

PORTFOLIO 1: The Emily Dickinson Music Archive: A Music as Numerous as Space: Emily Dickinson, Landscape, and the Allure of the Performative (EDIS International Critical Institute, Amherst College, Mass., USA)

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Figure1: *The Poet's Body-Gloves, Ears, Eyes* (1992), *Lesley Dill and Emily Dickinson: Poetry and Art*, Durbin Gallery of the Doris Wainwright Kennedy Art Center and Azar Art Studios, Birmingham AL (2016)

A Music as Numerous as Space: Emily Dickinson, Landscape, and the Allure of the Performative

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Original Abstract

"There is something about music that keeps its distance even at the moment that it engulfs us," composer Aaron Copland wrote in his book, *Music and Imagination*. "It is at the same time outside and away from us and inside and part of us."

The same can be said of the poems and letters of Emily Dickinson (which Copland set to music in 1950 in his song cycle, *12 Poems of Emily Dickinson*.) The enigmatic allure of landscape remained a driving force throughout Emily Dickinson's life; her perceptive yet innovative use of poetic space, sound and impetus not only found resonance and commune with her immediate environs but can also be viewed as proceeding from a profoundly musical sensibility. When shaping her prosody Dickinson not only drew heavily on the rhythmic and other musical structures of liturgical and hymn-based material but also reflected her musical sensibilities through her innovative use of area, scale, circumference, navigation, and an innate perspective of the natural world; often by way of musical metaphor. There is a highly self-conscious use of music in Dickinson's poetry both as a source of imagery and as a strategy for shaping her terse, condensed poetic line.

Building on critical theories of renowned Dickinson scholars such as Juhasz (1983), Loeffelholz (1991) Buonanduci (2009) and Vendler (2010) this study serves as an examination of Dickinson's use of musical device and metaphor: those flights of creative inspiration that duly reflected her deep bond with the landscapes that continued to inspire and challenge her. It will address Dickinson's fascination with, connection to, and interaction with exterior and interior space and how she determinedly returned to music as a preferred language of choice when seeking to express her creative response. Points of entry include her use of repetition, space and silence, rhythmic device, word painting and setting, syllabic placement, accent, stress and her inventive use of form.

By way of exploration and analysis of Dickinson's affinity with the outside world; her homage to nature through the use of musical metaphor (exterior landscape), and her active participation as both an avid music maker and domestic connoisseur within her own home (interior landscape), it is my wish that this body of research will ultimately serve as a model for future study and debate. When considering Emily Dickinson's instinctive improvisations - provocative vignettes of music and space - one cannot fail to appreciate the levels of her critical perception. These very insights encourage the performer to move one step closer to a more visceral and dramatic realisation of her work.

Proposed 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 Sally Bayley's *Home on the Horizon: Space in America's Search for Space from Emily Dickinson to Bob Dylan* (2013) 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.

Introduction

The French composer Achille-Claude Debussy famously stated that “Music is the space between the notes”. In true accordance with minimalist sensibility when approaching the construction, production and performance of music, Debussy invites us to consider the space between musical notes as an opportunity to think more deeply about time and variant within sonic landscape, with particular reference to the resonating and reverberating corridors of meaning found in the expressive pockets between defined objects.

In complement, Emily Dickinson can be viewed as a mastermind manipulator of spatial ownership; a chameleon of ever-changing role-play and an instinctual yet private performer. The proposition that Dickinson proceeded somatically raises some interesting questions about the importance of music, performance and artistic agency in Emily Dickinson’s life and the way in which she both consciously, and sub-consciously employed performance techniques to reinforce the varying states of consciousness found in her writing. Today’s presentation will focus on Emily Dickinson’s relationship to music, space and, specifically, her use of variant: in her own music making and her various literary offerings, all with a view to monitoring avenues of performance techniques employed.

While there is a wealth of scholarly literature relating to Emily Dickinson’s poetic output there is still a surprising lag in terms of academic inquiry into the role of music in her work. Her musical training, and use of musical device, imagery and reference have been widely documented, and the prolific and consistent musical setting of Dickinson’s work (particularly by American composers) has generated increasing discussion and debate. There is, however, surprisingly little study of the interface between Dickinson’s interaction with musical score and practice, and how her various annotations and markings as a result of these activities may have influenced and moulded her literary output.

