



# 21ST CENTURY MUSIC

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# Music of Emily Dickinson

PHILLIP GEORGE

While American poet Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (December 10, 1830, Amherst, MA - May 15, 1886) was born to a successful family with strong community ties, she lived a mostly introverted and reclusive life. After she studied at the Amherst Academy for seven years in her youth, she spent a short time at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary before returning to her family's house in Amherst. Thought of as an eccentric by the locals, she became known for her penchant for white clothing and her reluctance to greet guests or, later in life, even leave her room. Most of her friendships were carried out by correspondence.

Dickinson was a prolific private poet, though fewer than a dozen of her nearly 1800 poems were published during her lifetime.

The work that was published during her lifetime was usually altered significantly by the publishers to fit the conventional poetic rules of the time. Dickinson's typically titleless poems are unique for the time, with short lines, slant rhyme, and unconventional capitalization and punctuation.

Many of her poems deal with themes of death and immortality, two subjects which infused her letters to friends.

Although most of her acquaintances were probably aware of Dickinson's writing, it was not until after her death in 1886 -- when Lavinia, Emily's younger sister, discovered her cache of poems -- that the breadth of Dickinson's work became apparent. Her first collection of poetry was published in 1890 by personal acquaintances Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, both of whom heavily edited her work. A complete and mostly unaltered collection became available in 1955 when *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* was published by scholar Thomas H. Johnson. Despite unfavorable reviews and skepticism of her literary prowess during the late 19th and early 20th century, critics now consider Dickinson to be a major American poet.

Dickinson's poetry has been used as texts for art songs by composers such as Arthur Farwell, Vally Weigel, Ernst Bacon, John Duke, Aaron Copland, Elliott Carter, Samuel Barber, George Perle, Vincent Persichetti, Ned Rorem, Lee Hoiby, Emma Lou Diemer, Robert Muczynski, Betty Roe, Alfred Heller, Sylvia Glickman, Persis Vehar, Robert Baksa, John Adams, Michael

Tilson Thomas, Thomas Pasatieri, Nancy Galbraith, Nick Peros, and Tarik O'Regan. Many early settings predate the 1955 complete edition.

\*\*\*

Arthur Farwell (March 23, 1872, St. Paul, MN - January 20 1952) was trained as an engineer at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, graduating in 1893, but turned towards music by contact with the eccentric Boston-based composer Rudolf Gott. After studying in Boston, he became a pupil of Englebert Humperdinck in Berlin and Félix-Alexandre Guilmant in Paris. Returning to the U.S., he lectured in music at Cornell University from 1899 to 1901, and founded the Wa-Wan Press, dedicated to publishing the works of the American Indianist composers, among whom Farwell himself was a leading figure. His Dickinson settings include *The Sabbath* and *These Saw Vision*.

\*\*\*

Vally [Valerie] Weigl, née Pick (1894?89?99?, Vienna, Austria - 1982) studied piano, music, and musicology at the University of Vienna and studied theory and composition with her future husband Karl Weigl (1881-1949), whose associates included Pablo Casals, Wilhelm Furtwangler, Heinrich Schenker, Arnold Schoenberg, Richard Strauss, and Bruno Walter. In 1938 the Weigls were rescued from the oncoming war in Europe by the Quaker Society of Friends and were brought to the United States, where Vally continued her career as composer and piano teacher.

Her settings of Dickinson include *From Time and Eternity* and *Let Down the Bars*.

\*\*\*

The prolific American composer-conductor-pianist Ernst Bacon (May 26, 1898, Chicago, IL - March 16, 1990) composed over 250 songs over his career, received three Guggenheim Fellowships, and won the Pulitzer Prize for his *Symphony No. 1*. His 67 Dickinson settings include cycles --

*Songs of Eternity* (Dickinson and Walt Whitman)  
*My River*  
*From Emily's Diary*  
*The Last Invocation* (Whitman, Dickinson)  
*Quiet Airs*

-- and individual poems --

A drop fell on the apple tree  
A spider  
A Threadless Way  
A wind like a bugle  
Alabaster wool  
And this of all my hopes  
As if some little Arctic flower  
As if the sea should part  
As Well as Jesus?  
Eden  
Eternity  
Farewell  
From Blank to Blank  
How still the bells  
I dwell in possibility  
If bees are few  
I'm nobody  
In the silent west  
Is there such a thing as day?  
It's all I have to bring  
It's coming -- the postponeless Creature  
Let down the bars  
My river runs to thee  
No dew upon the grass  
Not what we did, shall be the test  
O friend  
On this Wondrous Sea  
Our share of night to bear  
Poor little heart!  
Savior  
She went  
She went as quiet as the dew  
Simple days  
Snowfall  
So bashful  
Solitude  
Summer's lapse  
Sunset  
The banks of the yellow sea  
The bat  
The crickets sang  
The daisy follows soft the sun  
The divine ship  
The gentlest mother  
The grass  
The heart  
The Imperial Heart  
The little stone  
The mountain  
The Postponeless Creature  
The Sea  
The simple days  
The Sun went Down

The swamp  
There came a day  
This and my heart  
To make a prairie  
Unto Me?  
Velvet people  
Water  
We never know  
Weeping and sighing  
What soft, cherubic creatures  
When roses cease to bloom  
Wild nights  
Winter afternoons  
With the first Arbutus

\*\*\*

John [Woods] Duke (July 30, 1899, Cumberland, MD - 1984) enjoyed great popularity in the middle of this century. As pianist, he supported his composer-peers in premiering works by Roger Sessions and Walter Piston, including the former's Sonata No. 1 at one of the Sessions-Copland concerts. As composer, he was fascinated by the "strange and marvelous chemistry of words and music," and in his master classes and writings he devoted a great deal of thought to the art of song and singing.

Asked why, as a pianist, his compositions included so few piano works and so many songs, Duke replied: "I think it is because of my belief that vocal utterance is the basis of music's mystery."

