
My Wheel is in the Dark: Emily Dickinson, music and the allure of the performative

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Abstract

There has been much scholarly and artistic debate about Emily Dickinson, yet surprisingly little research has been done in relation to her musical training - and the critical role that music played in informing much of her literary oeuvre. Dickinson possessed a comprehensive knowledge of music, in both rudiment and performance. Her personal music folio contains scores that, in many instances, require not only an advanced piano technique and sophisticated level of performance and virtuosity, but also demonstrate a diverse representation of musical style and genre. Editorial markings found in many of these manuscripts support the notion that she was exposed to a sustained level of expert music instruction, notably during her formative years. Music is both the ground on which the superstructure of her poetic thought was built and a condition of being towards which it aspired. With reference to Lowenberg's *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere: Emily Dickinson and Music* (1992) and Cooley's *The Music of Emily Dickinson's Poems and Letters* (2003) this presentation serves as an investigation of Dickinson's intersections with music and performance: her own musical practice, her innovative use of musical device, metaphor and language as an expression of her connection to (and interaction with) exterior and interior space, and the role that performance personae and gesture played in her artistic consciousness. It is my wish that this research will ultimately serve as a model for future debate regarding Dickinson's relationship to music and how; via the process of performance, analysis and reflection it can bring her audience one step closer to a more vivid realisation of her life and work.

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