Musical amphitheatres – Emily Dickinson’s use of interior and exterior space



Figure 2: Emily Dickinson's bedroom (post-restoration), The Emily Dickinson Museum (2015)

Emily Dickinson, as a writer, arguably surveyed the tangible landscape available to her, and then chose to curate her work beyond the immediately accessible. In this sense she clearly reflects key aspects of the performer's process: identifying the space provided, reaching into the depths of the artist's creative wellspring, analysing the resultant data, and then articulating a body-based response that reconfigures the performer's relationship to the initial boundaries on offer.

As an artist who used interior landscape (such as her bedroom, the front parlour, the kitchen, and the greenhouse) to engineer and manipulate a potent juxtaposition to her magnetic pull to exterior landscapes (travel and the exotic, religion, death, and nature) Dickinson emulated the performer-at-work. Sally Bayley, in her book entitled *Home on the Horizon: America's Search for Space from Emily Dickinson to Bob Dylan* describes Dickinson's "intention to dwell – and thrive – in the possibility of home life" as "encapsulating her culture's attitude towards the home space: as a place where inner and outer worlds might meet in conversation and where anything seems

possible”.¹ Dickinson’s sense of possibility “signifies the imaginative freedom to dwell both in and out of time and space: both indoors and out.”²

The process of working with the given (or known) yet yearning for fragment, in incessant repetition, striving for the most relevant word, sound, phrase, balance and commentary, all in a solitary space, is a hallmark of a performer’s workspace. Drawing on these daily influences and responsibilities, Dickinson was immersed in a constant and provocative dialogue between the everyday and, in her own words, the desire to “dwell in possibility”. Limits, borders, societal expectations, the mundane and incessant were creatively enmeshed with her ability to perceive hidden corridors of expression. Elizabeth Phillips, in her book *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance* states “Dickinson was an actress who changed roles and points of view as readily as she experimented with poetic genres”.³ Her ability to adapt, strategise, and elegantly gavotte through often challenging and turbulent artistic processes demonstrates a synchronous affinity with the performer confronting issues of identity, gesture and expression.

Emily Dickinson’s musical training



Figure 3: Emily Dickinson’s piano (rosewood, Hallet Davis & Co., Boston) and matching stool (rosewood and velvet), c. 1845, The Emily Dickinson Special Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University

¹ S. Bayley, *Home on the Horizon: America’s Search for Space from Emily Dickinson to Bob Dylan*, Peter Lang (2010), p.1

² *ibid.*, p.2

³ E. Phillips, *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance*, Pennsylvania State University Press (1988), p. 21

Existing records show that Emily Dickinson was well-versed and trained in both music theory and practice (specifically in piano and singing), as was commonplace for many young women of her age and social class in mid-19th century America. Her father supported her studies in both instruments during her time at Mount Holyoake Seminary, and in so doing provided her with the musical training to develop both her practical and theoretical skills.

From her earliest years of musical training it became clear that playing the piano was both a passion and a preoccupation. “I also was much pleased with the news [your letter] contained especially that you are taking lessons on the ‘piny’, as you always call it,” fourteen-year old Emily wrote to her friend Abiah Root in 1845, “but remember not to get on ahead of me. Father intends to have a Piano very soon. How happy I shall be when I have one of my own.”⁴ Dickinson’s wish soon came true – her father bought a piano in the same year; a handsome rosewood piano with ornately carved legs, manufactured by Hallett Davis and Company of Boston.

In return she dedicated a number of hours every day to her piano practice. In September 1845 Dickinson wrote to Abiah Root stating “I am taking piano lessons and getting along very well with them...now I have a piano, I am very happy”.⁵ Records suggest that over a period of some 6 years Dickinson actively engaged with the often laborious and thankless task of daily piano practise, resulting in a level of prowess that was deemed advanced, even by today’s standards. Her piano tuition was based on the Bertini Method,⁶ a popular piano methodology of the day. Bertini’s study programme included directives in such issues as deportment and correct finger and hand position, as well as exercises for developing finger agility and independence.

⁴ T. Johnson, *Selected Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Harvard University Press, Boston (1986), L6

⁵ *ibid.*, L8

⁶ H. Bertini, *Progressive and Complete Method for the Pianofoirte* (1894), New England Piano Company, Boston, c. 1856