Six Poems by Emily Dickinson (1968)

Good Morning, Midnight  
Heart! We Will Forget Him!  
Let Down the Bars, O Death  
An Awful Tempest Mashed The Air  
Nobody Knows This Little Rose  
Bee, I'm Expecting You

Four Poems (1975)

New Feet Within My Garden Go  
The Rose Did Caper on Her Cheek  
Have You Got A Brook In Your Little Heart?  
I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed

These Are the Days (1979)

\*\*\*

Aaron Copland (November 14, 1900 – December 2, 1990) set 12 Poems of Emily Dickinson (1950) as:

I've Heard an Organ Talk Sometimes  
 The Nature Gentlest Mother  
 There Came A Wind Like A Bugle  
 Why Do They Shut Me Out of Heaven?  
 The World Feels Dusty  
 Heart, We Will Forget Him  
 Dear March, Come in!  
 Sleep Is Supposed to Be  
 When They Come Back  
 I Felt A Funeral in My Brain  
 The Chariot

It was The Chariot that first captured Copland's imagination. "I fell in love with one song, The Chariot, Copland said, "and continued to add songs one at a time until I had twelve. The poems themselves gave me direction, one that I hoped would be appropriate to Miss Dickinson's lyrical expressive language."

This cycle marks the beginning of a brief period during which Copland composed vocal music almost exclusively. It was his first major vocal piece, and some consider it one of the great 20th-century song cycles.

Copland echoed Dickinson's concise yet lyric language with abrupt leaps in the vocal line that matched her unique dashes and pauses. Vivian Perlis noted, "The songs are unusual in style with irregular meters and stanzas, wide jumps in the vocal lines, and difficult passages for the pianist that present special challenges." To better capture Dickinson's psyche Copland visited the poet's home, soaking up the atmosphere of the room where she spent most of her hours, writing.

Following the first performance, which took place in New York in May of 1950, Copland wrote in a letter to Verna Fine (wife of Irving): "The songs went well with composer friends and audience but got roasted in the press. . . . I'm pleased with them -- and everybody seemed to think it was a real song-cycle -- which pleases me also."

While only the seventh and 12th songs are thematically related, harmonic features and word painting lend uniformity to the settings. The interval of a third dominates the songs in both vocal and piano parts, as do chord progressions of descending fourths. The songs are transparent, with the piano part often consisting of only two lines.

In 1958, Copland orchestrated eight of the twelve, ironically, not including his beloved Chariot.

Nature, the gentlest mother  
 There came a wind like a bugle  
 Why do they shut me out of Heaven?

The world feels dusty  
 Heart, we will forget him  
 Dear March, come in!  
 Sleep is supposed to be  
 When they come back

The work is the subject of a full length study by Larry Starr as The Dickinson Songs of Aaron Copland ( CMS Sources).

\*\*\*

Elliott [Cook] Carter[, Jr.] (b. December 11, 1908, New York, NY) studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris in the 1930's, and then returned to the United States. After an early neoclassic phase, he has developed, since 1950, a signature atonal, rhythmically complex style.

Heart Not So Heavy As Mine (1938)

Musicians Wrestle Everywhere (1945)

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Samuel [Osborne] Barber [II] (March 9, 1910, West Chester, PA – January 23, 1981) has also set Let down the bars, O Death (1936)

LET down the bars, O Death!  
 The tired flocks come in  
 Whose bleating ceases to repeat,  
 Whose wandering is done.

Thine is the stillest night,  
 Thine the securest fold;  
 Too near thou art for seeking thee,  
 Too tender to be told.

\*\*\*

Composer-theorist George Perle (b. May 6, 1915, Bayonne, NJ) was a student of Ernst Krenek, who composes in a style which he characterizes as "twelve-tone tonality." Perle's former student Paul Lansky describes it thus: "Basically this creates a hierarchy among the notes of the chromatic scale so that they are all referentially related to one or two pitches which then function as a tonic note or chord in tonality. The system similarly creates a hierarchy among intervals and finally, among larger collections of notes, 'chords.' The main debt of this system to the 12-tone system lies in its use of an ordered linear succession in the same way that a 12-tone set does."



In 1968, Perle cofounded the Alban Berg Society with Igor Stravinsky and Hans F. Redlich, who had conceived the notion.

His 13 Dickinson Songs (1977-1978) include I like to see it lap the miles, I know some lonely house off the road, and There Came A Wind Like A Bugle

\*\*\*

Vincent [Ludwig] Persichetti (June 6, 1915, Philadelphia, PA - August 14, 1987) trained many noted composers at the Juilliard School, including Philip Glass, Hall Overton, Richard Danielpour, William Schimmel, Peter Schickele, and Ronald Caltabiano.

Emily Dickinson Songs, op. 77 (1957)

Out of the morning  
I'm nobody  
When the hills do  
The grass  
Let down the bars, O Death (1936)

\*\*\*

Ned Rorem (b. October 23, 1923, Richmond, IN) received his early education at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, the American Conservatory, and Northwestern University. He later Curtis Institute and the Juilliard School. He lived in Morocco and France from 1949 to 1957).

After a Long Silence, for voice, oboe, and strings (1982, to texts of William Butler Yeats, George Herbert, Thomas Carew, Robert Burns, Queen Elizabeth I, Thomas Hardy, William Blake, Ernest Dowson, Emily Dickinson)

Swords and Plowshares, for four solo voices and orchestra (1990, to texts of Arthur Rimbaud, Lord Byron, W.H. Auden, W.B. Yeats, Archibald MacLeish, E.A. Robinson, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Denise Levertov, Psalm 133

Poems of Love and the Rain includes two settings of Love's Stricken, "Why" as No. 4 and 14.

Women's Voices includes as No. 8 What Inn Is This.

