry is so close. Dickinson as a person, rather than simply her work, is forced aside by the composer. In setting Dickinson’s poetry, composers present, without the poet’s permission, words she arguably intended to stand for her being when she was physically absent.

Indeed, the way some (particularly male) composers talk about their relationship with

⁶⁰ Alice Parker, letter to Carolyn Cooley, April 14, 1997. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 140.

Dickinson in setting her poetry affirms a gendered understanding. Ernst Bacon's "spiritual marriage" with Dickinson is just one example.⁶¹ Arthur Farwell indicated to his children that through Dickinson's "spiritual insight" he "bond[ed] with her nature."⁶² These relationships, however, are inherently gendered. The way composers use Dickinson in art song reflects the historic understanding of marriage, in which the man owns his wife and therefore controls her presentation to the world. It may be said that Bacon and Farwell, who were both active as composers in the first half of the twentieth century, were simply products of their time. However, even Robert Train Adams, a later composer (still living), writes about his composition, "My piece is not the poem, but represents, I hope, a collaboration between poet and musician."⁶³ In this statement, he fails to recognize that the "collaboration" of which he speaks is still an unequal relationship of use.

Though the relationship between poetry and music has the potential to be highly unequal and problematic, not all works are created in the same way or with the same problems. Just as the composers have different images of Emily Dickinson (which may be more or less nuanced), the approaches they use and choices they make present various dilemmas. Due to the sheer number of composers who have set Emily Dickinson, it would be impossible to cover all of them in this project. As a result, I focused on four in my recital: Ernst Bacon, Aaron Copland, Libby Larsen, and Lori Laitman. The four composers together span the century since Dickinson's death, and they themselves represent important differences and similarities in their identities,

⁶¹ Kimball, "Setting Emily," 462.

⁶² Brice Farwell, letter to Carolyn Cooley, February 23, 1997. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson's Poems*, 127.

⁶³ Robert T. Adams, letter to Carolyn Cooley, March 3, 1997. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson's Poems*, 138.

approaches to Emily Dickinson, and focuses in their compositions. Additionally, they wrote settings I have personally performed, which enables me to speak not only from a musicological perspective but also from my own experience as a performer.

“Musicians Wrestle Everywhere”: Composers Wrestling with Emily Dickinson

*Musicians wrestle everywhere —
All day — among the crowded air
I hear the silver strife —
And — waking — long before the morn —
Such transport breaks upon the town
I think it that "New Life"!*

*It is not Bird — it has no nest —
Nor "Band" — in brass and scarlet — drest —
Nor Tamborin — nor Man —
It is not Hymn from pulpit read —
The "Morning Stars" the Treble led
On Time's first Afternoon!*

*Some — say — it is "the Spheres" — at play!
Some say that bright Majority
Of vanished Dames — and Men!
Some — think it service in the place
Where we — with late — celestial face —
Please God — shall Ascertain!*

J# 157⁶⁴

In order to discuss the way the identities of the composers and their contexts made an impact on their settings, a brief introduction to each of them and their ideas about Emily Dickinson is necessary. Ernst Bacon (1898-1990) was a pianist, composer, conductor, writer, and teacher of music. As musicologist Ruth Friedberg and vocalist Robin Fisher identify, Bacon followed the “proverbial [American] dictum to ‘Go West’” when he chose to leave his native

⁶⁴ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 74.

Chicago for a Master's Degree at the University of California.⁶⁵ Musically, Bacon is counted among the "Americanists" whose work coincided with the isolationism of the World War-era, rejecting European styles in search of an American sound.⁶⁶ Along with Arthur Farwell, Bacon is considered to be one of the first notable art song composers to discover and set Dickinson's poetry.⁶⁷ Over the course of his life, he set nearly 70 of Dickinson's poems, though not all those settings were published.⁶⁸ He also set texts by Walt Whitman and other notable writers, arranged folksongs, and was influenced by a variety of American folk traditions, including spirituals, Appalachian folk tunes, and jazz.⁶⁹ His work was recognized by a variety of fellowships and awards.

Though Ernst Bacon did not publish extensive writings, his letters and interviews, as well as personal details shared by his family members, convey his perspective on Emily Dickinson. He always spoke with admiration for the poet. As he wrote in "On Words and Tones," the introduction to his *Fifty Songs*, Dickinson could, "compress immensity into four regular lines and with an economy just as great as the classical Chinese poets and painters, conjure ecstasy, poignancy, immensity, grief, passion, and intimacy with nature."⁷⁰ Though Bacon praises

⁶⁵ Friedberg and Fisher, *American Art Song*, 65.

⁶⁶ Friedberg and Fisher, 45.

⁶⁷ Kimball, "Setting Emily," 462.

⁶⁸ Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*, 2–7.

⁶⁹ Philip L. Miller, "Bacon, Ernst," *Grove Music Online*, 2001, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.duproxy.palni.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000001726>.

⁷⁰ Ernst Bacon, "On Words and Tones," in *Fifty Songs* (Georgetown, CA: Dragon's Teeth Press, 1974), v.

Dickinson, the context surrounding the praise reveals an underlying underestimation of her work. He was writing about the kind of poetry that he felt was ideal for setting to music, and he detailed a list of “essential requirements:—brevity, singleness of mood, absence of classical allusion and metaphor, metrical simplicity, and a language musical enough to invite music, yet not so musical as to be sheer music on its own.”⁷¹ Reminiscent of Coroniti’s statement that a poem must make room for music, Bacon seems to be looking for poems that he felt had already left room for music. The “Emily Dickinson” Bacon praises, then, is mediocre in her field; she writes well enough to be usable, but not so well that her work stands as “high art” alone.

Perhaps related, Bacon often emphasized Dickinson’s womanhood. Of course, the “spiritual marriage” he imagined with Dickinson was inherently gendered. Likewise, he wrote to the famous and groundbreaking African American contralto Marian Anderson, “The poetry of Emily Dickinson has long seemed to me one of the great achievements of womankind.”⁷² Bacon was writing in the early twentieth century, and the gendering of his statement reflects a man of his time. However, identifying Dickinson’s writing as the greatest of *womankind* implies that her poetry has not reached greatness on its own; instead, it still falls second to the great poetry of *mankind*. Indeed, he follows this statement with another reference that implies mediocrity, writing that her poetry “gives lyric expression to philosophical human thought without the latter being too apparent.”⁷³ To Bacon, Dickinson was smart, but she did not come across as so smart that it was distracting. His condescending writing essentialized her to her femininity. Reflecting

⁷¹ Bacon, v.

⁷² Ernst Bacon, letter to Marian Anderson, February 10, 1939. Quoted in Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*, 3.

⁷³ Bacon, February 10, 1939. Quoted in Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*, 3.

on Bacon's writings about Dickinson, reviewer Sara Hopkins noted, "She was not strange or puzzling to him..."⁷⁴ What is interesting about that statement is that Dickinson *is* strange and puzzling, and some of her poems elude even the best literary scholars. Bacon's "Dickinson" is domesticated, understandable, and, above all, feminine.

Aaron Copland (1900-1990) is perhaps the most famous of the composers to set Emily Dickinson. Born in Brooklyn to a Russian Jewish immigrant family, Aaron Copland was a "well-traveled, cosmopolitan New Yorker."⁷⁵ After becoming the first in a series of American composers to study with famed composition teacher Nadia Boulanger in France, Copland returned to the United States and, like Bacon, wrote as an "Americanist." He famously composed music in a variety of styles, including both elevated "art music" and accessible music based on popular themes and melodies, particularly American folk song.⁷⁶ Mostly known for his instrumental works, Copland published his only true art song set, *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, in 1950, and republished eight of them for voice and orchestra in 1958. In many ways, as musicologist Larry Starr argues in his book *The Dickinson Songs of Aaron Copland*, *Twelve Poems* represented the full range of Copland's ability as a composer and served as a turning point in his career.⁷⁷ The influential composition has been adopted into the canon of standard soprano vocal literature. Copland also published extensively on music.

⁷⁴ Sara Hopkins, "Review of Songs of Charles Ives and Ernst Bacon," *Emily Dickinson International Society Bulletin* 7, no. 1 (June 1995): 7. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson's Poems*, 130.

⁷⁵ Baker, "Aaron Copland's Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson: A Reading of Dissonance and Harmony," 1.

⁷⁶ Baker, 1.

⁷⁷ Larry Starr, *The Dickinson Songs of Aaron Copland*, ed. Michael J. Budds, CMS Sourcebooks in American Music 1 (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002).

Despite Copland's proclivity for writing, he was notably silent on Emily Dickinson and his Dickinson settings. However, he did provide a brief paragraph as a program note, in which he comments, "The poems center about no single theme, but they treat of subject matter particularly close to Miss Dickinson: nature, death, life, eternity... It is my hope that, in seeking a musical counterpart for the unique personality of the poet, I have given the songs... the aspect of a song cycle."⁷⁸ In this simple introduction, Copland establishes that he, like many other composers, was consciously attempting to capture Emily Dickinson in song. From his comment about the variety of subjects, Copland implies that he views Dickinson as a complex figure, different, perhaps, from Bacon's understandable "Dickinson." Interestingly, one of Copland's only other writings about Dickinson is a letter to Ernst Bacon. Copland replied to a letter from Bacon, saying, "Naturally I was interested to know that you had also produced a number of songs based on the poems of dear Emily. (I wonder if you know that I orchestrated 8 of my own settings of 12 of her poems.)"⁷⁹ Bacon wrote his own letter about Dickinson to Carlton Lowenberg, a scholar of Dickinson settings, expressing his "delight" in Lowenberg's "absorption with Emily Dickinson," and claiming, "It happens that I, of all composers, was one of the first to discover this unique poet as early as the late twenties, whereupon I must have written at least 30 songs in a short time."⁸⁰ Bacon's letter seems to claim a sort of ownership of or right to Emily Dickinson; Copland refers to the poet as "dear Emily" and restates his own achievements with her poems. Dickinson, in both instances, becomes a pawn under the power of two men, a

⁷⁸ Aaron Copland, *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1951).

⁷⁹ Aaron Copland, Letter to Ernst Bacon, May 10, 1979. Quoted in Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*, 4.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*, 3.

position that instantly highlights, once again, her status as a woman.

Though Copland's writings on Emily Dickinson are scarce, composer and scholar Peter Dickinson asked Copland about his Emily Dickinson settings during a series of interviews. In the conversations, Copland describes Dickinson as "modest"⁸¹ and "New Englandy"⁸² and reports feeling very "sympathetic"⁸³ to the poet from Amherst. Though he mentions reading a biography of Dickinson and visiting her home, Copland explains what drew him to the first poem he set, J# 712, "Because I could not stop for Death": "This little girl, or this young woman, in this little town in Massachusetts, riding off into immortality with death himself, was such an extraordinarily magnificent picture."⁸⁴ That Copland describes Dickinson as a "little girl" or "young woman" contrasts with the reality of the poet's age. According to Johnson's research, Dickinson likely wrote "Because I could not stop for Death" around the year 1863,⁸⁵ making her 33 years old. While not aged, Dickinson was no longer a little girl. Copland's description of Dickinson as youthful, particularly coupled with the "small town" setting, may really be implying a "Dickinson" who is naïve and innocent in her reclusiveness.

Additionally, Copland's emphasis on Dickinson's Massachusetts, New England, background situates her firmly as an ideal American figure, while Copland's own position as American was suspect due to his Jewishness, homosexuality, and leftist politics. Finally, Copland uses the word "sympathy" several times in describing his relationship to Dickinson.

⁸¹ Dickinson, "Emily Dickinson and Music," 191.

⁸² Dickinson, 193.

⁸³ Dickinson, 191.

⁸⁴ Dickinson, 191.

⁸⁵ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 350.

Though not as intimate as Bacon's "marriage," sympathy does convey closeness and perhaps even protectiveness. To some extent, Copland seems to have identified in himself a longing to relate to the poet. Given that his song cycle consciously attempts to capture Dickinson's personality, Copland seems aware that, to some extent, that involves capturing his own response to her.

Nearly fifty years after Copland's set, in 1997, Elizabeth Brown "Libby" Larsen (b. 1950) published her only art song set of Dickinson's poetry to date: *Chanting to Paradise*. Born to a musical family, Larsen attended the University of Minnesota for composition. One of the foremost living composers, Larsen has received numerous residencies and awards for her work, which spans a variety of genres from orchestral to opera to art song. She has not only set four Dickinson poems for solo voice but has also composed several choral settings of Dickinson's works. Larsen was a co-founder of the American Composers Forum, and she continues to be an active composer and lecturer.⁸⁶

Larsen has written directly about her Emily Dickinson settings on her website—a medium not available in Bacon's or Copland's time. She describes her approach to setting Dickinson: "[I] try to ferret out the game she set for herself in working on the poem, and then illuminate that game through the musical setting... My creative task is to reveal Dickinson's genius."⁸⁷ In this sense, Larsen presents a different "Dickinson" than the composers before her. This "Dickinson" is brilliantly clever as she leaves riddles to be answered by those who discover them. While Bacon sought to add to Dickinson's work with his music, Larsen tries to expose

⁸⁶ Libby Larsen, "Full Biography," *Libby Larsen*, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=243>.

