

11-11-2015

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Recommended Citation

Altman, Meryl. "An Evening with Emily Dickinson." Program notes for performance of Aaron Copland, *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*. DePauw University. 11 November 2015. Print.

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An Evening with Emily Dickinson

Barbara Paré, soprano, with pianist Tony Weinstein and reader M. Susan Anthony.
DePauw University, November 11, 2015.

Program notes by Meryl Altman.

The idea of this completely unknown girl in Massachusetts seeing herself riding off into immortality with death himself seemed like such an incredible idea! I was very struck by it, especially since it turned out to be true. --Aaron Copland, *Since 1943*.

What is called mystery is character.

--Genevieve Taggard, *The Life and Mind of Emily Dickinson*, 1930.

British and American composers have turned their hands to Emily Dickinson's poems more than almost anyone's: one scholar counted over 1600 settings in 1993, and there must now be many more, both famous and obscure. Maybe this is because Dickinson herself so often describes both hearing and making "music," which recurs as a metaphor for deep feeling, for religious experience, for her own self-expression and conscious craft. Perhaps Dickinson also attracts composers, and other imaginative interpreters, because of all she *doesn't* say. Her reticence, her ambiguities, the puzzles and traps she sets for us, have led scholars, poets, and other artists to fill in the blanks with a startling range of conflicting versions: erotic, domestic, devout Christian, atheist iconoclast. . . Poets as different as Hart Crane, Adrienne Rich, Sharon Olds, Anne Carson, and Susan Howe have imagined themselves into the story of her life. So did Martha Graham, whose "Letter to the World" premiered in 1940, a year before Graham would commission Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*; Graham dramatized a dialogue in dance between two Emily Dickinsons, "One Who Dances" and "One Who Speaks." (Both were menaced by a Puritan "Ancestress" figure.)

And new "Emily Dickinsons" appear every year. She was a nature poet, yes, but not in a dainty feminine way (oh, look, a pretty flower!) – as ecocriticism of a tougher type now recognizes. And if you read *all* the poems, not just the conventional selections, you see it is also untrue that she ignored the Civil War, science, the wider world outside the little house she rarely left. That some of her poems were addressed to women, we now know – though that opens more questions than it settles, really.

Dickinson also remains, for many, the poet of devastating loss, the kind of loss that brooks no consolation, even from religion. (Well, *especially* not from religion: though she "thinks with" the religious language of her day, she is hardly bound by its sentimental dogmas.) Others focus on what Adrienne Rich calls her "poetry of extreme states, the poetry of danger," which wrestles with madness; and many, like Rich, have taken her as pattern for an alternative women's life of intellectual and artistic independence. Her incendiary writing, sewn up into neat little packets, can seem a mockery of the "cult of true womanhood" from which she drew a vocabulary of resistance. Finally, poems like "The Soul selects her own society-/ Then shuts the door" can serve as manifestos for introverts: *just because I'm quiet doesn't mean you've silenced me*.

Dickinson's poems are often lyrics in the literary sense of that word – they say "I," and set forth a longing or a mood – and most composers have been content to "set" them, as a showcase for the soprano voice or a straightforward expression of female selfhood and power, whether spare or lush. Aaron Copland's sequence, *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, stands out among the thousands. It takes some time, and some seriousness, to know *his* Dickinson songs, because he sought and found a musical complexity to match the poet's own.

Many of the interpretations of Dickinson we now teach would have been unavailable to Copland when he began his work in March 1949. As most people know, only seven of Dickinson's poems were published during her lifetime. Her death in 1886 kicked off a prodigious battle among her heirs, who competed to "honor her memory" in ways she would have hated, sanding off her nonconformist edges and selecting those poems least likely to ruffle feathers. The editions Copland used often gave them titles (which Dickinson never did), replaced Classical references with Christian ones, broke up her carefully arranged sequences and re-ordered her poems to illustrate conventional "themes." Meanwhile, biographies built up the myth of the Belle of Amherst going mad in her white dress, and defended contradictory theories of who the "he" and the "you" of her poems refer to -- as if that was what most mattered.

Perhaps most unfortunate, the sanitized editions "regularized" Dickinson's innovative line-breaks and punctuation, losing many ambiguities and ironies while smoothing out the rhythm. This matters because Dickinson was often, as Valentine Cunningham puts it, an "alternative hymn-writer"; she habitually uses the basic ballad stanza of the New England hymnal, with its alternation of four iambs and three –

"The Lórd to mé a shépherd ís/ Want thérefore sháll not Í" –

but stretches within it, and stretches it, sometimes beyond recognition or past breaking. And yet Copland seems somehow to have seen beyond the busybody "polishing" of the editors, because his abstract dialogues between piano and voice, his exploratory dissonances, layer meaning upon meaning in much the same way, breaking the form to put it back together, differently.