\*\*\*

Lee Hoiby (b. February 17, 1926, WI) was a child prodigy, studying with notable pianists Gunnar Johansen and Egon Petri. Among his early influences was Pro Art quartet leader Rudolf Kolisch, son-in-law of Arnold

Schoenberg. Hoiby played with Harry Partch's ensembles, and studied at Mills College with Darius Milhaud and at the Curtis Institute with Gian Carlo Menotti. The introduced Hoiby to opera, and involved him in the Broadway productions of The Consul and The Saint of Bleecker Street. He has set Dickinson's A Letter and There Came a Wind like a Bugle.

\*\*\*

Emma Lou Diemer (b. November 24, 1927, Kansas City, MO) received both her B.M. (1949) and her M.M (1950) from the Yale School of Music. She studied composition in Brussels, Belgium on a Fulbright Scholarship from 1952 to 1953, returning to the United States to receive her Ph.D from the Eastman School of Music in 1960. She was professor of theory and composition at the University of Maryland 1965-70, and served on the faculty of the University of California from 1971 to 1991.

Three poems by Emily Dickinson (1993)

The birds begun at four o'clock  
Bee, I'm expecting you  
I suppose the time will come

\*\*\*

William Jay Sydeman (b. 1928, New York, NY) was educated at Manhattan's Mannes School of Music, and has received commissions from the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Tanglewood Music Center, and the Boston Symphony. In 1970, Sydeman left New York -- and composition -- teaching at a teenage drug rehabilitation center in rural California, spending two years in Los Angeles' commercial music industry, and another year studying Steiner education in England, before settling in Hawaii, where he composed liturgical music for a Tibetan Buddhist temple.

In 1981, Sydeman returned to teaching at the Steiner College in Fair Oaks, CA, and composition. He moved to Nevada City, CA, in 1988. His three Emily Dickinson settings are Hope Is a Thing with Teathers, I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died, and I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed.

\*\*\*

Elaine Hugh-Jones (b. 1927, London, UK) studied composition with Lennox Berkeley and was an official accompanist for the BBC for 37 years. She taught at Malvern Girls' College and I Malvern College until her retirement in 1997. Her writing is almost entirely vocal and choral work including song cycle Songs of War



(2003), to texts of Wilfred Owen, and the Dickinson setting Members of the Resurrection.

\*\*\*

Robert Muczynski (b. March 19, 1929, Chicago, IL) studied composition with Alexander Tcherepnin at DePaul University in Chicago, where he received the Bachelor of Music degree (1950) and the Master of Music degree (1952), both in Piano Performance. Muczynski has taught at DePaul, Loras College (Dubuque, IA), Roosevelt University (Chicago), and the University of Arizona (Tucson). His works include a setting of I Never Saw a Moor (1967)

\*\*\*

Betty Roe (b. 1930, London, England) studied at the Royal Academy of Music. She was (1968-78) Director of Music at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA), and worked extensively as a session singer with leading London groups and ensembles. Her cycle Delight (1999) includes Dickinson's Delight Is as the Flight, Answer July and I Taste a Liquor.

\*\*\*

Alfred Heller (b. 1931, New Yorker, NY) was a protégé of Heitor Villa-Lobos, and worked with the late Brazilian composer on several of his later compositions.

For Arleen (1990)

I'm nobody  
In the silent west  
Solitude  
Sunset

\*\*\*

Sylvia [Foodim] Glickman (1932 - January 16, 2006) Sylvia Foodim Glickman (1932 - January 16, 2006) grew up in New York City, where her mother enrolled her in music school at the age of 3. She graduated from the High School of Music and Art in 1950, and earned a bachelor's degree in 1954 from the Juilliard School of Music, where she also received a master's degree in 1955. She studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London on a Fulbright scholarship. She married Harvey Glickman, a political science professor, in 1956. Sylvia taught piano at the New England Conservatory of Music, Haverford College, Princeton University, and Franklin and Marshall College. In 1988, she founded Hildegard Press

(after Hildegard von Bingen) and in 1991, was coeditor with Martha Schleifer of a 12-volume reference, Women Composers: Music through the Ages. Amongst here works is the Dickinson setting It will be Summer.

\*\*\*

Persis Vehar (b. 1937) holds degrees from Ithaca College (BM) and the University of Michigan (MM). She studied composition with Warren Benson, Ross Lee Finney, Roberto Gerhard and Ned Rorem, and attended seminars with Milton Babbitt, John Cage and Roger Sessions. Vehar's Dickinson settings include How Happy is the Little Stone and The Martyrs Even Trod.

\*\*\*

Robert Baksa (b. 1938, New York, NY) grew up in Tucson, Arizona. He studied composition at the University of Arizona with Henry Johnson and Robert McBride, and studied with Lucas Foss at the Berkshire Music Center. Since 1962 he has been living in New York City. His Emily Dickinson Songs (1967/1999) include Poor little heart!, Who robbed the woods?, and This is my letter to the world.

\*\*\*

At 11, William Elden Bolcom (b. May 26, 1938, Seattle, WA) entered the University of Washington to study composition privately with George Frederick McKay and John Verrall. He later studied with Darius Milhaud at Mills College (M.A.), Leland Smith at Stanford University (D.M.A.), and Olivier Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire (2ème Prix de Composition). Winner of a Pulitzer Prize, he is a professor of music composition at the University of Michigan. His sole Dickinson setting is The Bustle in a House.

\*\*\*

Michael Tilson Thomas (b. December 21, 1944, Los Angeles, CA) is an American conductor, pianist, and composer -- currently the Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony.