⁸⁷ Libby Larsen, "Chanting to Paradise," *Libby Larsen*, accessed March 27, 2018, <https://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=241&profileID=1344&startRange=>.

qualities already within the poetry. Additionally, Larsen’s focus is less on the meaning of the poem and more on the poetry itself. For her, Dickinson’s subject matter seems secondary to the masterful way she uses language. Larsen even describes the visual aspect of the words “travel[ing] across the page in small, thoughtful steps,”⁸⁸ an image she tries to capture aurally. Larsen recognizes (unlike her predecessors) that the “I” of Dickinson’s poetry is “the first person voice of the poem”⁸⁹—the speaker—rather than Dickinson herself. Even so, Larsen does still describe the poem as being about “Dickinson’s spiritual conundrum,”⁹⁰ rather than Dickinson exploring a possible spiritual conundrum through a third-party speaker.

Notably, Larsen has a penchant for writing for and about women, often using poetry by women.⁹¹ As one of the women who fellow female composer Jennifer Higdon has credited with “[eradicating] the glass ceiling for women [composers],”⁹² Larsen had a difficult time finding female mentors in composition, so she turned to writers, “looking for women who were communicating through any art form.”⁹³ Additionally, however, Larsen reports being “drawn to first-person texts, and a certain expression of spiritual struggle,” which she says she more

⁸⁸ Libby Larsen, “I Find My Feet Have Further Goals,” *Libby Larsen*, accessed March 20, 2018, <https://libbylarsen.com/index.php?contentID=240&profileID=1101&startRange=0>.

⁸⁹ Larsen, “Chanting to Paradise.”

⁹⁰ Larsen.

⁹¹ Tina M. Stallard, “Libby Larsen,” in *Women of Influence in Contemporary Music: Nine American Composers*, ed. Michael K. Slayton (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2011), 212.

⁹² Jennifer Kelly, *In Her Own Words: Conversations with Composers in the United States* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt2tt9pb>.

⁹³ Kelly, 307.

commonly finds in texts by female authors, where “the language is subjective and very personal.”⁹⁴ Naturally, then, the subjective and personal quality of Dickinson’s poetry would appeal to Larsen. Of course, the subjectivity of many female writers reflects the subjectivity of marginalized writers more broadly. Whereas white, male writers have the luxury of a sense of objectivity and speaking for the normative experience, marginalized writers are forced to come from their own experience. What Larsen identifies with in Dickinson’s poetry is distinctly identity-related. Therefore, while Copland and Bacon also emphasized Dickinson’s femininity, Larsen does so in a different way. She relates to Dickinson as a female artist in a man’s world, lending her “Dickinson” a sense of strength, perseverance, and feminism.

Unlike Larsen, Lori Laitman (b. 1955) is known primarily for her vocal compositions. As she claims, “I found my voice in writing for voice.”⁹⁵ After growing up in a musical family and attending Yale for flute, Laitman began composing on the side.⁹⁶ In her composition, Laitman has set Emily Dickinson poems more frequently than any other poet, and she has also composed a song cycle entitled “Are Women People?” including texts from Susan B. Anthony and the 19th Amendment.⁹⁷ Like all three of the other composers, Laitman has received many awards for her composition.

Laitman, similar to Copland, has written almost nothing about her Dickinson compositions. In an interview with soprano Mary Crawford for Crawford’s doctoral dissertation,

⁹⁴ Stallard, “Women of Influence,” 212.

⁹⁵ Lori Laitman, “My Beginnings as an ‘Accidental’ Vocal Composer,” *Lori Laitman Composer*, accessed April 10, 2018, artsongs.com/informal-biography/.

⁹⁶ Laitman.

⁹⁷ Lori Laitman, “Are Women People?,” *Lori Laitman Composer*, December 28, 2016, <http://artsongs.com/catalog/are-women-people.html>.

Laitman did answer some questions about her Dickinson settings. The composer discussed the qualities of Dickinson's work that drew her to the poet, namely "the beauty of her language and her striking vision."⁹⁸ However, Laitman also notes that some of Dickinson's poems are "too complex to be perfect for song—some, for me, are even too complex without song!"⁹⁹ Rather than a language-based reading of the poem like Larsen, then, Laitman relies extensively on "intuition" and describes many of her Dickinson settings as using "mood-setting."¹⁰⁰ While Larsen highlighted literary aspects of the poetry, Laitman's settings are more consciously emblematic of her own response to the poem, rather than an extrapolation of the poetry itself. In comparison with the "Dickinsons" of other composers, Laitman's "Dickinson" seems to be less distinct. However, Laitman clearly sees Dickinson as a complicated, intelligent, and even visionary figure, perhaps even with an intuition similar to Laitman's own.

In all four composers' discussions of Dickinson and their settings, it is evident that each is drawn to Dickinson and her poetry in ways that reflect their own identities and experiences. Whether it is Copland interacting with the American image of the New Englander (an image Copland himself does not fit) or Laitman consciously capturing her own response, Dickinson becomes a mirror for the composer to better see aspects of himself or herself. Any portrayal of "Emily Dickinson" in music is then filtered through the lens and identities of the composer in question. The variety in Dickinson's poetry and the many unknowns about her life make space for each of the composers to form a personal relationship with a different version of the absent poet. Despite the variety of those relationships, however, they share a common characteristic:

⁹⁸ Mary Crawford, "Dickinson Sings," 74.

⁹⁹ Crawford, 74.

¹⁰⁰ Crawford, 76.

Dickinson had no choice in the matter. Her relationships with the composers are fundamentally one-sided, based on use, and may have been entirely unwanted.

“Bind me—I still can sing”: Publishing Dickinson Settings

*Bind me — I still can sing —
Banish — my mandolin
Strikes true within —*

*Slay — and my Soul shall rise
Chanting to Paradise —
Still thine.*

J# 1005¹⁰¹

“Copland assumes the role of an interpreter of Emily Dickinson,” wrote Baker in her discussion of *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Indeed, Bacon, Larsen, and Laitman function as interpreters as well. Their interpretations (unlike the scholars’ interpretations Baker describes) are often not found in journal articles. However, in addition to the ways composers have discussed or written about Dickinson, the music can also reveal how they imagine her, through both the musical choices in the settings themselves and the way the settings are published.

All of the composers published at least some of their Dickinson settings in song collections. Some of these sets are identifiable as “song cycles,” collections of individual songs “designed as a unit.”¹⁰² Copland’s *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, for example, is a song cycle. Several of Bacon’s collections, meanwhile, are less likely to be considered cycles because

¹⁰¹ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 466.

¹⁰²Susan Youens, “Song Cycle,” *Grove Music Online*, 2001, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/0-mo-9781561592630-e-0000026208>.

they consist of individual songs, composed separately, that happen to have been selected to be published together. However, collections are also often designed to function well as a set.¹⁰³ Whether or not one considers a particular publication a song cycle or merely a collection, publication groupings indicate intentional choices by a composer. The Dickinson poems a composer chooses to set and place together may indicate how a composer interprets Emily Dickinson. A setting or a collection may also be accompanied by dedications or epigraphs that further illuminate the composer's intentions.

Since Dickinson did not publish her poetry herself, she was never required to make the choices that often arise with publication. Thus, she did not title her the vast majority of her poetry (though editors of her early collections often did), and she did not group her poems for publication in volumes. Composers, however, in order to have their compositions performed, face choices of publication, including the necessity of titles for both individual songs and collections, which poems to group together in collections or cycles, and whether or not to include dedications or epigraphs. The choices composers have made in each of these areas have ramifications for the way Emily Dickinson is presented in the published setting that also likely affect the way the composition is performed.

Some of Ernst Bacon's settings exist only in manuscript (unpublished), while others were published as individual art songs. However, Bacon did publish his Dickinson settings in collections that together span half a century: *Quiet Airs* (1927); *Songs from Emily Dickinson* (1932); *Six Songs* (1942); *Five Poems Set to Music* (1944); *Ten Songs for Chorus of Women's Voices, Soprano and Alto Soli, and Piano* (1971); *Fifty Songs* (1974), and the limited edition

¹⁰³Youens.

Tributaries: Songs (1978).¹⁰⁴ None appear to be intended as song cycles. *Fifty Songs* and *Tributaries* are larger collections that are likely intended more as anthologies of Bacon's songs than as true collections. *Six Songs*, however, as a shorter collection, was likely published together intentionally, placing two Dickinson poems alongside two poems by Walt Whitman and one by Carl Sandburg (as well as an arrangement of an "Ancient Christmas Carol").¹⁰⁵ The grouping of poets has an effect on Bacon's Dickinson. The other two poets are famous for their distinctly American writing, and, indeed, the Sandburg poem, "Omaha," references an American city in its title. In this context, "Dickinson" becomes distinctly American, and Dickinson's J# 266, which Bacon calls "The Banks of the Yellow Sea," with its reference to "Western Mystery,"¹⁰⁶ now seems to be describing America.

Bacon's *Quiet Airs*¹⁰⁷ is also shorter and intended as a collection, as illustrated by its title. The set includes a poem by Walt Whitman, as well as poetry by Sara Teasdale, Robert Herrick, Emily Brontë, and Chinese poet Cho Wên-chün. Dickinson and Herrick are the only poets included more than once (three poems by the former and two from the latter). The title likely refers literally to the dynamic markings—which are often *piano* or softer throughout the set (though there are rare occurrences of *forte* or even *fortissimo*)—as well as the subject matter of the poems, which often focus on heartbreak and despair, sometimes surrounding love. The "Emily Dickinson" of this set is featured in poems J# 211, 536, and 1510, to which Bacon adds

¹⁰⁴ Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*, 3–7. Of these sets, only three contain exclusively Dickinson poems (*Songs from Emily Dickinson*, *Five Poems Set to Music*, and *Ten Songs for Chorus of Women's Voices*). The others set Dickinson alongside other poets.

¹⁰⁵ Ernst Bacon, *Six Songs* (New York, NY: Classical Vocal Reprints, 1991).

¹⁰⁶ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 122.

¹⁰⁷ Ernst Bacon, *Quiet Airs* (New York, NY: Classical Vocal Reprints, 1991).

new titles: “Eden,” “The Heart,” and “The Little Stone,” respectively. All three poems, consistent with the rest of the collection, demonstrate a longing for a happiness which is not grasped, making this “Emily Dickinson” distinctly depressed, longing, and alone. The heartbreak that permeates the set leaves a Dickinson in mourning over the unrequited loves of her life.

Similarly, Lori Laitman published her Dickinson songs in many sets, most of which consist entirely of Dickinson settings. One notable exception, however, is her 2003 collection *Fresh Patterns*, which contains three songs.¹⁰⁸ The first is a setting of Dickinson’s J# 26, “It’s All I Have to Bring Today.” The second sets a poem by living poet Annie Finch entitled “A Letter to Emily Dickinson,” in which Finch expresses the lasting effect of Dickinson’s poetry and its influence on her own work. In the final song, entitled “Fresh Patterns,” Laitman entwines the previous two pieces together into a duet for two sopranos, putting Dickinson in dialogue with the admiring Finch. The “Emily Dickinson” that emerges in this set is particularly distinct. She becomes a wise and benevolent teacher-figure, a model for those who follow. The Dickinson poem Laitman chose to accompany Finch’s tribute is particularly interesting:

It's all I have to bring today —
This, and my heart beside —
This, and my heart, and all the fields —
And all the meadows wide —
Be sure you count — should I forget
Some one the sum could tell —
This, and my heart, and all the Bees

¹⁰⁸ Lori Laitman, *Fresh Patterns*, 2nd ed. (Potomac, MD: Enchanted Knickers Music, 2017).

Which in the Clover dwell.¹⁰⁹

Taken alone, the “it” in the poem is ambiguous. What is it that Dickinson brings? Coupled with Finch’s poem about the power of Dickinson’s words, “it” becomes poetry. Laitman’s “Dickinson” brings her poetry, containing her heart and all her experiences, and hopes it will amount to a worthwhile sum. In response, Finch’s poem reassures “Dickinson” of her impact, giving her life and work a reified meaning in the teaching of another.

Aaron Copland’s *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, meanwhile, and Libby Larsen’s *Chanting to Paradise* contain only Emily Dickinson settings. However, the titles of the sets raise another important question about publication, particularly of Dickinson settings. Most art songs—and collections—need (or at least use) titles. Copland’s and Larsen’s titles are notably different. Copland attributes the settings directly to Dickinson, invoking her in the title.¹¹⁰ He also, however, labels the set by the number of settings involved. Given that Dickinson titled few of her poems, Copland’s simple titling seems particularly appropriate. Larsen, on the other hand, chooses to use a short phrase as the title of her set.¹¹¹ It comes from Dickinson’s poem J# 1005,¹¹² the second stanza of which reads “Slay — and my Soul shall rise/Chanting to Paradise —/Still thine.”¹¹³ The title implies transcendence and ethereality, which reflect directly on the poet, though she goes unnamed. From the references to both chanting and paradise, Larsen’s “Dickinson” reads as a sort of saintlike figure. While Copland lets the audience discover

¹⁰⁹ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 18–19.