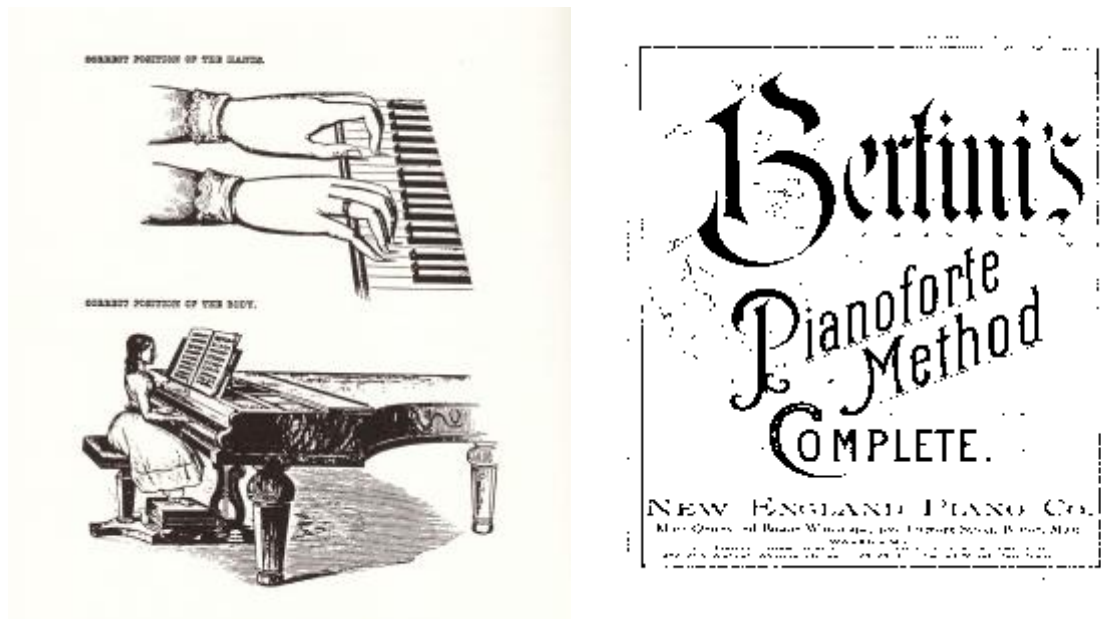


Figure 4: Excerpts from Bertini's *Complete and Progressive Piano Method*, New England Piano Company, Boston, c. 1856

Of particular note, she was known by her family and neighbours to be an expert improviser at the piano. Her cousin John Graves described her late night improvisations as “heavenly music.” When he would visit his cousins and stay overnight, he would be awakened from his sleep by Dickinson’s music making, with Emily explaining the next morning, “I can improvise better at night.” Dickinson’s cousin Clara Newman Turner also recalled that “before seating herself at the piano Emily covered the upper and lower octaves so that the length of the keyboard might correspond to that of the old fashioned instrument on which she had learned to play.” MacGregor Jenkins, a Dickinson neighbour during Dickinson's lifetime, noted in his memoir that:

[Emily] went often across the lawn to her brother’s house. It was through him, and his handsome wife the “Sue” of her letters and messages, that she kept in touch with the life of her circle, and to a considerable extent with the village and the world. It was here that she would fly to the piano, if the mood required, and thunder out a composition of her own which she laughingly but appropriately called “The Devil,” and when her father came, lantern in hand, to see that she reached home in safety, she would elude him and dart through the darkness to reach home before him. This was pure mischief and there was much of it in her.⁷

⁷ M. Jenkins, *Emily Dickinson, friend and neighbour*, Little Brown & Co, Boston (1939), p.36

DEVIL'S DREAM -- REEL.



www.abcnotation.com/tunes

Figure 5: *The Devil's Dream*, anon., c.1834 (New England), www.abcnotation.com/tunes

The proposition that Dickinson proceeded from not only a musical but performative perspective is beautifully supported by the image of her finding freedom in thought and expression via an improvisatory musical language. Her choice to improvise at night, potentially based on well-known jigs, reels and patriotic songs of the time, demonstrates her desire to find release within boundary: to explore ways in which her innate sense of musical gesture, placement, breath, silence and cadence in performance terms could potentially inform her own poetic practice.

Dickinson's personal musical folio – a performance charter



Harvard University, Houghton Library, 010110806_0011

Figure 6: Index page from E. Dickinson, *Music: a bound volume of miscellaneous sheet music, without title page*, Houghton Library Special Collections, Harvard University, Boston

Emily Dickinson's personal music folio also offers us a unique window into her musical preferences; containing 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 and determined level of expert music instruction, notably during her formative years. Spanning 484 pages her selections were somewhat unusual for the time. As a direct result of a surge in the technical development of the piano, and interest in the piano as a home-based instrument, there was increased production and representation of solo and duet-based piano repertoire in personal music folios.