Poems of Emily Dickinson (2000) was written for and inspired by René Fleming. The composer notes,

"We had a conversation over tea one day in late 2000, and she described to me a project she was developing in collaboration with the actress Claire Bloom and the director Charles Nelson Reilly that would include

readings from Dickinson's letters, recitations of her poems, performances of song-settings by various composers, and a script to give everything some dramatic continuity. She asked if I had ever written any Dickinson songs. I told her I hadn't, and that seemed to be the end of it. But in the next few days two or three songs came quickly into my mind; I'm well acquainted with Dickinson's poetry, and read it constantly. So I composed a couple of songs and sent them to René. She was very appreciative, but she said she couldn't use them as by that time the evening was fully programmed. But then she changed her mind, and *Fame and Of God We Ask One Favor* got their premieres only a few weeks later.

Originally I thought of calling this cycle *Short Poems of Emily Dickinson*, since I deliberately selected shorter poems, and specifically short poems that had an acerbic rowdy cast to them. I appreciate the range of her poetry, but what you hear quoted, and what composers seem most drawn to set, are nearly always what you might call her 'touchy-feely' poems. As a result, people often overlook the fact that there are a lot of sardonic, bitter, quite cutting observations in her poetry. I wanted to focus on more of that aspect of her work, on its ironic quality, on its social criticism—and also on the sense of appreciation for just being alive, which is so much a part of her work. Dickinson is really a remarkable figure. Somehow her isolation gave her the essential distance to be able to see things clearly, to perceive reality and the essential nature of things. Such qualities are enduring.

[In *Nature Studies*,] three poems [*To make a prairie, How happy is the little Stone, and The Spider holds a Silver Ball*] flow together as a continuous song, and then at the end the first poem is recapitulated with strands of music that come from the other two. This movement is also a play on words, with *Nature Studies* inviting a musical interpretation of the word 'studies,' as in 'études.' So each of those three settings is based on a famous technical study -- or at least one musicians would recognize -- relating to some instrument. The first is based on Dohnányi's piano étude for extended arpeggios, and the second on some, or probably on numerous, Czerny or Hanon studies involving substitute finger passages, again for piano. The third refers to a famous trombone étude involving extended range by Robert Marsteller. He was the principal trombonist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic when I was growing up, and you can hear this particular étude still played backstage by brass players to this day. In my settings, however, this 'studies' are played by diverse instruments, and not by the instruments they originally related to." [G. Schirmer]

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Thomas Pasatieri (b. October 20, 1945, New York, NY) began composing at age 15 and, as a teenager, studied with Nadia Boulanger. He entered the Juilliard School at age 16 and became the school's first recipient of a doctoral degree. Pasatieri has taught composition at Juilliard, the Manhattan School of Music, and the Cincinnati College-Conservatory. From 1980 through 1984, he held the post of Artistic Director at Atlanta Opera. He has composed 19 operas, and his Dickinson cycle *Far From Love*, for soprano, clarinet, piano, violin, and cello (1976), includes *Let Down the Bars, O Death* as its fifth setting.

\*\*\*

John [Coolidge] Adams (b. February 15, 1947, Worcester, MA) began composing at ten and first heard his music performed at 13 or 14. He studied with Leon Kirchner, Roger Sessions, Earl Kim, and David Del Tredici at Harvard University (BA 1971, MA 1972) and was the first student ever to be allowed to submit a musical composition for an undergraduate thesis. He taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music from 1972 till 1984, and continues to reside in Berkeley.

*Harmonium*, for chorus and orchestra (1980-1981), was written for the first season of Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco, and first conducted by Edo de Waart on April 15, 1981. The work is based on poetry by John Donne and Emily Dickinson and is regarded as one of the key compositions of Adams's minimalist period.

Negative Love (John Donne)  
Because I could not stop for Death (Dickinson)  
Wild Nights (Dickinson)

Timothy Johnson has discussed various aspects of the harmonic language of *Harmonium* in detail, and K. Robert Schwarz has noted the influence of the musical techniques of Steve Reich on *Harmonium*, and also has commented on the less schematic and more "intuitive" manner of Adams' composition in the work.

\*\*\*

William [Palmer] Hawley (b. November 4, 1950, New York, NY) was born into the family of an English professor and poet. He studied at Ithaca College School of Music and the California Institute of the Arts (B.F.A., 1974; M.F.A., 1976) under Morton Subotnick, Harold Budd, James Tenney, Earle Brown, and Morton Feldman, but turned toward earlier as well as more recent musics, including those of India and East Asia.

Three Dickinson Songs (1985)

## Six Dickinson Settings (1987)

- I. There Came a Day at Summer's Full
- II. A Valentine
- III. As if the Sea Should Part
- IV. I Have a Bird in Spring
- V. It's Like the Light
- VI. On This Wondrous Sea

Four Reveries (1995) (Rossetti, Shelley, Dickinson, Browning)

- III. My River Runs to Thee

Safe In Their Alabaster Chambers (1995)

Three New England Songs (1998):

- II. Summerwind (Emerson, Dickinson)
- III. We Learned the Whole of Love

The Snow That Never Drifts (2002)

How Still the Bells (2004)

\*\*\*

Nancy Galbraith (b. 1951 in Pittsburgh, PA) is an American postmodern/postminimalist composer. Her settings of The Sea of Sunset and Wild Nights, which comprise Two Emily Dickinson Songs, were commissioned by The Providence Singers.

The texts are

This is the land the sunset washes,  
These are the banks of the Yellow Sea;  
Where it rose, or whither it rushes,  
These are the western mystery!

Night after night her purple traffic  
Strews the landing with opal bales;  
Merchantmen poise upon the horizons,  
Dip, and vanish with fairy sails.

## Wild Nights

Wild nights! Wild nights!  
Were I with thee,  
Wild nights should be  
Our luxury!  
Futile the winds  
To a heart in port,  
Done with the compass,  
Done with the chart,  
Rowing in Eden!  
Ah! the sea!  
Might I but moor  
To-night in thee!