¹¹⁰ Copland, *Twelve Poems*.

¹¹¹ Larsen, “Chanting to Paradise.”

¹¹² See page 29

¹¹³ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 466.

“Dickinson” in his set, Larsen gives a suggestion as to the figure one might find in hers.

Issues around titles do not only arise with collections, however. While all four composers do title their Dickinson songs, they use several different methods of titling. Larsen and Copland often title the Dickinson songs with the first line of the Dickinson poem, sometimes slightly shortened. For example, the title of Larsen’s setting of J# 1005 is “Bind me — I still can sing” (the first line of the poem, omitting only a dash at the end¹¹⁴), and the title of Copland’s first piece is “Nature, the gentlest mother” for J# 790, the first line of which is “Nature — the Gentlest Mother is.”¹¹⁵ However, exceptions do exist. For example, the final setting in Copland’s cycle is entitled “The Chariot.” The poem Copland uses is J# 712, “Because I could not stop for Death.” The word “chariot” is not in the poem; instead, Death’s vehicle is referred to as a “carriage.” The short, abrupt title changes the sense of the poem. “Carriage” presents a very different image, one of an enclosed buggy with seats, windows, and possibly curtains. “Chariot,” on the other hand, ordinarily refers to an open-air vehicle, ridden standing. It is a more reckless and dangerous image, more Ancient Roman than nineteenth century. A carriage might take one quietly and gently away; a chariot seems to race with breathtaking speed and even violence. While the title does describe a central image of the poem, it contorts that image from Dickinson’s original diction and introduces Death as a more ancient and fearsome figure.

Likewise, Larsen’s choral setting of J# 775, “If Blame be my side — forfeit Me” is titled “Home,” a word that does not appear until the very end of the poem.¹¹⁶ While Larsen chooses it

¹¹⁴ Writers commonly eliminate final punctuation (especially a final dash) from the first line of the poem when it is used as the title.

¹¹⁵ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 385.

¹¹⁶ Libby Larsen, *Home* (United States: Kenwood Editions, 2013).

as her title, the image of home does not even seem particularly resonant in the poem, which reads

If Blame be my side — forfeit Me —
But doom me not to forfeit Thee —
To forfeit Thee? The very name
Is sentence from Belief — and Home —¹¹⁷

Calling the poem “home” leaves the listener waiting for the relevance of the title, which does not even occur until the end of the poem. It also changes the poem, as “Home” recalls warmth, family, and safety. However, the speaker of the poem seems to actually be dealing with a situation where she may be forced to forfeit things dear to her because of something for which she receives “blame.” The tone is more likely agitated, afraid, and pleading.

Complicating the poem further, Larsen also adds a Biblical epigraph from Ruth, chapter 16: “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For where you go, I will go.”¹¹⁸ While this matches the theme of the poem nicely, it adds a religious dimension not found in the poem alone. Is “thee” then God? If so, the poem becomes a prayer of sorts, and “home” has heavenly connotations. In the quote from Ruth, however, Ruth is not speaking to God but to her mother-in-law, Naomi. She implies that “home” does not refer to a literal space or house as much as to the condition of being with a person or people one loves. In this reading, perhaps “home” is actually synonymous with “thee.” This would explain why Larsen felt the image of home was central enough to the poem to make it the title. However, while Dickinson’s original poem is intentionally vague and ambiguous, reserving many details of the speaker’s situation, Larsen’s title forces an overlay of simplicity. On one hand, this might encourage audiences to

¹¹⁷ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 378.

¹¹⁸ Larsen, *Home*.

engage with a possible interpretation. On the other, it detracts from the poem itself and from the audience's ability to interpret and interact with Dickinson's own words. In the process, Larsen also reveals a conception of "Dickinson" that is inherently tied to religious struggle and is also secondary. Though Dickinson's poem alone suggests dependency, Larsen's title adds a domesticity alongside the dependency that renders a more confined and powerless "Dickinson."

The discussion of emphasizing certain implications of the poem raises yet another, more serious, concern: the ethics of changing someone else's poetry. While titles exist only outside the setting itself, alterations within the text sung by the performer are then inherent to the setting and can change meaning in more drastic ways. For example, manuscripts of Ernst Bacon's settings of J# 1596, "Few, yet enough," indicate that Bacon reproduced the line as "Few get enough."¹¹⁹ In Dickinson's text, the speaker indicates a sense of completion and hope. In Bacon's version, the speaker is marked by deprivation and need. Bacon's "Dickinson" reads, as a result, as a whiny, disadvantaged figure, very different from the hopeful resolution of the speaker in Dickinson's original poem.

"Earth's Corroboration of Ecstasy's Impediment": Composers' Musical Choices

*The fascinating chill that music leaves
Is Earth's corroboration
Of Ecstasy's impediment —
'Tis Rapture's germination
In timid and tumultuous soil
A fine — estranging creature —
To something upper wooing us
But not to our Creator —*

J# 1480¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*, 3.

¹²⁰ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 625.

Composers talk about their “Emily Dickinsons,” and they make choices about publication that reveal their “Emily Dickinsons.” But their musical decisions may be the most important evidence of how they see Dickinson. The voicings and ranges composers use, the repetition or omission of text, and the mood created by the melody or accompaniment—or both—contain clues as to their imaginings of Dickinson. By noting these various aspects, one can begin to see (or hear) the composer’s “Emily Dickinson” within the music itself. Of course, music is a fundamentally subjective experience, and art song has many layers. The performers’ experiences and choices also affect the “Emily Dickinson” who appears in these settings, as do the predispositions and interpretations of the audience. As a result, the “Emily Dickinson” who emerges from my reading of these composers’ settings may look slightly different from the “Emily Dickinson” who emerges from others’ encounters with these settings. However, the process of exploring how those “Emily Dickinsons” are created and experienced allows one to become more fully aware of the way an art song affect the way one perceives the poet who unwittingly lent her name and face to the new artwork.

One of the most immediately noticeable characteristics of a large number of Dickinson settings is how frequently they are written for a female singer. Indeed, of the composers featured here, Ernst Bacon is the only one to occasionally directly set the poems for tenors or baritones. His decisions, however, are not so much gender-specific as range-specific. For example, *Quiet* *Airs* is intended for contralto (a female voice type) or baritone (a male voice type). Copland and Larsen set their art song collections for women. Laitman’s Emily Dickinson art song collections are all intended for women, though she does sometimes publish individual songs in keys for

every voice type,¹²¹ presumably for convenience and marketability. While there are some settings that have been written for men, the majority of the collections (and all the most famous settings) are for women, often for sopranos, the highest female voices. Implied in this choice is that Emily Dickinson's poetry is somehow inherently feminine and that only other women can articulate Dickinson's message (ironic, given that many of the composers articulating her message through their settings are male).

Even for pieces that are not strictly "art songs," some composers still overtly show their emphasis on Dickinson's femininity. Composer Leo Smit,¹²² for example, wrote a piece called "Alone," using J# 663, "Again — his voice is at the door." The piece is written for a viola player who also recites the poetry. Smit specifies, however, that the piece is intended for "*Female Viola/Reciter.*"¹²³ Given that, unlike with the voice, the sex of a violist does not affect the timbre of the viola playing, this specification is even more overt in classifying Dickinson as a poet of and for the female. Of course, it is also interesting to note that using the title "alone" for a poem about a happy hour in love once again immediately highlights Dickinson as heartbroken and lonely, despite the fact that the poem actually uses the word "alone" to refer to the speaker being alone with her lover.

Likewise, though many choral settings are written for SATB (a choir of mixed voices: soprano, alto, tenor, bass), an unusual number of settings also exist for combinations of soprano

¹²¹ Lori Laitman, "Catalog," *Lori Laitman Composer*, accessed April 4, 2018, <http://artsongs.com/catalog>.

¹²² Two men by the name of Leo Smit have become composers of note; American composer Leo Smit, the composer in question here, lived from 1921-1999 and wrote almost 100 settings of Emily Dickinson poems (see Lowenberg, *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*, 89-91.).

¹²³ Leo Smit, *Alone* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Theodore Presser Company, 1998). Emphasis added.

and alto—female—voices (SA, SSA, SSAA). As choral music scholars Susan D. Stewart and Susan D. Smith note, “women’s choirs may have received the greatest musical rewards from Emily Dickinson’s poetry, especially advanced and mature women’s groups interested in difficult and substantive works.”¹²⁴ In other words, though there may be more Dickinson settings for SATB, the “best” are for women’s voices. Libby Larsen, in her Dickinson choral pieces, has written both individual pieces and collections for both SATB and women’s voices. Choral settings of Emily Dickinson for only male voices are much more rare, and neither Bacon, Copland, Larsen, nor Laitman wrote any. The explanation for this may be found in Tom Rasely’s comments about his father Charles W. Rasely’s SSA setting of J# 254, “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers,” which the elder Rasely simply calls “Hope.” The son, a musician and composer in his own right, writes that the women’s voicing may have been chosen “to suit the lyrics—the fact that it was written by a female; the tenderness of the narrator’s thoughts; the image of hope as a bird that sings sweetly; and ‘never in extremity asked a crumb of me.’”¹²⁵ According to Tom Rasely, such thoughts are not “‘guy’ thoughts.”¹²⁶ In this case, “Dickinson” is so female that she is unsuitable and even unrelatable for men.

On the other hand, the fact that choral settings are written for a number of voices to sing together frequently implies a universality. In choral settings for women, Dickinson can become a figure who somehow embodies a “female experience.” In SATB compositions, setting Emily Dickinson to be sung by all voice parts joined together presents her as a figure with whom

¹²⁴ Stewart and Smith, “Song in Emily Dickinson’s Poems,” 13.

¹²⁵ Tom Rasely, letter to Carolyn Cooley, February 16, 1997. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 132.

¹²⁶ Rasely, February 16, 1997. Quoted in Cooley, *Music of Dickinson’s Poems*, 132.

everyone can relate, someone who encompasses and embodies what makes us human. This dynamic becomes particularly interesting given some of the poems chosen for choral setting. For example, Larsen sets J# 919, “If I can stop one Heart from breaking” for SSA women’s chorus.¹²⁷ J# 919, however, is a personal poem about the meaning of life, and it was private in the sense that, like Dickinson’s other poetry, it was not shared during her lifetime. By taking Dickinson’s private poem about the meaning of life and setting it for several voices to sing, Larsen implies that the struggle for meaning is universal, and that Emily Dickinson is someone through whom all can understand themselves and our own personal experiences can be seen as uniting. However, setting it for female voices also implies that this may be truer for women, or that women’s struggle for meaning often looks like Dickinson’s. In this case, that suggestion may be problematic, as the speaker of J# 919 finds her life will not be in vain if she manages to be helpful and nurturing, i.e. motherly, an expectation of the “feminine” that certainly does not match every woman’s experience. While it may (or may not) be true that serving others gives life purpose, implying that this is particularly true for women reifies norms of the woman as domestic and motherly.

Composers do not only choose *who* will be performing Dickinson’s words; they also choose *how*. Similar to choosing a title, repeating or omitting parts of the poetry allows the composer to emphasize some images or lines over others. However, unlike a title, this change occurs within the setting itself. A title requires a program or an announcement for an audience to know it; changes to the text within the setting itself are more prominent and affect the presentation of “Emily Dickinson” more directly. A particularly potent example of the effects of

¹²⁷ Libby Larsen, *Today, This Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

these text changes can be found in two settings of the same poem, J# 288, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?”¹²⁸

In Laitman’s “I’m Nobody! Who are You?,”¹²⁹ she ends with a repeat of some of the beginning text. “I’m Nobody! Who are You? Are you Nobody Too? I’m Nobody! Don’t Tell!”¹³⁰ This ending almost reverses the meaning of the poem. In Dickinson’s original poem, she ends with the image of the frog telling its name the livelong day to an admiring bog. Though it is playful, that ending seems to find relief in being reclusive and unknown. However, Laitman ends the song with the speaker whispering a not-so-secret “secret” to the world. The “Emily Dickinson” in this version of the poem seems confident and outgoing, flirtatious with her readers. She seems to know that she *is* “Somebody” but is teasing the audience or laughing at the world for not having figured that out yet. In many ways, Laitman’s portrayal of “Dickinson” has a more distinctly feminist bent, as she laughs in the face of a world who might have told her she was nothing or assumed she was.

In Bacon’s setting of the same poem, he cuts the phrase “They’d advertise—you know.” For me, this is particularly interesting, because it seems to be touching on exactly what this project explores. The line “they’d advertise” is the only line in the poem that suggests that one of the dangers of projecting one’s image and words into the world is that other people can take that image and those words and do what they want with them. It is the only line that hints Dickinson might have thought about what people like these composers could do with her words if they were published. Without that line in the poem, Bacon seems to be ignoring the ways in

¹²⁸ See page 6

¹²⁹ Lori Laitman, *Four Dickinson Songs* (Potomac, MD: Enchanted Knickers Music, 1996).