Figure 7: *Juniata Quick Step* (B.A. Burditt) and *Sliding Waltz* (C.H. Keith) from E. Dickinson, *Music: a bound volume of miscellaneous sheet music, without title page*, Houghton Library Special Collections, Harvard University, Boston

What is interesting to note is that whilst Emily Dickinson did include standard piano fare of her day, including piano transcriptions of larger operatic and symphonic works, her tastes were predominantly centred on popular music of the time: Irish, Scottish and English folk song, patriotic ballads, minstrel songs and piano transcriptions of dances such as waltzes, quick steps and reels.

Dickinson's exposure to musical performance - Jenny Lind and Anton Rubenstein

Whilst Emily Dickinson preferred the security and regularity that her strategically-designed structural empire provided she was nevertheless seduced by the exotic energy of live performance. As a result of her attendance at a number of music recitals and soirees in her youth, Dickinson went on record to express her profound reaction to the immediacy and inclusivity of experiencing live music performance.



E. Magnus, *Jenny Lind*, National Portrait Gallery (UK) (1862)

After attending a concert by the famous 19th century soprano, Jenny Lind, in Boston in May, 1841, 20-year old Emily became enchanted with not only Lind's vocal range and technical abilities, but perhaps more importantly with her adopted performance persona. Dickinson wrote of the experience:

How we all loved Jenny Lind, but not accustomed oft to her manner of singing didn't [sic] fancy that so well as we did her – no doubt it was very fine – but take some notes from her "Echo" – the Bird songs from the "Bird Song" and some of her curious trills, and I'd rather have a Yankee. Herself, and not her music, was what we seemed to love – she has an air of exile in her mild blue eyes, and a something sweet and touching in her native accent which charms her many friends.⁸



E. Brown (Quidor, Engvr.), *Jenny Lind's Birdsong*, S.C. Jollie, New York (1850)

Judith Pascoe, in her article entitled *The House Encore Me So: Emily Dickinson and Jenny Lind* argues that Dickinson found a comparative conduit for performative expression through viewing Jenny Lind's performance:

The Jenny Lind phenomenon provides a rewarding context in which to place Dickinson's performance poems, suggesting a highly theatrical Dickinson whose refusal to place her poems before a broad audience had more to do with the vagaries of the marketplace than with a reluctance to perform. Lind provided Dickinson with an important – if ultimately disappointing – model of female self-fashioning. The several ways in which Lind's public persona and Dickinson's private and poetic ones coincide suggest that Dickinson's relatively brief encounter with Lind had a complex and enduring impact on her conception of herself as an artist.⁹

Further, Dickinson's description of one of the many recitals given by the famous European concert pianist Anton Rubenstein during his American concert tour in 1873 further cements her attraction to the allure of the musically performative. In a letter to her cousin Frances Norcross in May of the same year Dickinson writes "Glad you heard Rubenstein! Grieved Loo (her sister Lavinia) could not hear him. He makes me think of polar nights Captain Hall could tell! Going from ice to ice! What an exchange of awe!"¹⁰ Years later, Clara Bellinger Green (Dickinson's cousin) revealed "Emily told us of her early love of the piano and confided that, after hearing Rubenstein...play in Boston, she had become convinced that she could never master the art and had forthwith abandoned it once and for all, giving herself up then wholly to literature".¹¹

With a self-directed immersion in her literary practice Dickinson nevertheless determinedly retained a musical ethos, transferring her practical musical skills to a more metaphoric one.

In Carolyn Cooley's book *The Music of Emily Dickinson's Poetry and Letters: A Study of Imagery and Form* the author states:

Melodic strains and musical references pervade her poems, providing unusually appropriate figurative language to express joyous and plaintive moods... To an astonishing degree, the pulsating rhythms and sounds which Dickinson orchestrates

⁹ J. Pascoe, *The House Encore Me So: Emily Dickinson and Jenny Lind*, *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 1:1 (1992), pp. 1-18

¹⁰ T. Johnson, op.cit., L390

¹¹ Ibid., YH 2 (273)

in hundreds of her poems testify to her rare ability to convey profound concepts in musical terminology. Sometimes, the very air around her seems filled with music, and the songs of the birds either lift her exalted spirit or trouble her downcast soul. At other times, music emanates from the depths of her own being to create contrapuntal melodies which achieve either a harmonic or a dissonant whole. Dickinson's assertion that "in adequate music there is a major and a minor" is a philosophy which she incorporates into her writing, because, whether created and developed in major keys of exhilaration or in minor keys of depression, music is one of Dickinson's most effective strategies for expressing her sensitive and provocative thoughts.¹²