\*\*\*

Nick Peros (b. March 17, 1963) is a Canadian classical composer with a catalogue including symphonic, orchestral, choral, vocal and chamber works. His Dickinson settings include:

Bring me the sunset in a cup  
I taste a liquor never brewed  
So set its sun in thee  
When roses cease to bloom, sir

\*\*\*

Tarik [Hamilton] O'Regan (b. January 1, 1978, London, UK) is partly of North African heritage, and currently lives in New York, NY, and Cambridge, UK.

His Two Emily Dickinson Settings (2007), commissioned by Craig Hella Johnson and Conspirare for their September 2007 concert series in Texas, were designed to frame an evening's program as a compositional "inhalation" and "exhalation," a crescendo and decrescendo, or a prelude and postlude. Each setting uses a solo soprano and tenor, their voices referencing polarities of "sun" and "shade" and "love" and "hate."

# Concert Review

## The Dill of Montalvo

BRIAN HOLMES

TRichard Marriott's Divide Light, A New Opera by Leslie Dill. 8/13/08, Villa Montalvo, Saratoga, CA.

The composer should get top billing in an opera. But Divide Light isn't actually an opera, and Leslie Dill is by no means a composer. She is a performance artist who has made a career of creating paper sculptures and photographs with words on them, often the words of Emily Dickinson. A residency at Villa Montalvo gave her the chance to fashion her non-opera, using 20 poems of Emily Dickinson as the libretto. The title comes from the poem:

Banish Air from Air -  
Divide Light if you dare -  
They'll meet  
While Cubes in a Drop  
Or Pellets of Shape  
Fit  
Films cannot annul  
Odors return whole  
Force Flame  
And with a Blonde push  
Over your impotence  
Flits Steam.

The show was sold out for its single performance. What we heard and saw included three singers, a chorus, a string quartet, and seven actors. Projections of words and images filled a screen at the back of the stage. The stage was outdoors, allowing a secondary chorus of crickets..

Why wasn't it an opera? The singers were not characters, and their actions were not a story. Also, the chorus wasn't a bunch of dragoons, jolly villagers, or flower maidens.

So what was it, if not an opera? Mostly a fashion show oratorio, inspired by Emily Dickinson's poetry, and animated by post-minimalist music. Leslie Dill designed the vivid costumes, which displayed words from the libretto. The singers and the string quartet players wore black and white, either large black letters on white cloth, or large white letters (shining like the bones of a skeleton) on black. The actors, who never spoke (though one sang briefly) were decorated more colorfully. Some costumes contained panels that unrolled to display important words. One dress, though black and white, concealed long ribbons. The first ribbon, seemingly drawn from the heart of the actress who wore it, was blood red. Another dress bore letters on its side panels; only when the actress spun did the panels open enough to read "beauty."

The words, both sung and seen, were gathered in three segments, with the pattern intended to follow the progress of

the human soul. As the singers sang, they moved about the stage, often gesticulating earnestly, though it cannot be said that they did any acting. Meanwhile, the screen displayed words and images related to the poems. Sometimes the letters of the words drifted hither and yon, as wayward as Little Bo-Peep's sheep, but even when they didn't, they could not be depended on to help us understand what singers were singing.

I would have preferred supertitles. The singers, soprano Jennifer Goltz, mezzo Kathleen Moss, and baritone Andrew Eisenmann, sang expressively and with commitment. Goltz, whose demanding part sometimes featured acrobatics on high notes, was particularly impressive. But it was rarely possible to understand more than half the words. Nor was the skillful chorus, The Choral Project under Daniel Hughes, any easier to follow. Alas! An evening with Emily Dickinson is an evening wasted if you can't follow the words. Much of her verse is hard enough to parse even when audible and visible. As evidence, I offer the poem quoted above, a remarkably opaque treatment of light.

The composer, unfamiliar to me, was Richard Marriott. (One of the choristers told me that he undertook this project after another composer dropped out.) He founded the Club Foot Orchestra, which specializes in accompanying silent films. He used to compose for Atari, a credit the program notes omitted. His music had several styles. Sometimes it developed over short ostinato figures; sometimes the melodies unfolded with aching slowness over drones; sometimes the music was cluttered and active like gamelan music. The chorus sat on opposite sides of the stage, flanking the screen. The effective choral writing was mostly chordal, but except for several passages involving interlocking ostinato figures, it was not memorable.

The most engaging part of the music was the Del Sol String Quartet. On stage and in costume, these players were often more entertaining than the singers. Two of the numbers called for a string soloist to move around the stage, interacting with the singers or actors. Another number required them to speak or shout various words as they performed. Their music, simple and complex, was always effective and well executed.

The sound system? Boo, hiss! Everyone was on a microphone. So when someone sang, you heard her voice emerge from a speaker some distance above her head and off to the side, not from her throat. The occasional low frequency feedback did not adequately compensate for the shrill distortion of the amplified sound. The added reverberation did not suit the outdoor venue: the crickets sang fine without it.

Only at the end, with all the musical forces joining together, and with four of the vividly costumed actors on display, was the effect grippingly theatrical. Too late! Though the evening offered much evidence of the commitment of the performers and creators involved, the elusive central figure, Emily Dickinson, the belle of Amherst, had already hid her face and fled from view.