¹³⁰ Laitman, 11.

which Dickinson, as a woman in her time (particularly an unmarried woman), faced a lack of agency, or the ability and freedom to make her own choices. As a result of the omission, it is not out of fear that Bacon's "Dickinson" is not a public figure but rather out of boredom with the "dreariness" of always having to live in the public eye. To me, this portrayal makes "Dickinson" lose some of the sympathy she held in the original poem.

Despite all of the overt choices in publication, performance direction, and even text use in the settings, even settings that retain the original poem exactly and use a neutral title and context in publishing still do not leave the poem unchanged. In "Going to Heaven," by Aaron Copland, for example, Copland does not change the original poem very much at all but differences in emphasis do exist. On paper, the poem seems to be about grief. The song, however, seems to focus more on the question of religion and the meaning (or meaninglessness) of life. That must come, then, from the music itself. In this case, a very recognizable motif (short, recurring melody) used on the words "Going to Heaven" repeats throughout the setting, drawing attention back to the opening exclamation. While composers affect the texts they use in different ways, every composer, by setting the poem to music, is adding something original and offering some interpretation. Indeed, settings without any interpretation are so bland they hardly qualify as art song. (Arguably, though, even that is its own interpretation!) Every song, therefore, in some way, is putting forth its own "Emily Dickinson."

"I dwell in Possibility"

*This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me —
The simple News that Nature told —
With tender Majesty*

*Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see —
For love of Her — Sweet — countrymen —
Judge tenderly — of Me*

J# 441¹³¹

As I formed an interactive event out of the Dickinson settings of the four composers I chose to perform, I encountered J# 441, “This is my letter to the World” (above). In the poem, Dickinson’s speaker claims the world “never wrote to [her].” While that may have been true in her lifetime, the centuries after her death saw hundreds of composers and performers write back in their own ways—through their music as well as their words. The return letters are not exclusive to composers, however. As noted, in the beautiful duet by Lori Laitman, the composer couples Dickinson’s J# 26, “It’s all I have to bring today,” with a poem by contemporary poet Annie Finch entitled “A Letter for Emily Dickinson,” in which the latter poet expresses her indebtedness to Dickinson. She writes that her words “will never be free of [Dickinson] after all” and that “I take from you as you take me apart.”¹³² It was this setting, “Fresh Patterns,” that I chose to conclude my recital.

What was beautiful about ending with the duet was that it overtly acknowledged Dickinson’s contributions and lasting impact as an artist. While the duet, too, inevitably involved creating a version of “Dickinson,” the use of a poem titled as a “letter” respected the subjectivity involved in using and responding to Dickinson and her words. It also enabled me to invite the audience into a space of responding artistically to Dickinson themselves, recognizing

¹³¹ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 211.

¹³² Laitman, *Fresh Patterns*.

at the same time the pitfalls of doing so. While arguing that using Dickinson's words and responding to her presented ethical dilemmas, I was able to also suggest that, taken in the proper context and with background knowledge, these new artistic creations could still be a beautiful tribute.

As composers have set Emily Dickinson over and over again in the past century, they have created thousands of different artistic representations of Dickinson and her poetry. The representations do not reflect the historical Dickinson as much as the identity, time period, and social location of the composer in question. Through the way composers' conceptualizations have been translated into song, composers have actualized their ideas about Dickinson in their sheet music. They have used her as a mirror to explore themselves, a use that has, to various degrees, essentialized, oversimplified, and narrowed the complex figure of Emily Dickinson for the performers and audiences who engage with their settings.

While it may occur in particularly powerful ways with relation to Emily Dickinson, the reduction (and redaction) of a poet by the composer who sets him or her is not exclusive to Emily Dickinson. Instead, exploring the ways in which composers have presented or represented her highlights the importance of educated engagement with art song. Audiences must understand that any conception of a poet is filtered through the composer (and then through the performers), and that any representation of a poet (or even possibly a composer) must be understood as someone else's interpretation. All involved — composers, performers, and audiences alike — should be called upon to think about the potential for art song to do violence or to misrepresent, and performers must consider the extent to which they have a responsibility to provide the audience with context and information about the settings they are experiencing.

As Dickinson claimed her business was to sing, perhaps it is the business of singers to take a leaf out of her book and observe. It is not that any setting or representation of Emily Dickinson is by necessity “bad,” though some settings are certainly more respectful and informed than others. The reality is that a single setting is just one piece of the story. By putting a number of settings by a number of composers together in a recording, a recital, or even a paper, the picture of Emily Dickinson who emerges is more complicated and ambivalent. Emily Dickinson becomes not what one person is narrowing her to be but instead the complex person who lives between all those representations. Exposing the discrepancies between representations also allows those settings that treat Dickinson in the most authentic ways to shine. Just as Dickinson used the speakers in her poems to explore multiple sides of a single issue, performers and scholars can use composers’ settings to explore multiple sides of Emily Dickinson. In the end, Dickinson is then truly allowed to “dwell in possibility.”

*I dwell in Possibility —
A fairer House than Prose —
More numerous of Windows —
Superior — for Doors —*

*Of Chambers as the Cedars —
Impregnable of Eye —
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky —*

*Of Visitors — the fairest —
For Occupation — This —
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise —*

J# 657¹³³

¹³³ Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, 327.

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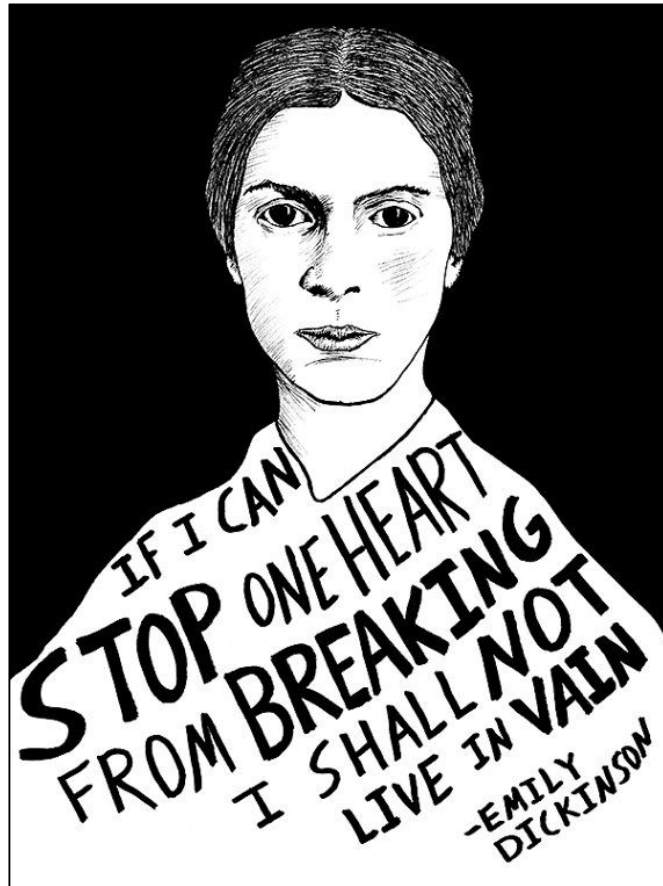
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“I’m Nobody! Who are You?”
Musical (Re)Presentations of Emily Dickinson



Abigail Martin
Honor Scholar Presentation
March 16, 2018
Music on the Square

Honor Scholar Senior Thesis Presentation
Abigail Martin, Soprano
with Laura Brumbaugh, Piano

From <i>Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson</i> "Why Do They Shut Me Out of Heaven?"	Aaron Copland (1900-1990)
From <i>Three Songs</i> "Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?"	Etta Parker Dates Unknown
From <i>Quiet Airs</i> "The Heart"	Ernst Bacon (1898-1990)
From <i>Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson</i> "Heart, We Will Forget Him"	Aaron Copland
From <i>Chanting to Paradise</i> "In This Short Life"	Libby Larsen (b. 1950)
From <i>Four Dickinson Songs</i> "If I..." "I'm Nobody! Who are You?"	Lori Laitman (b. 1955)
From <i>Songs From Emily Dickinson</i> "I'm Nobody! Who are You?"	Ernst Bacon
From <i>Quiet Airs</i> "And This of All My Hopes"	
From <i>Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson</i> "Going to Heaven"	Aaron Copland
From <i>Chanting to Paradise</i> "By a Departing Light"	Libby Larsen
From <i>Between the Bliss and Me</i> "I Gained It So"	Lori Laitman
From <i>Today, This Spring</i> "If I Can Stop One Heart From Breaking" Resonance: Elizabeth Brunell, Suzette Hartsfield, Abigail Martin, Kenna McWilliams, Emma Nelson, Marin Tack	Libby Larsen
From <i>Fresh Patterns</i> "Fresh Patterns"	Lori Laitman
with Sarah Hennessy, Soprano	

Performer's Note

I will never forget the day this event began to take shape. I had been planning on a traditional lecture recital where I performed Dickinson songs and spoke about the conclusions of my thesis work. I was sitting in Dr. Harbert's office when I brought up the fact that Emily Dickinson was such a regular correspondent and loved the written word—Wouldn't it be nice to honor her by leaving space in the programs for people to write and maybe invite them to write a written response (a letter back to Emily Dickinson) at the end? From there, our ideas spiraled outward as we redesigned what it meant to give a recital, a lecture recital, or even a workshop. That was the birth of the event you will be part of this evening. It has grown in leaps and bounds since, through the support of my committee members, further research on my part, and the practicalities of time and space.

For me, this recital is about honoring Emily Dickinson for the person and poet she was. It is also, however, about honoring *you*, the audience members who have chosen to engage with this music and these poems. When we walk into any space, we bring who we are with us—our experiences, our knowledge, our current emotions and attitudes. Rarely, in concert halls, are we asked to use anything other than our ability to listen. Tonight, I am asking you to bring your whole self here, and I will bring mine. I am asking you to try new things and meet new people, trusting that you have something unique to contribute. I am asking you to join me on my journey of discovery.

Thank you for choosing to be here this evening. An interactive event only works with an audience, and I am grateful to you for being mine. I hope you will enjoy this evening, I hope you will learn something, and, most of all, I hope that you will be inspired to continue thinking critically and creatively about the world (and the art) all around you.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my sponsor, Dr. Elissa Harbert, for believing in my out-of-the-box ideas and patiently guiding me through the process of a thesis. This project would not be what it is without her. Thanks also to the other members of my committee: Dr. Meryl Altman, Dr. Beth Benedix, and Dr. Eliza Brown. They have helped me overcome stumbling blocks and think through challenges, and all three have left their fingerprints on this evening's event. I am grateful to professor Pamela Coburn for helping me prepare this music, and to my collaborative pianist, Laura Brumbaugh, for the many hours of coachings and rehearsals she put in to help make this recital workshop happen. I cannot imagine performing this with anyone else.

Thank you to Resonance Chamber Ensemble for agreeing to perform. The women of this ensemble and the work we have done together have hugely influenced my growth as a musician, and it would not feel right to perform without them. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Sarah Hennessy, for not only performing with me but also being the most supportive of friends throughout the preparation process. Thanks to Chris Flegal, Jacob Peterman, Steven Linville and the entire production team at DePauw for helping me secure Music on the Square and preparing the space for tonight.

My final thank you goes to the many family members and friends who read my work, helped with the behind-the-scenes logistics, and, most of all, continuously encouraged me when the task of doing something new and different was overwhelmingly daunting. A special thank you goes to my parents, for their unfailing support of anything and everything I have tried for the last twenty-one years. I would not be the student or the person I am without them. To God be the Glory.

Workbook

Please feel free to use the space provided in this workbook as you wish, to write or doodle.

I encourage you to write down things you notice, moments you found interesting, ideas that come to you, or images that catch your eye in the poems or the songs.

From *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*
“Why Do They Shut Me Out of Heaven?”

Aaron Copland

What comes to mind when you think of Emily Dickinson? (1 min., free writing)

Questions for thought:

What stands out to you in these songs?

Which setting(s) do you like best? Why?

Which composer do you find most interesting? Why?

From *Three Songs*

“Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?”

Etta Parker

From *Quiet Airs*

“The Heart”

Ernst Bacon

From *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*

“Heart, We Will Forget Him”

Aaron Copland

From *Chanting to Paradise*

“In This Short Life”

Libby Larsen

From *Four Dickinson Songs*

“If I...”

Lori Laitman

Write your own stanza in Common Meter. If it helps you, think of the tune to Amazing Grace, which we used when we sang "Because I Could Not Stop for Death."*

8 syllables:

6 syllables:

8 syllables:

6 syllables:

***Please note that you will be sharing with the other people in your group.**

Question for Thought:

Do you think the changes affect the poetry or the portrayal of Emily Dickinson? How?

From *Four Dickinson Songs*

“I’m Nobody! Who are You?”

Lori Laitman

From *Songs From Emily Dickinson*

“I’m Nobody! Who are You?”