On the face of things, composer and poet had little in common: widely travelled, a secular Jew, Copland in the 1940s was enjoying both critical acclaim and popular success for such deliberately accessible works as *Billy the Kid*, *Lincoln Portrait*, *Appalachian Spring*. He was a highly visible public figure, known as the "Dean of American composers" both for his own work and his activism on behalf of a new American music, at a time when classical performances were mainly limited to the European masters. Copland's conscious intention (connected with the leftist hopes and strivings of the 1930's) to "make contact" with a broad audience and not just a few aesthetes had brought him recognition; he now composed mainly on commission, was well-paid for writing film scores (and sometimes received top billing), and his books and essays about music were widely read. In contrast, Dickinson's life seems much closer to the fate a generation earlier of Charles Ives, who had chosen obscurity over conformism. (Copland, who championed Ives' work, once wrote, "to write all that music and not hear it one would have to have the courage of a lion.")

And yet, he tells us, he travelled to Amherst and stood for a long time in her room, "to see what she saw out of that window."

Musically speaking, these Dickinson songs seem to have marked a transitional moment for Copland. His biographer writes of "a trend away from public statements," and others note the absence of the folksong or jazz sources which helped give the more accessible works an "American flavor." The Copland we hear in these songs is certainly *not* the Copland of "Beef: It's what's for dinner." Rather, he returns to the more esoteric or abstract language of his early work, to the time when his dissonances were routinely booed. So it's interesting that a number of the poems he chose to set deal with questions of public recognition, with reasons for stepping back. It's tempting to connect #3 ("Why did they shut me out of heaven/ Did I sing too loud?") with questions of audience and respect, especially since he ends the song, not with her sly question, but with a triumphant repeat of the opening stanza. Might we read a line like "Honors/ taste dry" (#4), or the speaker's preference

in #6 for March rather than April, ending with the claim “That blame is just as dear as Praise/ and Praise as mere as Blame,” as his own meditation on fame? “The reviews were so bad,” he wrote Leonard Bernstein after the 1950 première of the Dickinson songs, “that I decided I must have written a better cycle than I had realized.”

Paradoxically, what drew him to this nineteenth-century New Englander seems to have been her modernism: her irony, her concision, her intellectual toughness, her resistance to seductive clichés and hollow certainties, her juxtaposition of shattering intensities with mundane, everyday objects, the fragmented, disjunct images which somehow add up to a luminous vision. Copland was very much a part of avant-garde circles beyond the world of music – he was a dedicated reader of the 20th-century poets, and one of the first to buy and read Joyce’s *Ulysses* – and part also of the modernist generation that ransacked American tradition for a “usable past” outside the genteel Boston tradition and apart from mindless jingoism, forging a classic American canon that included Whitman and Melville as well as Dickinson herself. For Copland, as for Martha Graham and other cultural workers who helped make Dickinson’s a household name in the 1920s, the poet’s example may have helped solve the problem of how to be both American *and* modernist, how to avoid what Ezra Pound called “emotional slop and slither” while laying claim to a future that need not be dominated by European imports.

I am struck, finally, by the understated self-reflexivity of Copland’s settings: the martial bugle-song like tones and marching cadence of #2, the distant echo of Chopin’s Funeral March in #9 and of Bach chorale in #10 (“I’ve heard an Organ talk, sometimes”), the repeated “could I forbid, could I forbid, could I forbid” in #5, which seems almost a mockery of florid operatic style, mirroring the poet’s own shifts in voice from the deceptively simple to the baroque and grand. In “Heart we will forget him” (#5) the piano pursues its own thoughts, in conversation with the vocalist but slightly out of step. It is as if the music were quietly examining and commenting on its own musical means and sources, while directly imitating nothing and no one.

There were ways to be an American composer without quoting American popular song. Copland’s first forays into the twelve-tone method date from the same period: as he explained, “I have always had an aversion to repeating myself.” Perhaps it was in that refusal to rest with the given that Copland and Dickinson were most strongly akin.

--Meryl Altman, November 2015. maltman@depauw.edu

In preparing these notes, I drew heavily on the following sources. (Quotations are from Pollack, unless otherwise indicated.) I’ve also consulted program notes by Vivian Perlis (1998), Philip Huscher, and Janine Wanée and Liane Curtis (2013). Many thanks to Matthew Balensuela for his help, too.

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