# Chronicle

August 1

Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. St. Francis Auditorium, Santa Fe, NM. "Modeled on a Pueblo mission church, St. Francis Auditorium opened in 1917, part of the Pueblo revival period in Santa Fe architecture. A series of colorful murals depicts scenes from the life of St. Francis and the good works of Franciscans in New Mexico. A row of carved-wood ceiling beams are both imposing and beautiful. The festival, which this summer offers 39 concerts of 100 works, including premieres, rarities and favorites, also presents some programs in the city's 821-seat Lensic Performing Arts Center, an elaborately decorated vaudeville house from 1931, renovated in the late 1990s. While here, I caught . . . a fascinating contemporary-music program featuring Anssi Karttunen, a brilliant Finnish cellist, early on Friday evening. The main draw for music-minded visitors to the city each summer is the respected Santa Fe Opera, something well understood by the pianist and composer Marc Neikrug, the chamber music festival's enterprising artistic director. So the festival wisely schedules concerts that do not conflict with the opera company's performances. The noontime series, with concerts lasting about an hour, is popular with tourists. And most evening concerts begin at 6, leaving plenty of time for a postperformance dinner and enabling voracious classical music buffs (and critics) to drive the few miles north to the Santa Fe Opera in time for a production. Mr. Karttunen's concert on Friday offered diverse contemporary works for solo cello, with a few short exceptions: three tango-tinged pieces for three cellos by the Argentine composer Pablo Ortiz. Mr. Karttunen began with a recent solo work by Mr. Ortiz, Manzi, quirky music with pungent harmony and Baroque-like passages that surely pay homage to Bach. Luigi Dallapiccola's arresting Ciaccona, Intermezzo e Adagio (1946), for cello solo, is the kind of visceral music that may cause listeners who fear the term '12-tone' to have an epiphany. Berio's Sequenza XIV (2002) ingeniously explores the sound possibilities of the cello, including long stretches in which, by tapping on the body of the instrument and rapping the strings, the cellist evokes Sri Lankan drum rhythms. Mr. Karttunen played both works commandingly. The Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, whose Adriana Mater is receiving its American premiere production at the Santa Fe Opera this summer, was in attendance for Mr. Karttunen's performance of her Sept Papillons (Seven Butterflies), from 2000, a suite of short (roughly a minute each), capricious, vividly colorful fantasy pieces in the spirit of Schumann. Each explores a different cello technique or musical element, like fluttering rhythmic riffs or eerie, thin tunes hovering over weird pedal tones. Leaving the auditorium, the audience came upon a mariachi band inviting people to a crafts fair in the plaza. From Saariaho to mariachi: a typical day in Santa Fe during the summer festival season} [Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times, 8/5/08].

Mostly Mozart Festival presents a program of W.A. Mozart and Anton Webern. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY. "Surely, it can't have been the first time in the 42-year history of the Mostly Mozart Festival that anyone has booed. But to one who remembers all too well the soporific feel-good programs of the 1980s and '90s, it came as a jolt. True, it was provoked. The current custodians of the festival are intent on challenging listeners' expectations rather than merely satisfying them. That meant, in the concert by the festival orchestra . . . a program of Mozart and Webern -- unmediated, First Viennese School met Second. With Louis Langrée, the festival's music director, conducting, and Christiane Oelze applying her versatile soprano, the first half of the program did some artful dodging between tonality and atonality: from the Overture and an aria from Mozart's Idomeneo to Webern's Five Canons After Latin Texts (Op. 16) and back to Mozart's Adagio and Fugue (K. 546); from Webern's Five Religious Songs (Op. 15) to Mozart's Masonic Funeral Music (K. 477). It was a calculated risk and not a huge one, since the Webern numbers amounted, in total, to less than 10 minutes. But that first Webern set, as the performers were trying to proceed seamlessly back into Mozart, drew a smattering of polite applause and a resounding boo. It can't be said that the experiment was entirely successful. Quoted in the program notes, Mr. Langrée cited "the structural complexity, the eloquence of rhetorical gesture and the economy of orchestral colors" common to the music of both composers. But coming after that spare Webern set, with its instrumentation limited to clarinet and bass clarinet, the strings of Mozart's Adagio and Fugue carried a wash of Brahmsian if not Mahlerian warmth. Ditto the more heavily scored Masonic Funeral Music after the second, slightly more intricate Webern set. Those relatively unknown Mozart works are among his most austere beautiful, an austere beauty that in some ways they share with Webern's exquisite miniatures but that does not necessarily translate into compatibility. Still, if the notion smacked of an effort to make Webern palatable for a larger audience, that is a laudable goal, and this was an experiment worth trying" [James Oestreich, The New York Times, 8/4/08].



August 7

The final concert by the Police. Madison Square Garden, New York, NY. "[The concert] could have felt like any number of things: a victory lap, a spectacle, a backward glance, an amen. It was all of the above to one degree or another, but what it ultimately suggested was the last day of school. At the close of a reunion tour that stretched past a year, reaching well over three million fans and earning more than \$350 million, this three-piece rock band seemed not only festive but also relieved, and frankly giddy at the prospect of freedom. 'It's been a huge honor to get back together,' a full-bearded Sting said several songs into the show, before thanking the group's drummer, Stewart Copeland, and its guitarist, Andy Summers, 'for your musicianship, your companionship, your friendship, your understanding, your patience with me.' Have a nice summer, he could have added. Instead he sounded a note of jocular confession: 'The real triumph of this tour is that we haven't strangled each other.' Not that it hadn't crossed their minds, he added. The crowd roared knowingly, well versed in the history of a band that broke up in 1984, at the pinnacle of its success, in a bitter haze of clashing egos. So the tour, which began in May 2007, has apparently been more of a diplomatic rapprochement than a sentimental journey. . . . The grand finale . . . was no different in that regard: it confirmed the unusual chemistry that always bonded these artists, musically if not personally. . . . In a nod to the setting, the group welcomed nearly two dozen members of the New York City Police Department band near the start of the show, for a souped-up version of Message in a Bottle. This did nothing to improve the song, but it was welcome stagecraft, even if Sting looked patently silly in a police cap. . . . Sting had other points to make. Introducing Don't Stand So Close to Me, he recalled his early career as a schoolteacher, mock-lamenting his wayward path as a rock star. . . . But the concert's closing moments -- involving a crew member in costume as the fat lady singing, and an audio clip of Porky Pig stammering 'That's all, Folks' -- came across like a fizzy drink with a bitter aftertaste. It was a prankish, almost flippant way to go, but its sharp ambivalence felt totally honest" [Nate Chinen, The New York Times, 8/7/08].