Ernst Bacon

From *Quiet Airs*

“And This of All my Hopes”

From *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*

“Going to Heaven”

Aaron Copland

Three Dickinson Poems:

By a departing light
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays.
--J# 1714--

I gained it so —
By Climbing slow —
By Catching at the Twigs that grow
Between the Bliss — and me —
It hung so high
As well the Sky
Attempt by Strategy —

I said I gained it —
This — was all —
Look, how I clutch it
Lest it fall —
And I a Pauper go —
Unfitted by an instant's Grace
For the Contented — Beggar's face
I wore — an hour ago —
--J# 359--

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain.
--J# 919--

Questions for Thought:

How were the composer's choices similar to or different from
the ones you would have made?

From *Chanting to Paradise*
"By a Departing Light"

Libby Larsen

From *Between the Bliss and Me*
"I Gained It So"

Lori Laitman

From *Today, This Spring*
"If I Can Stop One Heart From Breaking"

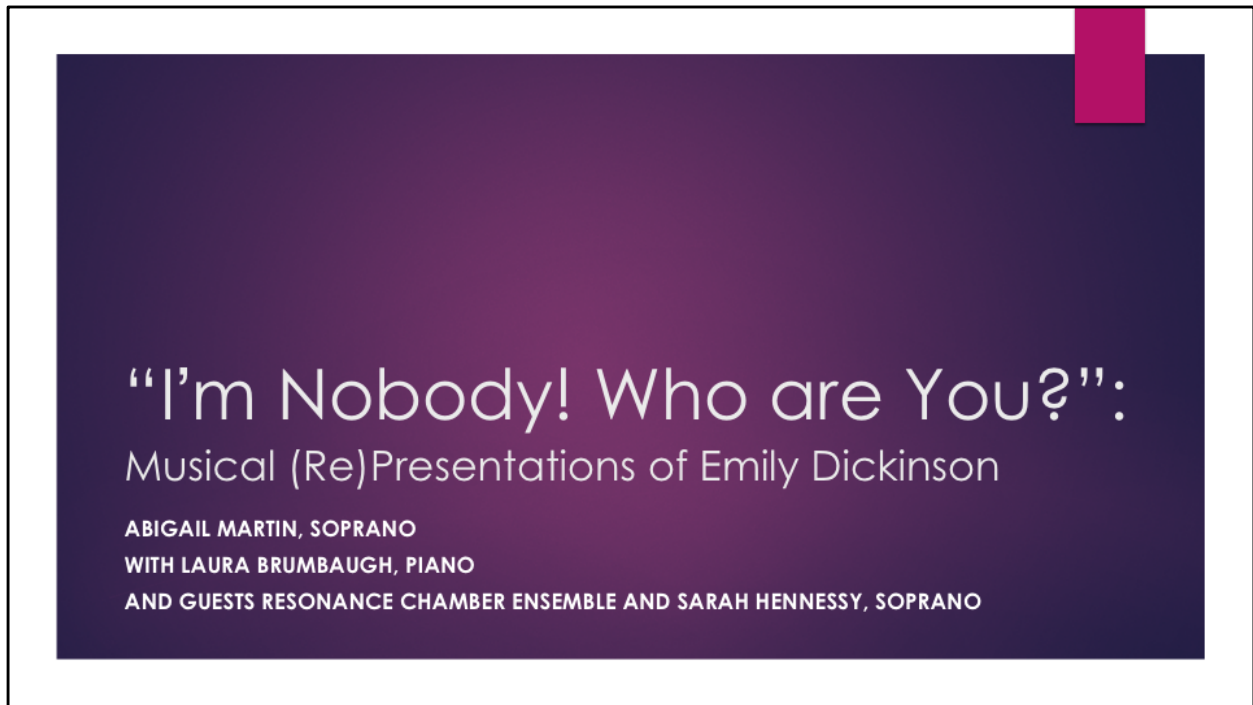
Libby Larsen

From *Fresh Patterns*
"Fresh Patterns"

Lori Laitman

Optional Activity:

I also invite you to use this last page of your workbook (or another format) to create your own artistic response--a poem, a melody, a drawing, a letter, or anything you would like--to one or two of the poems we heard today. If you would like, either this evening or in the future, please consider sharing your thoughts with me (abigailmartin_2018@depauw.edu).



Appendix 2

The notes on the powerpoint were intended as a reference script for myself alone. Though there are no citations in the script or powerpoint, the same topics can be found and are cited throughout the paper.

“Why Do They Shut Me Out of Heaven?”

From *Twelve Poems of
Emily Dickinson* (1950)
by Aaron Copland

Why — do they shut Me out of Heaven?
Did I sing — too loud?
But — I can [sing] a little "Minor"
Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn't the Angels try me —
Just — once — more —
Just — see — if I troubled them —
But don't — shut the door!

Oh, if I — were the Gentleman
In the "White Robe[s]" —
And they — were the little Hand — that knocked —
Could — I — forbid?

J# 248

*say



“I’m Nobody! Who are You?”:

Musical (Re)Presentations of Emily Dickinson

ABIGAIL MARTIN, SOPRANO

WITH LAURA BRUMBAUGH, PIANO

AND GUESTS RESONANCE CHAMBER ENSEMBLE AND SARAH HENNESSY, SOPRANO

Good evening! I’m so happy to see you all here. Welcome to Music on the Square, my living room for this evening. In Emily Dickinson’s time, an evening of visiting with friends and neighbors would be accompanied by musical performances, and this will be our space tonight for community and music.

Abigail Martin

- ▶ Senior
- ▶ 5-Year Double Degree
 - ▶ Voice Performance
 - ▶ Peace & Conflict Studies
 - ▶ Religious Studies
- ▶ Honor Scholar



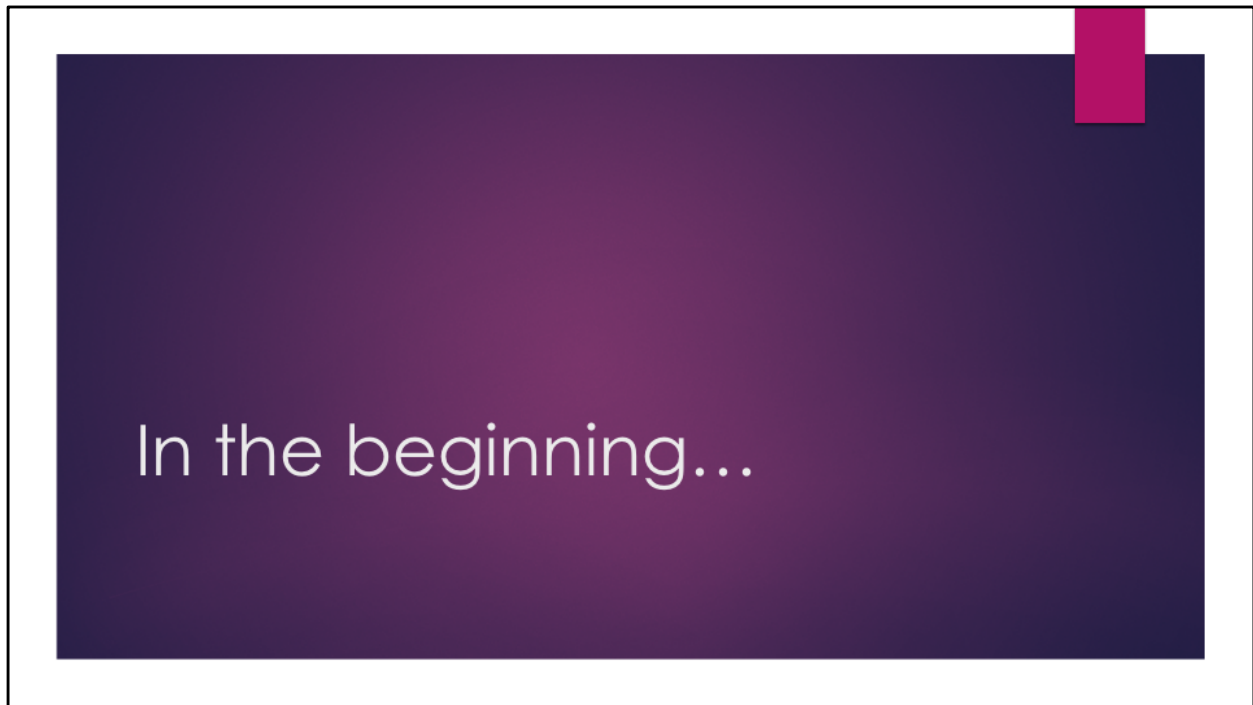
I want to begin by telling you a little bit about myself, my project, and the workshop you've decided to be a part of today. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Abigail Martin. I'm currently a senior, but I have one more year at DePauw. I'm a 5-Year Double Degree student in the School of Music, earning a Bachelor of Music in Voice Performance and a Bachelor of Arts double majoring in Peace and Conflict Studies and Religious Studies. I have four senior capstone projects to complete, but I have spent this year working on my Honor Scholar Senior Thesis. [And there's a lovely picture of me on the trail, which is my favorite thing to do when I'm not studying or practicing.] My project is about how Emily Dickinson is portrayed in and through music.



Art Song

- Western Classical music
- Solo singer with piano
- Pre-existing poetry

I am focusing on art song, which is a Western classical music tradition of songs for a solo singer with piano accompaniment. Normally, it means a song using pre-existing poetry (like Emily Dickinson's), rather than lyrics written particularly for the song. We then call the song a "setting" of that poem.



So how did I get started on this topic? I was a sophomore the first time I sang a setting of an Emily Dickinson poem, and it was actually the song I started with today. I have been fascinated with Emily Dickinson since I first read her poem "I'm Nobody! Who are You?" in middle school, and, as an angsty middle schooler, I loved the poem (though I'm not sure I really understood it). After singing "Why do they Shut Me Out of Heaven?," I took every chance I could get to sing settings of her poetry.

As voice students, we have a studio class once a week, where we have to perform the music we are working on for our peers. Our professor asks us to introduce the pieces. Normally we say the title, composer, and a brief summary (which you should ALWAYS know about your pieces). At one studio class, my voice teacher, Pamela Coburn, asked me to introduce what I would be singing. I said, "Tonight I'll be singing 'This Little Rose.' It's an Emily Dickinson poem." Pam said, "And who's the composer...?" I said, "I have no idea." While it might just have seemed like I didn't know what I was talking about (which was kind of true), there was something else going on too. I was identifying these pieces not by the composer but by the poet. For me, these songs were primarily by and about Emily Dickinson. I was associating Emily Dickinson herself with the songs that used her poetry.

Poetry as Person

- ▶ “Setting Emily” –Carol Kimball
- ▶ “a piece of Emily’s soul” –Stanworth Beckler
- ▶ “a vivid third presence...on the stage—the figure of the poetess herself” –William Fleming

I realized, after working with several different composers’ settings of Emily Dickinson poems, that the connection between the poet and her poetry is a very common phenomenon. Whether it was Carol Kimball who published an article entitled “Setting Emily,” composer Stanworth Beckler who said that one of Emily Dickinson’s poems was “a piece of Emily’s soul,” or reviewer William Fleming who said that a concert of Emily Dickinson songs evoked “a vivid third presence... on the stage--the figure of the poetess herself,” people tend to talk about Emily Dickinson’s poetry like it is Emily Dickinson herself and settings of her poetry like they are by and from her, rather than by and from a composer who is using her words (and the images associated with her) to create a new artwork.

In art song, composers interpret poetry, bringing their own perspectives to bear on the text as they write their musical settings. Then singers and pianists put those songs in their bodies, reinterpreting them through their performances. Each of these layers adds new meanings, and often the words take on a whole new tone.

Questions:

- ▶ Who was being portrayed? How?
- ▶ How were the poems being used?
- ▶ Who were the people using the poems? Why?
- ▶ Who has the right to speak for whom?
- ▶ Who gets to edit or change someone else's words?
- ▶ **What is it doing to Emily Dickinson?**

I became interested in how these songs portrayed the poet. How were the poems being used? Who were the people using the poems? Why? But also who has the right to speak for whom? Who gets to edit or change someone else's words? Many of these settings were composed by men, using a woman's words (without her permission), for other women to sing. What are the effects of these layers? Most important to me, in a genre where we talk about the poet as somehow one in the same with her poetry, what is all of this doing to Emily Dickinson?

So I set out on a project to explore those questions. I've been working with a committee of four professors: my sponsor, Elissa Harbert, and three others, Meryl Altman, Beth Benedix, and Eliza Brown. And today, I'm joined by my fantastic collaborative pianist, Laura Brumbaugh, to share some of the music that I've prepared with the help of my voice teacher, Pamela Coburn, and to have a conversation with you about some of the things I've been thinking about. My hope is that this recital will be an opportunity to honor Emily Dickinson as an artist and a person, as well as recognizing those composers who have sought to honor her throughout the past century. I hope it will be a chance for you to not only hear about some of my findings, but to also experience and think about the questions with me. While the conclusions I reached are one possibility, the experience of music is subjective, and

you might have different thoughts entirely. I'm hoping that through this evening, we can explore together who Emily Dickinson was and is, what it means to create a piece of art, and how we can powerfully and respectfully honor artists who have come before.

