
‘Musicians Wrestle Everywhere’: Voice, Impersonality, and Performance in Vocal Settings of Emily Dickinson’s Poems

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Abstract

Emily Dickinson is said to be the American poet most frequently set to music. She has attracted the attention of musicians working in many different genres, including purely instrumental ones; however, vocal works of various types largely predominate among Dickinson-inspired compositions. The purpose of this paper will be to examine the different approaches to Dickinson’s poems that have been taken in song cycles written for the solo voice (especially Aaron Copland’s *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* [1950]; Vincent Persichetti’s *Emily Dickinson Songs* [1957] and Gordon Getty’s *The White Election* [1981] also come to mind), and to contrast them with the very different readings given in choral compositions by musicians such as Samuel Barber (*Let Down the Bars, O Death*, 1936), Elliott Carter (*Heart, Not So Heavy As Mine*, 1938; *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*, 1945), and John Adams (*Harmonium*, 1980). The difference is not just one of scale—although the contrast between the delicate textures of Copland’s songs and the exuberant climax of Adams’s *Harmonium* could not possibly be any greater. What is at stake here is the commonly held belief that Dickinson’s verse is “quiet,” “private,” essentially autobiographical, and conducive to the type of introspection associated with (near) solitude. Choral compositions emphasize Dickinson’s lyricism, but they challenge the idea that the emotions conveyed in her poems can be rendered in a single voice, understood as that of a more or less unified subject. Instead, these choral works favour the free-floating expression of communal affect; they encourage the audience to approach Dickinson’s poems as explorations of non-subjective and impersonal states of being, rather than as fascinating disclosures originating in the inner life of a single individual. Likewise, choral settings are able to highlight the complex gendering of Dickinson’s words by assigning them to both male and female singers, whereas Copland, Persichetti, and Getty write for a solo soprano, implicitly associating the lyrical “I” heard in the poems with familiar portrayals of feminine subjectivity. Conversely, song cycles based on Dickinson’s poems are able to emphasize their drama no less than their lyricism, as the singer’s voice negotiates complex transitions from one image, or one emotional state, to another, following a theatrical model of character development. Ultimately, these cycles suggest that poetry may be understood, if not necessarily as a mode of dramatic performance, then at least as the writing and reading of scripts, or scores, to be appropriated by performers. Not only is this, once again, at odds with conventional portrayals of Dickinson as a “quiet” and “private” writer, but it implies a change in the semiotic categories usually invoked by critics when dealing with her work. As Nelson Goodman writes in *Languages of Art*, a score is not a work of music, but the criterion that makes it possible to single out a class of performances and treat them as instances of the same work; it “serves the function of identifying a work from performance

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to performance.” If so, then maybe Dickinson-inspired musical works are more than just musical readings of her poems; they are also read by them, in the sense that they can be identified and understood to the extent that they comply with Dickinson’s scripts, treated as sets of instructions or guides to performance. In addition, these works of music write Dickinson’s verse, or write it anew, as they examine the poems for their notational properties—a problematic approach which leads the composers to privilege certain aspects of Dickinson’s texts at the expense of others, but which can also encourage the reader to wonder about the notational value of the texts’ other, non-musical features, or in other words about what it would mean for their “verbal language” (Goodman) to be approached in its totality as a mode of musical notation.