August 9

Kurt Weill's Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny (1930, libretto by Bertolt Brecht). Tanglewood Music Center, Lenox, MA. "Weill's music, though mostly stern and rigorous, has stretches of plaintive lyricism and searching harmony. Weill softens the anticapitalist screed in Brecht's text and humanizes the characters. Seeing the opera performed by this cast humanized it even more. There was something touching about watching young singers full of promise portraying vacant-eyed prostitutes, like the dusky-toned mezzo-soprano Rebecca Jo Loeb as Jenny. Or hapless lumberjacks, like the boyish lyric tenor Steven Ebel as Jimmy Mahoney, the pitiable hero of the work, who is electrocuted for failing to pay a reckless gambling debt and a big bar tab. To be without money is the one unpardonable crime in Mahagonny. In casting Mahagonny a production can treat the work as an opera or a musical theater piece. Mr. Levine certainly cast it as an opera at the Met, starting with the original production headed by Teresa Stratas, a Jenny for the ages, and the Wagnerian tenor Richard Cassilly, scoring a career triumph as Jimmy. . . . The final chorus, a slow, steady, hard-driving march, had the requisite bleakness. With the hedonistic town in shambles, the residents demonstrate for their ideals, holding placards that are all too timely: 'Support Fear,' 'Trust Us,' 'Don't Think,' 'Who Are They?' Yet to experience the chorus performed by young artists on the thresholds of their careers lent the show an element of uplift that -- my guess -- would have gratified Weill and infuriated Brecht" [Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times, 8/11/08].

August 12

Bob Dylan. Prospect Park, New York, NY. "Dylan struck a pose. He was standing at center stage, feet planted wide. Dressed in black from his hat on down, he faced outward, proud, flanked by stone-faced band members. Then he formed his hands into pistols -- six-shooters, let's say -- and fired shot after shot, roguishly slaying the crowd. It was a pretty good illustration of what had been happening for the past two hours. Mr. Dylan can be an inconstant performer, and sometimes an indifferent one. . . . As usual Mr. Dylan transformed his old songs, in some cases preserving only the lyrics. . . . Necessity surely birthed some of these inventions: Mr. Dylan, 67, now sings with a (more) limited range, and a coarse, throaty tone. . . . Masters of War . . . draws its focus wide but sharp. Here Mr. Dylan enunciated unusually clearly, over a drone-haunted vamp. 'I hope that you die,' he snarled . . . But his peak of intensity came paired to something other than a death wish. 'I can see through your masks,' he wailed . . . He seemed to know firsthand about masks" [Nate Chinen, The New York Times, 8/13/08].



Music of Bohuslav Martinu. Avery Fisher Hall and Kaplan Playhouse, New York, NY. "Janine Jansen, the violinist, and Maxim Rysanov, the violist, . . . gave . . . robust and occasionally steamy accounts of Martinu's Three Madrigals and the Handel-Halvorsen Passacaglia. . . . The Martinu, composed in 1947, alludes to the contrapuntal intricacy of Bach's music but couches it in a hard-driven, 20th-century sensibility, which thrived on the energy these two players brought to it. . . . Martinu had a place in the orchestral program as well. [Jiri] Belohlavek opened his selections with the Serenade No. 2 (1932), a brief, lightweight neoclassical work for violins and violas" [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 8/14/08].

August 13

Kaija Saariaho's *Passion de Simone*. Rose Theater, New York, NY. "There is not much uplift . . . in the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho's wrenching and gravely beautiful *Passion de Simone*. . . . This dramatic work, essentially a 75-minute oratorio for soprano, chorus and orchestra, explores the life and writings of the Jewish French philosopher, mystic and social activist Simone Weil, who died at 34 in 1943 in England. In solidarity with her compatriots in concentration camps, Weil, who was sickly all her life, refused to eat more than meager rations, virtually starving herself. Ms. Saariaho, 55, is composer-in-residence at Mostly Mozart this summer, and *La Passion de Simone* can be seen as the festival's defining work. This is the third dramatic piece Ms. Saariaho has collaborated on with the Lebanese-born writer Amin Maalouf, who, like the composer, lives in Paris. The text is in French. Their two previous operas were grimly involving: *L'Amour de Loin*, a medieval romantic fable that ends in tragedy, and *Adriana Mater*, which recently had its American premiere at the Santa Fe Opera, a brutal tale of a woman raped by a neighbor in a war-torn country. *La Passion de Simone* may be the most despairing of the three. It is unrelentingly bleak and probably too long. Still, it is hard to resist the sheer, misty allure of Ms. Saariaho's thick-textured, rhapsodic music and the unusually inventive dramatic structure of this work, especially as presented here. The soprano Dawn Upshaw gave a mesmerizing performance, joined by the superb choral ensemble London Voices (Terry Edwards, music director) and the excellent City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, directed by the Finnish conductor Susanna Malkki in her impressive New York debut. The production was conceived and directed by Peter Sellars. (Lincoln Center was one of four institutions that commissioned the work.) This oratorio, which Ms. Saariaho has likened to Bach's passions, is subtitled a *Musical Journey in 15 Stations*, as in *Stations of the Cross*, each one offering a contemplation upon an aspect of Weil's life and beliefs. Rather than presenting Weil as the central character of a biographical drama, the story is told by a narrator, Ms. Upshaw, dressed in a gray housedress. She sits at and circles a bare wood table, poring over Weil's journals, though she is visited by a silent spectral figure, a dancer, Michael Schumacher, dressed like a barefoot prisoner, who enters Ms. Upshaw's solitary room through a lone door. . . . As always, Ms. Saariaho's orchestral writing is wondrous. She masterfully builds shimmering, organic sonorities from

multilayered orchestra elements that blend natural and electronic sounds. Her tonally wayward harmonies are alive with pungent dissonance. Yet, as the collages of orchestral sound flow by inexorably, they come across as grounded and elemental. And the soprano part deftly balances ruminative lyricism with conversational naturalness. . . . The score does have moments that pulsate with rhythmic energy. Sometimes all it takes is a simple ostinato in the percussion section, or a riff that swings in a four-squared, hammering meter, as when Ms. Upshaw describes Weil's months spent bound to a machine: Weil took a leave from her teaching job to work incognito in two factories, the better to understand the plight of workers. . . . By the end, *La Passion de Simone* does present a small element of uplift. Despite her confounding philosophy and acts of self-abnegation, Weil left behind her writings, her journal" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 8/14/08].