As you might be able to tell, this is a very interactive event. However, everything I ask you to do today is an invitation. The activities I have designed will hopefully be engaging and fun for you and will help you think about the topic and the music in new ways, but that is only an invitation. If you choose not to participate in a given activity, that is completely okay. Likewise, no matter where you are coming from, you have something valuable to bring to these activities and conversations. Some of you may have a background in music, an interest in Emily Dickinson, or be Honors Scholars working on your own interdisciplinary research, and that's awesome. But even if you don't think you know anything about these topics, you bring your own knowledge and experiences in areas I may know nothing about, which are also valuable in helping us listen to and think about this music.

First Activity

- ▶ Get into a group of 5 people
- ▶ As diverse as possible
- ▶ Choose a semi-circle of 5 chairs
- ▶ Sit and look up front for your next directions

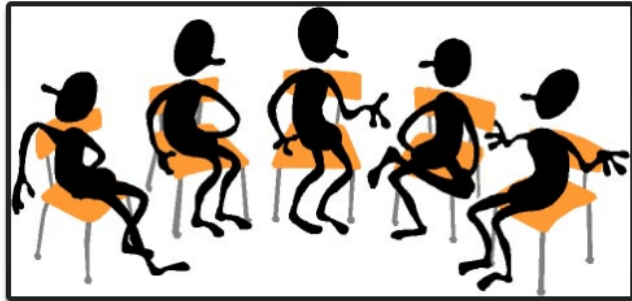


So now I have my first invitation for you. If you are willing, find a group of five people to be your conversation group for this evening. I really encourage you to gather as diverse a group as possible—different ages, majors, and backgrounds will make the conversations more interesting for you (and this is a great chance to get to know someone new). If we don't have perfect groups of five, you can have smaller groups, but no larger than 5. When you have found a group, choose one of the semi-circles of 5 chairs, and then look up front so I know you're ready to move to the next activity.

(2 minutes to find groups)

Meet Your Group

- ▶ Name
- ▶ Where you're from
- ▶ Major or academic interest/department
- ▶ What brought you here to this event
- ▶ What you're excited for or nervous about this evening



Now that you have your groups, it's time to get to know each other just a little bit. Take turns, going around the circle, to introduce yourself to the group. I've put some questions up on the powerpoint that you can use, but you can share as much or little as you feel comfortable with. I'll give you about 3 minutes. When you hear Laura playing something on the piano, please wrap up your conversations and face the front of the room.

(3 minutes)

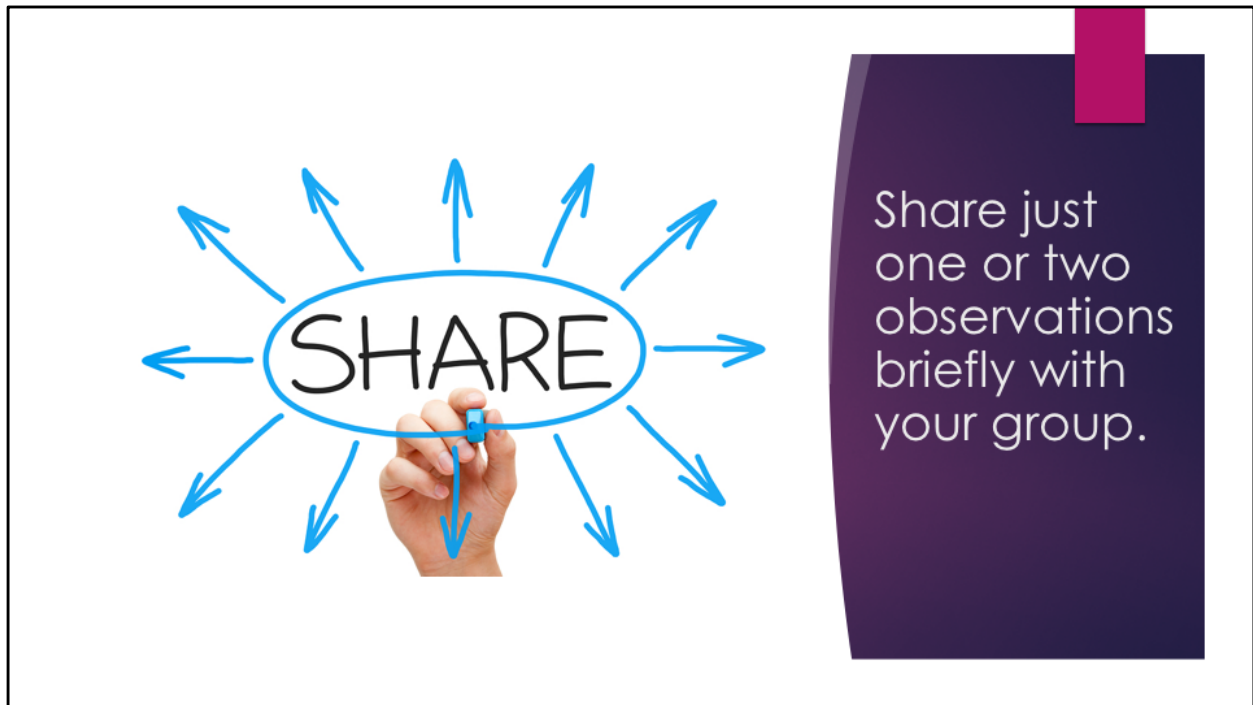
Now that you have met one another, there are a few other important people it is time that we met. The first is, of course, Emily Dickinson herself.

What comes
to mind when
you think of
Emily
Dickinson?

- ▶ What words do you associate with her? Images?
- ▶ What do you know about her, if anything?
- ▶ Does hearing her name make you think of anything in your own life?

**Don't worry about trying to answer all the questions;
just get down some preliminary thoughts!**

Before I tell you more about her, I would like you to open your workbooks to page 5 and write down anything that comes to mind when you think of Emily Dickinson. Even if you don't know any "facts," the associations you have are important, because they impact the person you might imagine her to be. I'll give you a minute or so to jot down your thoughts.



Now take a moment to briefly share just one or two of the things you noticed with your groups, making sure to go around the circle and give each person a chance to share if they would like to. You can use the questions on the powerpoint as guides.

My guess would be that you didn't all have the same associations. Just like many of your descriptions are different, when scholars (and musicians!) write about Dickinson, they also notice and identify with different things about her. It's important to recognize that everyone approaches a topic from his or her own perspective. So I'm about to share with you some of the things about Emily Dickinson (and some of the composers who set her poetry) that are important to me or that I identify with, but that does not mean it will be a complete picture of any of these figures—that would be impossible for me to do.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

- ▶ Musician
- ▶ Poet
- ▶ Recluse
- ▶ Poet and correspondent
- ▶ Unpublished in lifetime



Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she lived her entire life. As a young person, she became an accomplished pianist and attended singing school. Not only did she enjoy playing piano pieces that others in her life found very challenging, but she also frequently improvised. She also enjoyed attending musical performances. In 1951, she saw Jenny Lind perform (a name some of you might recognize from the recent movie “The Greatest Showman”), and, while she didn’t particularly like Jenny Lind’s voice, she was fascinated with Jenny Lind as a person and the persona she presented on stage. She also wrote about hearing Arthur Rubenstein play piano and expressed deep sadness that she would not be as proficient. As she grew older, she increasingly shifted her artistic interest to poetry. She also became more reclusive and kept in touch with others mainly through letters. She participated in the women’s culture of the time, as a cook, seamstress, avid gardener, and regular correspondent. Though she wrote nearly 1800 poems, often on themes of nature, death, immortality, and religion, fewer than a dozen were published during her lifetime, all anonymously. After her death in 1886, her writings were discovered by her sister Lavinia and then published by their brother-in-law’s mistress, Mabel Loomis Todd, and Emily’s mentor and love interest Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Whether or not she would have wanted them published remains a question.

“Have you got
a Brook in Your
Little Heart?”

From *Three Poems*
(1896) by Etta Parker

Have you got a Brook in your little heart,
Where bashful flowers blow,
[Where] blushing birds go down to drink,
And shadows tremble so —

And nobody knows, so still it flows,
That any brook is there,
And yet your little draught of life
Is daily drunken there —

[Then] look out for the little brook in March,
When the rivers overflow,
And the snows come hurrying from the hills,
And the bridges often go —

And later [too], in August it may be —
When the meadows parching lie,
Beware, lest this little brook of life,
[May] Some burning noon go dry!

J# 136

*And

*Why

It was actually with Lavinia Dickinson’s permission that the first musical setting of an Emily Dickinson poem was written. In 1896, just ten years after Emily Dickinson’s death, a woman named Etta Parker composed a set of *Three Songs*. For one of them, she used the poem “Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?” The song isn’t really an art song, but it comes out of the popular parlor song tradition of the time, the same tradition that Emily Dickinson herself engaged in. Throughout this evening, I will project the poetry on the powerpoint. The red-bracketed text indicates differences between the composers’ texts and the original poetry. As I sing throughout this evening, I encourage you to jot down thoughts in your workbooks and take a minute to notice the effect of the song, whether you like it, and how it makes you think of Emily Dickinson.

Ernst Bacon (1898-1990)



- ▶ *Songs from Emily Dickinson* (1932)
- ▶ Modernist
- ▶ “spiritual marriage” with Dickinson
- ▶ “American” sound

Though there were other composers who set Emily Dickinson’s poetry to popular music over the early part of the 20th century, one of the first art song composers was Ernst Bacon. Though records show he started setting her poetry much earlier, the first collection of his Dickinson art songs, called *Songs from Emily Dickinson*, was published in 1932. In many ways, his settings are the complete opposite of the Etta Parker piece. While hers was intended for a popular audience, to be fairly singable, his settings are difficult to sing. The voice often clashes with the piano in jarring dissonances. Bacon was interested in expressing the American spirit in music, and he was very interested in American literary figures. His interest in Emily Dickinson goes beyond her American-ness. Bacon set dozens of Dickinson’s poems, and his widow, Ellen Bacon, wrote that he talked about a “spiritual marriage” with the poet. To give you an example of one of his settings, I’m going to sing “The Heart,” which was published in a set of songs called *Quiet Airs*, in which he set texts by a variety of poets. As you listen, feel free as always to write down notes, things that stuck out to you, your impressions of the song, etc.

"The Heart"

From *Quiet Airs* (1952)
by Ernst Bacon

The Heart asks Pleasure—first,
And then—Excuse from Pain;
And then—those little Anodynes*
That deaden suffering—

And then—to go to sleep—
And then—if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor,
The **[liberty]** to die—

J# 536

*anodynes- painkilling drugs

*privilege



Group Discussion

WHAT STOOD OUT TO YOU IN THE SONGS YOU'VE HEARD SO FAR?

The graphic features two overlapping speech bubbles on the left: a green one with a white question mark and a blue one with a white lightbulb icon. To the right is a dark purple rectangular area with a pink tab at the top, containing the text 'Group Discussion' and 'WHAT STOOD OUT TO YOU IN THE SONGS YOU'VE HEARD SO FAR?' in white.

I'm going to give you a moment to turn back to your groups and share what you thought about these settings, in particular what stood out to you. (Give approx. 3 min.)

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)



- ▶ *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1950)
- ▶ Both popular and art music
- ▶ Famous and influential set
- ▶ "American" sound

In 1950, Aaron Copland, a composer who was known mostly for his instrumental works, published his only major art song set: *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*. The set in many ways represented the full range of his ability as a composer (with elements of both popular and elevated musical styles). Like Bacon, Copland also sought to represent an American sound. While Copland published far fewer Dickinson songs than Bacon, his Dickinson settings were a turning point in his career. They are now part of the canon of standard soprano vocal literature, and his setting of Emily Dickinson was followed by many other composers taking up her poetry. The piece I opened with, "Why Do They Shut Me Out of Heaven?," was one of the pieces from this song cycle. To give you a sense of the variety in the settings, I will perform "Heart, We Will Forget Him" from the same set.

“Heart, We Will Forget Him”

From *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1950)
by Aaron Copland

Heart! We will forget him!
You and I — tonight!
You may forget the warmth he gave —
I will forget the light!

When you have done, pray tell me
That I **[my thoughts may dim]**!
Haste! lest while you're lagging
I **[may]** remember him!