August 20

Four-hour concert of African music. Damrosch Park, New York, NY. Cultural exchange rarely gets more rapturous than it did . . . at Damrosch Park, in a free concert of African music presented by Lincoln Center Out of Doors. Over the course of about four hours, an overflow audience beheld the efforts of several imposing legends from Ethiopia; a raucous art-punk band from the Netherlands; a jazz combo from Cambridge, Mass.; and a group with roots in Kenya and Washington. The show started strong and never flagged, helped along by an enthusiastic crowd. The show's biggest stars were Mahmoud Ahmed, a transfixing vocalist, and Getatchew Mekurya, an authoritative saxophonist. Both artists have reached global audiences through *Éthiopiques*, the acclaimed reissue series on Buda Musique, a French label. And both artists used their stage time to evoke the exuberance of Addis Ababa in the 1970s. But they appeared in separate sets, and with two strikingly different groups. Mr. Ahmed, 67, began his portion of the evening with *Atawurulegn Lela*, wafting a sinuous melodic line over briskly tumbling polyrhythm. His voice was strong, even youthful, and his phrasing was supple. Later he sang *Ere Mela Mela*, an anthem with a more meditative groove, and here his singing grew rich and plangent; at times its microtonal shivers suggested the somber beauty of an Islamic call to prayer. His accompanying coterie was the *Either/Orchestra*, a light-on-its-feet big band led by the saxophonist Russ Gershon, an Ethiopian-music specialist. As they do on *Ethiogroove*, a DVD issued last year, Mr. Gershon and company refurbished the sound of Mr. Ahmed's old records, with sharper horn intonation and less rhythm-section distortion. In addition to Mr. Ahmed, the *Either/Orchestra* backed *Alemayehu Eshete*, a singer with an equally assertive but less transcendent style. Opening with *Addis Ababa Bete*, Mr. Eshete was at his charismatic best; each verse began with a single clarion note and then plunged into rapid-fire patter. He tried a few other approaches in his set, like an insinuating croon and a bark befitting his nickname, the Ethiopian James Brown. Extra Golden, the Kenyan-American band, hit upon funk as a byproduct of its style, which blends Nairobi benga music and old-fashioned rock 'n' roll. With a steady-thumping downbeat but much variation elsewhere -- Onyango Wuod Omari, the band's drummer, is a mischief-maker -- the group made its hybrid feel unlabored. But there were subtle indications of an arduous exchange. Some songs juxtaposed English and Luo, a bit jarringly. And at one point Opiyo Bilongo sang *Obama*, a song of gratitude for a certain United States senator and his crucial assistance with artist visas. (Earlier Bill Bragin, Lincoln Center's director of public programming, had similarly thanked Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York. There was no tune called Schumer, though.) The concert closed with a gripping performance by Mr. Mekurya, the king of Ethiopian saxophone, and the *Ex*, the punk band from Amsterdam. Drawing primarily from their 2006 album *Moa Anbessa* (Terp), they dug in deeply together, creating a cyclone of stomping rhythm, brash distortion and fluttering modal melody. There were vocal turns by G. W. Sok, the band's hyperdeclarative frontman, and Katherina Ex, its rigidly propulsive drummer. But the stage belonged to Mr. Mekurya, who held his ground against two scabrous guitars on

his trademark, *Shellela*, his tone a mixture of husky stoicism and earnest supplication. At another point, when he played an unaccompanied cadenza, he earned one of the biggest cheers of the night" [Nate Chinen, *The New York Times*, 8/21/08].

The Emerson String Quartet performs Bela Bartok's Quartet No. 3 and Kaija Saariaho's *Terra Memoria*. Joe's Pub, New York, NY. "The venerable Emerson String Quartet is accustomed to performing in glittering concert halls. But it seemed entirely comfortable at Joe's Pub on Wednesday, offering a raucous performance of Bartok's head-banging String Quartet No. 3 that would have sounded appropriate in a far grittier establishment than this upscale spot. . . . The program also included an unsentimental rendition of Barber's *Molto Adagio*" [Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*, 8/25/08].

August 21

The Emerson String Quartet performs Kaija Saariaho's *Terra Memoria*. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY. "Although in some ways a delicate piece, Kaija Saariaho's striking *Terra Memoria*, which starts and ends with a whisper, seemed . . . suited to Avery Fisher. Dedicated to 'those departed,' the angst-ridden, dissonant textures of the one-movement work create an anxious momentum and haunting cloud of sound, a startling mood swing" [Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*, 8/25/08].

August 23

Zukofsky Quartet. Bargemusic, New York, NY. [Karol] Szymanowski's String Quartet No. 1 [is] a shimmering, deliciously quirky score with a melancholy spirit that suddenly evaporates in a vigorous finale . . . [a] real find . . . and given the fascination his music holds for audiences these days, the work is likely to appeal to a larger audience now than when he composed it, in 1917. It begins and ends with the sparest of gestures: a single high tone at the start, two whispered pizzicato chords at the end. In between, its plush textures surge with an intense chromaticism that creates an unusual world, largely Romantic but with early modernist leanings. Cyrus Beroukhim, the ensemble's first violinist, painted his lines with a graceful portamento that underscored the work's Romantic roots. If the performance sometimes shortchanged the air of mystery that Szymanowski's harmonic language creates, it was solid and vigorous, and consistently lush [Allan Kozinn, *The New York Times*, 8/25/08].