J# 47

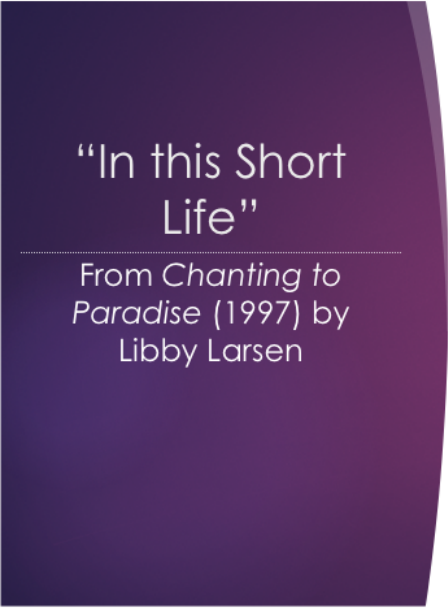
*may straight begin

Libby Larsen (b. 1950)




- ▶ *Chanting to Paradise* (1997)
- ▶ Choral settings
- ▶ Text-based

Though many composers followed in Copland's footsteps, the next composer I will highlight published her Dickinson songs almost fifty years later. Libby Larsen, one of the foremost living composers, has won a Grammy for her vocal composition. Like Copland, she published only one art song set of Dickinson's poetry so far, a set titled *Chanting to Paradise*. However, Larsen has written quite a few choral settings of Dickinson, one of which you will hear later this evening. Larsen's approach to Emily Dickinson is highly text-based. She says that her "creative task is to reveal Dickinson's genius." The poems she chose are much less commonly set, including the one I will sing for you now, "In This Short Life."



“In this Short
Life”

From *Chanting to
Paradise* (1997) by
Libby Larsen



**In this short Life
That only lasts an hour
How much—how little—is
Within our power**

J# 1287

Lori Laitman (b. 1955)




- ▶ *Between the Bliss and Me* (1997)
- ▶ Many Dickinson settings
- ▶ Voice focus

The final composer I will focus on today published her first Dickinson set the same year Larsen published *Chanting to Paradise*. Lori Laitman, like Ernst Bacon, has set many of Dickinson's poems in several collections. Though her music is not "popular" like Etta Parker's, it is also very different from the jarring dissonances of Ernst Bacon. Laitman is known for her poetic settings and for the beauty of her music. She writes almost exclusively for voice, and Dickinson is the poet she has set the most frequently. She views composing Emily Dickinson works as "sharing [Dickinson's] thoughts through music." To give you a sense of her composition, I will sing "If I..." from *Four Dickinson Songs*.



“If I...”

From *Four Dickinson
Songs* (1996) by Lori
Laitman



If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain.

J# 919



Group Discussion

- ▶ WHICH SETTING HAVE YOU LIKED BEST? WHY?
- OR--
- ▶ WHICH COMPOSER DO YOU FIND MOST INTERESTING? WHY?

I'd like to give you another chance now to share your thoughts with your group. Choose one of the two guiding questions on the powerpoint to discuss with your group. (Give approx. 5 min.)

I've done quite a bit of singing for you all, so now I think it's your turn! Are you willing to sing a little bit with me? (collect nods)

Hymn Meter

Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch
like me
I once was lost
But now am found
Was blind but now I see

Auld Lang Syne

Should auld acquaint-
tance be forgot
And never brought
to mind
Should auld acquaint-
tance be forgot
And auld lang syne

God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen

God rest ye mer-
ry gentlemen
Let nothing you
dismay
Remember Christ
our Savior
was born on Christmas Day

One of the interesting things about Emily Dickinson's poetry is that it is written in hymn meters. Hymn meters use a particular number of syllables for each line, so that many texts can be sung to the same tune. Dickinson would have learned a lot of these hymn meters when she attended singing school, and her contemporaries would have immediately associated the hymn meters with tunes and common texts for those tunes.

One example is the poem "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," which is written in what's called Common Meter, which uses 8 syllables in the first line, 6 in the second, 8 in the third, and 6 in the fourth. You may not realize it, but you actually know a lot of tunes that use Common Meter: Amazing Grace, God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, Auld Lang Syne, the Gilligan's Island theme song... So that we can see how these hymn meters work, we're going to sing "Because I could Not Stop for Death" to Amazing Grace.

Because I Could Not Stop for Death

Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace
how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost
But now am found
Was blind but now I see

Because I could not...

Because I could
not stop for Death —
He kindly stopped for me —
The Carriage held
But just Ourselves
And Immortality.

Let's just sing through Amazing Grace first to get the tune in our heads. Yes, singers, you can feel free to harmonize.

First, Amazing Grace... (sing Amazing Grace all together)

Now, let's try singing the first stanza of "Because I could Not Stop for Death" to that tune.

Write a Stanza of Common Meter

▶ Common Meter (8 syllables, 6 syllables, 8 syllables, 6 syllables)

▶ Examples:

This semester is so busy;

Conversation is difficult.

Senior year is quite hard.

We are so divided.

But soon there will be summer sun,

But there is hope in learning to

And I can be outdoors.

See “their” humanity.

Now I’m going to give you a chance to try out what it’s like to do that yourself by writing a text in Common Meter. I’ve put two examples up in the front. Remember that it’s 8 syllables, 6 syllables, 8 syllables, 6 syllables. While this is actually used by very experienced composers to create beautiful texts, your text does not need to be your best work of art ever! We’re just getting a feel for what this is like. And just so you know, I will be asking you to share your stanza with your group in a little bit. (Allow approx. 3 minutes for people to write)

A graphic titled "Activity" with a dark purple background. It contains four numbered steps in colored boxes: 1 (orange), 2 (green), 3 (teal), and 4 (purple). A pink tab is visible on the right side of the graphic.

Activity

- 1 Pass to the left. Choose a section to repeat.
- 2 Pass to the left. Choose a word or phrase to cut.
- 3 Pass to the left. Give a title (no words in poem).
- 4 Pass to the left. Add something new.

Thanks for trying that out with me! Next we're going to do an exercise with those stanzas. Please pass your booklet to the person on your left. Take the poem you just received and choose a little section of it to repeat. You can put the repeating text at the end of any line in the poem (don't worry about the number of syllables in that line). (Allow approx. 1 min.)

Now pass the poem you just changed to the person on your left. Take the poem you just received and choose a few words or a line to cut out. (Once again, don't worry if you're changing the number of syllables in the line.) (Allow approx. 1 min.)

Pass the booklets once again to the left. Take the poem you just received, and give it a title that does not use any of the words in the poem. You can use words like "and," "the," or "a," but don't use any of the important nouns used in the poem. (Allow approx. 1 min.)

Pass the booklets one more time to the left. Take the poem you just received and add something new. You can add a new line at the end, add words to an existing line, or even add an illustration or description of some kind. (Allow approx. 1.5 min.)

Discussion

- ▶ How did those changes affect the poem?
- ▶ Which changed it most?
- ▶ What was it like to read your poem in its changed version?



Now give the poems back to the people they belong to. I'm going to give you a few minutes to talk as a group about what those changes did or didn't do to your poem. (Allow approximately 10 minutes for a conversation)



Would anyone like to share with the larger group, either the changes that were made or how you felt like it affected your poem? If you would like to share, please take a second to make sure it is okay with the other members of your group who contributed.

Changes in the Songs

Change

- ▶ Reusing a phrase
- ▶ Cutting a Phrase
- ▶ Title not in Poem
- ▶ Adding something new

Song Setting

- ▶ "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"
Laitman
- ▶ "I'm Nobody! Who are you?"
Bacon
- ▶ "And This of All My
Hopes"/"Eden" Bacon
- ▶ "Going to Heaven" Copland

As you might have already guessed, composers, when they set Emily Dickinson's poems to music, make some of those same changes to her texts. I'm going to sing some examples of that for you now. The first and second are settings of the same poem: "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" The first, by Lori Laitman, ends the song by repeating some earlier parts of the poem. The second, by Ernst Bacon, cuts out part of the poetry in the middle. The third setting, Ernst Bacon's "And this of All My Hopes," also had a title that was not in the poetry at all: "Eden." The last, Aaron Copland's "Going to Heaven," adds some things to the poem. As you listen, just like before, feel free to make notes of your thoughts or reactions. Please hold your applause until after all four of these settings.

**“I’m Nobody!
Who are You?”**

From *Chanting to
Paradise* (1997) by Lori
Laitman

**I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise—you know!**

**How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one’s name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!**

J# 288

“I’m Nobody!
Who are you?”

From *Songs from Emily
Dickinson* (1932) by
Ernst Bacon

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! **[they’d advertise—you know!]**

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell **[your]** name—the livelong **[day]**—
To an admiring Bog!

J# 288

**“And This of All
My Hopes”**

“Eden”

From *Quiet Airs* (1952)
by Ernst Bacon

**And this of all my Hopes
This, is the silent end
Bountiful colored, my Morning rose
Early and sere, its end**

**Never Bud from a Stem
Stepped with so gay a Foot
Never a Worm so confident
Bored at so brave a Root**

J# 913

“Going to Heaven”

From *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1950)
by Aaron Copland

Going to Heaven!
I don't know when —
Pray do not ask me how!
Indeed I'm too astonished
To think of answering you!
Going to Heaven!
How dim it sounds!
And yet it will be done
As sure as flocks go home at night
Unto the Shepherd's arm!

Perhaps you're going too!
Who knows?
If you should get there first
Save just a little [place] for me
Close to the two I lost —
The smallest "Robe" will fit me
And just a bit of "Crown" —
For you know we do not mind our dress
When we are going home —

J# 79

“Going to Heaven”

From *Twelve Poems of
Emily Dickinson* (1950)
by Aaron Copland

I'm glad I don't believe it
For it would stop my breath —
And I'd like to look a little more
At such a curious Earth!
[I am] glad they did believe it
Whom I have never found
Since the might Autumn afternoon
I left them in the ground.

J# 79

*I'm

Discussion Question

DO YOU THINK THE CHANGES AFFECTED THE POETRY OR THE PORTRAYAL OF EMILY DICKINSON? HOW?

Once again, I'll give you some time to talk with your group about the effects of these changes. Make sure you're going around the circle, which gives everyone a chance to share. (Allow approx. 5 minutes for conversation)

Would any of you be willing to share some of the things your group talked about? If you want to share something someone else in your group said, please check with them first!

“I’m Nobody! Who are you?” Laitman

Dickinson’s Original

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one’s name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

J# 288

Laitman’s Version

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d advertise—you know!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one’s name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

**I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you--Nobody—Too?
I’m Nobody! Don’t tell!**

Thank you all for those thoughts. Here are some of the things I noticed with those changes. In Lori Laitman’s “I’m Nobody! Who are You?,” she ends with a repeat of some of the beginning text. “I’m Nobody! Who are You? Are you Nobody Too? I’m Nobody! Don’t Tell!” For me, this ending almost reverses the meaning. In Dickinson’s original poem, she ends by talking about the frog telling its name the livelong day to an admiring bog. Though it is playful, that ending seems to find relief in being reclusive and in the world not knowing about her. However, Laitman ends the song with the speaker whispering a not-so-secret “secret” to the world. The Emily Dickinson I see in this version of the poem seems confident and outgoing, flirtatious with her readers. She seems to know that she *is* “Somebody” but is teasing the audience or laughing at the world for not having figured that out yet. In many ways, Laitman’s portrayal of Dickinson’s laughter has a more distinctly feminist bent, as she is laughing in the face of a world who might have told her she was nothing or assumed she was, as she knows she is more.

"I'm Nobody! Who are you?" Bacon

Dickinson's Original

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! **they'd advertise—you know!**

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one's name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

J# 288

Bacon's Version

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you—Nobody—Too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell!

How dreary—to be—Somebody!
How public—like a Frog—
To tell one's name—the livelong June—
To an admiring Bog!

In Bacon's setting of the same poem, he cuts out the line "They'd advertise--you know." For me, this is particularly interesting, because it seems to be touching on exactly what I'm exploring in the paper. The line "they'd advertise" is the only line in the poem that suggests that one of the dangers of projecting one's image and words into the world is that other people can take that image and those words and do what they want with them. It's the only line that hints Dickinson might have thought about what people like these composers could do with her words if they were published. Without that line in the poem, Bacon seems to be ignoring the ways in which Dickinson, as a woman in her time (particularly an unmarried woman), faced a lack of agency. In this case, it isn't out of fear that Dickinson isn't a public figure but rather out of boredom with the "dreariness" of always having to be a public figure. To me, this portrayal makes her lose some of the sympathy I felt for her in the original poem.

“Eden” Bacon

And this of all my Hopes
This, is the silent end
Bountiful colored, my Morning rose
Early and sere, its end

Never Bud from a Stem
Stepped with so gay a Foot
Never a Worm so confident
Bored at so brave a Root

J# 913



In Ernst Bacon’s setting of “And this of all my Hopes,” what stood out to me is that there is no religious imagery in the poem until Bacon gives it the title “Eden.” It is an appropriate and clever title. As the speaker talks about the way her hopes have been crushed, the title suggests the loss of paradise in the Christian reading of Genesis. To me, without the title, the poem suggests a loss of innocence. The references to “buds” and “morning rose” coming to their ends seems to indicate the passage of time and accompanying disappointment. In some ways, the title adds a beautiful dimension, nostalgically looking back on that hopeful, youthful view of the world, in which it looked like a paradise. However, adding religious imagery to a poem otherwise devoid of it resituates Emily Dickinson as religious. Throughout much of her poetry, Emily Dickinson wrestles with religion. Titling the poem “Eden” causes me to read that struggle in this poem, whereas it may have originally been referring to other hopes she had for her own life or for the world as she imagined it could be, without a religious reference. The title change makes Dickinson a self-conscious Christian and narrows her and her meaning.



In "Going to Heaven," by Aaron Copland, he doesn't change the original poem very much at all. However, I still think he adds something that wasn't in the poem originally. When I read the poem, it seems to be about grief. When I listen to (or sing) the song, however, it seems to be more about the question of religion and the meaning (or meaninglessness) of life. That must come, then, not from changes to the words but from the music itself. Indeed, every composer, by setting the poem to music, is adding something to the original poem.

Activity—Helpful Questions

- ▶ What do you think this poem means or is about?
- ▶ If you were setting this poem to music, what would you emphasize?
- ▶ How would you describe music that you think would express this poem? Is it fast or slow? Beautiful and smooth? Jarring and dissonant?
- ▶ How do you think this poem presents Emily Dickinson? What might it imply about her?

Let's explore how that happens. There are 3 poems listed on page 9 in your workbook. Choose one to focus on. I'm going to give you a few minutes to think about the poem and write some of your thoughts. There are some questions on the powerpoint to help you. (Allow 5 minutes for writing)

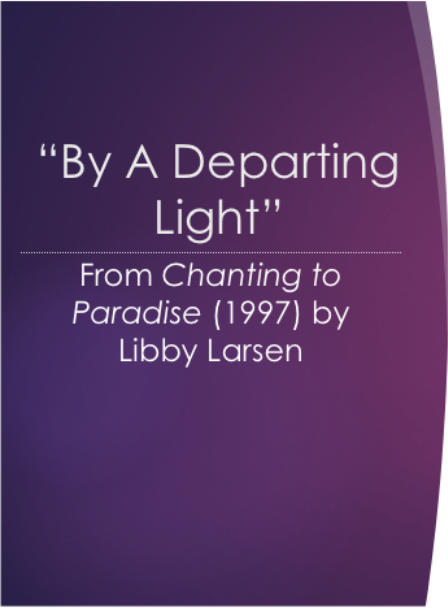
Now take a few minutes to share some of the things you found in the poems with your groups and talk about how you would set the poems (is it similar or different).

Share with the Group



Would anyone like to share some of their observations?

I will sing through settings of each of these poems now. While I sing these, notice what picture of Emily Dickinson the composer chose. Did they make the same choices you did?



“By A Departing
Light”

From *Chanting to
Paradise* (1997) by
Libby Larsen

**By a departing light
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays.**

J# 1714

"I Gained It So"

From *Between the Bliss
and Me* (1997) by Lori
Laitman

I gained it so —
By Climbing slow —
By Catching at the Twigs that grow
Between the Bliss — and me —
It hung so high
As well the Sky
Attempt by Strategy —

I said I gained it —
This — was all —
Look, how I clutch it
Lest it fall —
And I a Pauper go —
Unfitted by an instant's Grace
For the Contented — Beggar's face
I wore — an hour ago —

J# 359

**“If I Can Stop
One Heart From
Breaking”**

From *Today, This Spring*
(1995) by Libby Larsen

Performed by
Resonance Chamber
Ensemble

**If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain**

**Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain.**

J# 919

This last setting is the only choral setting I will perform today. I'd like to invite Resonance Chamber Ensemble up to sing with me.



Discussion

HOW WERE THE COMPOSER'S CHOICES SIMILAR TO OR DIFFERENT FROM THE ONES YOU WOULD HAVE MADE?

I'll give you some time now to talk about what you noticed in your circles.

Would anyone be willing to share with the group?

My Observations

- ▶ Use of the female voice
- ▶ Universality
- ▶ Performers' Choices

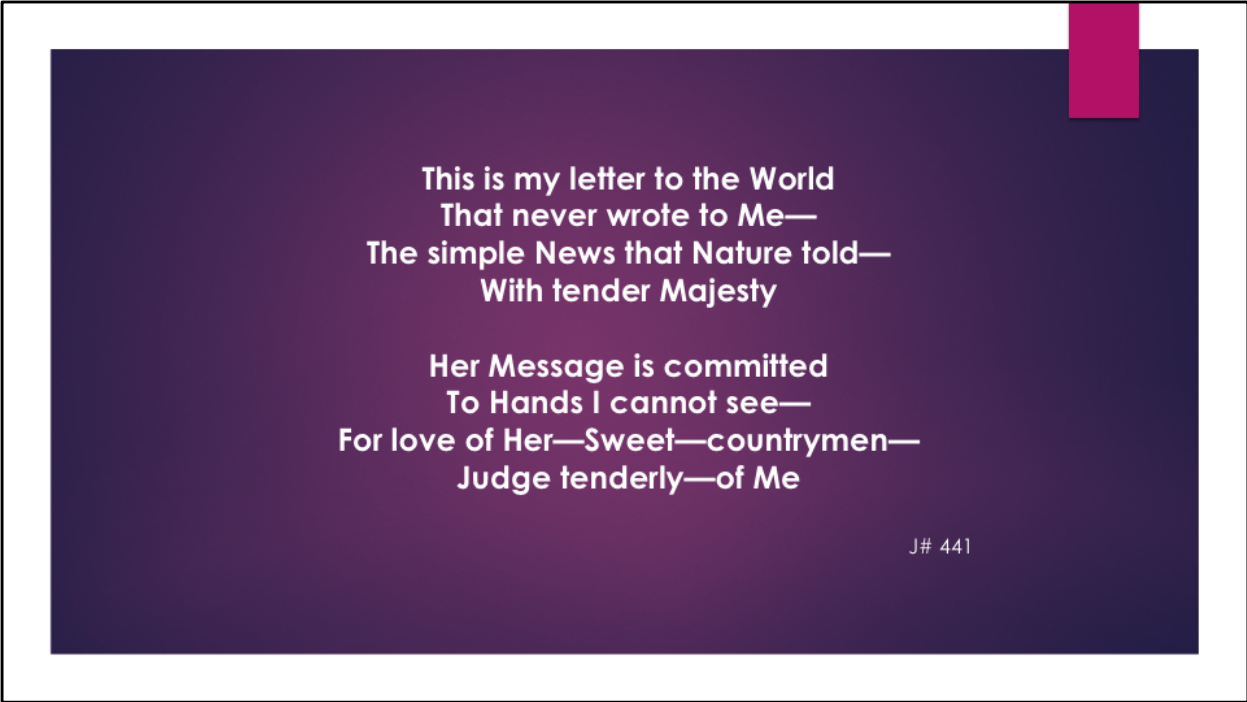
I want to share with you just a few of the things I noticed the music highlighting about Emily Dickinson (though there are definitely many more, some of which you all brought up). First, of course, all of these settings are for a woman's voice. While there are some settings that have been written for men, the majority (and all the most famous settings) are for women, particularly for sopranos, the highest female voices. To me, this emphasizes that the composers are conscious of Dickinson as a woman and implies that her poems describe the female experience.

In particular the choral setting, I believe Larsen presents Emily Dickinson as a sort of universal character, someone who encompasses and embodies what makes us human. By taking Dickinson's private poem about the meaning of life and setting it for several voices to sing, she implies that this particular struggle is universal, and that Emily Dickinson is someone through which we can all understand ourselves. This presentation of Dickinson offers her as a vessel through which many of our own personal experiences can be seen as joining.

Of course, Laura and I, as performers of the music, can also affect the picture of Emily Dickinson the composer has created, so there are really 4 layers occurring: the poet's text, the composer's setting, the performers' presentation, and finally, the audience's

interpretation.

We have heard a lot of composers' settings this evening. But I think it is important for one moment as we conclude to let Emily Dickinson speak for herself. Of course, just like the composers emphasize things in their compositions, someone performing the poem will add their own layer of meaning and inflection. But let us remove the layer of the composer and the music for just a moment, as I read.




This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me—
The simple News that Nature told—
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see—
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—
Judge tenderly—of Me

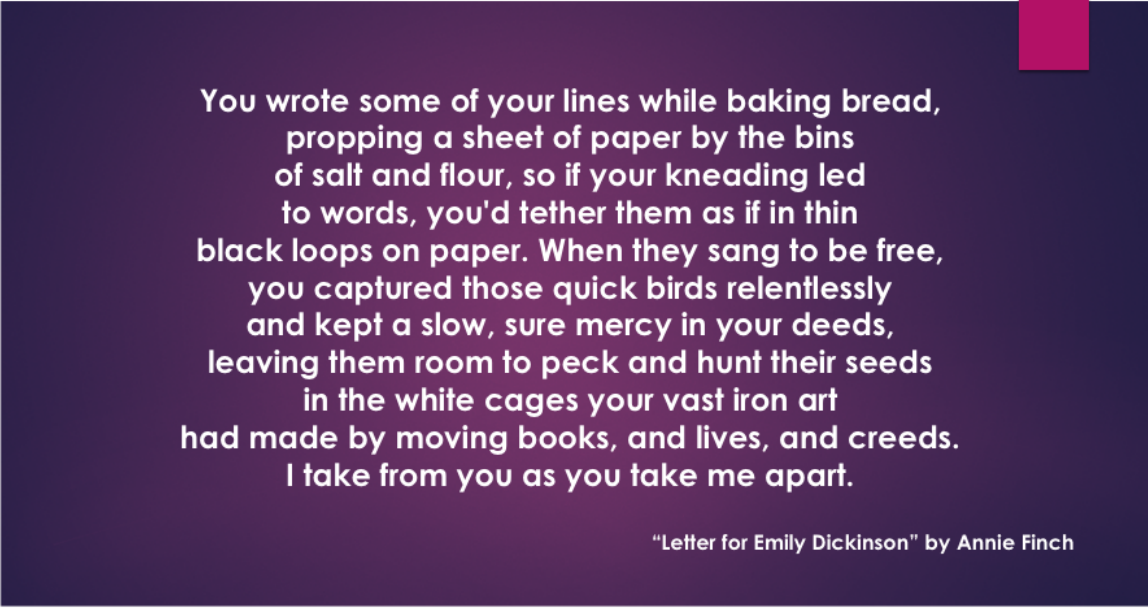
J# 441

This seemed like an appropriate poem to end with, partly because, through their music and performances, composers and singers have been writing back to Emily Dickinson over and over again in the last century. And poets, too, have taken up that call. Annie Finch wrote a poem titled “A Letter for Emily Dickinson,” that I will share with you now.



When I cut words you never may have said
into fresh patterns, pierced in place with pins,
ready to hold them down with my own thread,
they change and twist sometimes, their color spins
loose, and your spider generosity
lends them from language that will never be
free of you after all. My sampler reads,
"called back." It says, "she scribbled out these screeds."
It calls, "she left this trace, and now we start" --
in stitched directions that follow the leads
I take from you, as you take me apart.

"Letter for Emily Dickinson" by Annie Finch



You wrote some of your lines while baking bread,
propping a sheet of paper by the bins
of salt and flour, so if your kneading led
to words, you'd tether them as if in thin
black loops on paper. When they sang to be free,
you captured those quick birds relentlessly
and kept a slow, sure mercy in your deeds,
leaving them room to peck and hunt their seeds
in the white cages your vast iron art
had made by moving books, and lives, and creeds.
I take from you as you take me apart.

"Letter for Emily Dickinson" by Annie Finch

"Fresh Patterns"

From *Fresh Patterns*
(2003) by Lori Laitman

Performed with Sarah
Hennessy, Soprano

It's all I have to bring today—
This, and my heart beside—
This, and my heart, and all the fields—
And all the meadows wide—
Be sure you count—should I forget
Some one the sum could tell—
This, and my heart, and all the Bees
Which in the Clover dwell.

J# 26

"Fresh Patterns"

From *Fresh Patterns*
(2003) by Lori Laitman

Performed with Sarah
Hennessy, Soprano

When I cut words you never may have said
into fresh patterns, pierced in place with pins,
ready to hold them down with my own thread,
they change and twist sometimes, their color spins
loose, and your spider generosity
lends them from language that will never be
free of you after all. My sampler reads,
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leaving them room to peck and hunt their seeds
in the white cages your vast iron art
had made by moving books, and lives, and creeds.
I take from you as you take me apart.

"Letter for Emily Dickinson" by Annie Finch



The world has written back to Emily Dickinson, or to the hundreds of Emily Dickinsons they have imagined her to be. Of course, it's not that any setting or representation of Emily Dickinson is by necessity "bad;" it's just only one side of the story. By putting a number of settings by a number of composers together in an event like a recital, we have the opportunity to see a whole picture (or to at least get closer). Then Emily Dickinson becomes not who one person is narrowing her to be but instead the complex person who lives between all those representations. We allow her to truly "dwell in possibility."

Thank you for spending your evening with me. I hope you will stay to enjoy some food and to share some of your thoughts with me. I also invite you to use the last few pages of your workbook to create your own artistic response--a poem, a melody, a drawing, a letter, or anything you would like to--to one or two of the poems we heard today. If you decide to, either this evening or in the future, please consider sharing that with me--I'd love to see. Thank you again for your attentiveness and participation this evening.