Dickinson's piano score annotations



The Grand Overture to Lodoiska by Kreutzer, arranged for two performers on the pianoforte by Czerny (1823), New York p.4, extract from Emily Dickinson's music book. Houghton Library Special Collections, Harvard University

Despite Dickinson's seeming departure from a physically-driven relationship with music production she does provide us with a clear legacy of her somatic choices in piano practice and score preparation. Her personal music folio includes many annotations and markings in Dickinson's own handwriting, in both pencil and pen. From these markings it is clear that she possessed a secure knowledge of the physical and analytical knowledge required to prepare a

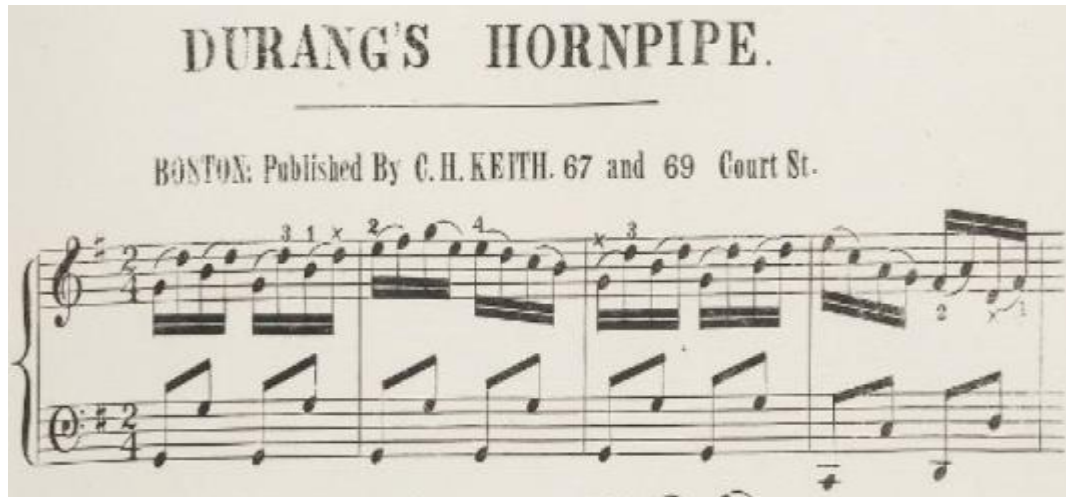
¹² Carolyn L. Cooley, *The Music of Emily Dickinson's Poems and Letters: A Study of Imagery and Form*, Macfarland Press (2003), p.25

piano score in readiness for performance. Issues pertaining to hand position, note accuracy and, perhaps most poignantly fingering marks, track an intimate yet critical visceral journey.

When a pianist initially engages with a piece of music one of the first things they must do, once notes have been identified, is strategically determine a comfortable and accessible fingering pattern. Correct fingering acts as a metaphoric key that, once applied, neatly and swiftly opens the 'locked door'. Piano fingering is a bespoke mechanism in an individual's performance preparation – the performer's physiology and level of pianistic development inform the choices made.

Printed annotations

The following is an example of what was the most common occurrence in Dickinson's music folio – a clear page with printed annotations.



Duran's Hornpipe (c1785), C.H.Keith, Boston (1831), Emily Dickinson's Music Book. Houghton Library Special Collections, Harvard University

Note names

The following example highlights Dickinson's reinforcing note names in the bass clef. This is standard practice for pianists at various stages of development, particularly when working in extension areas, such as notes above or below the stave as written on ledger lines.



The Old Armchair, H. Russell (1840), p.1, extract from Emily Dickinson's music book. Houghton Library Special Collections, Harvard University

Dickinson clearly took the issue of piano fingering seriously, as evidenced in the following musical examples, working within the British System as opposed to the Continental System. Despite the British System's popularity throughout the nineteenth century it became outdated in favour of the Continental System by the mid-twentieth century.¹³

English Fingering System (c. 1800-1950)

- Left Hand (LH) | Right Hand (RH)
- Thumb (RH) | Pinky (LH) = + or X
- Index (RH) or Ring (LH) = 1
- Middle = 2 (RH | LH)
- Ring (RH) or Index (LH) = 3
- Pinky (RH) or Thumb (LH) = 4

Continental Fingering System (c. 1950-)

- Left Hand (LH) | Right Hand (RH)
- Thumb = 1 (LH, RH)
- Index = 2 (LH, RH)
- Middle = 3 (LH, RH)
- Ring = 4 (LH, RH)
- Pinky = 5 (LH, RH)

Dickinson clearly relied heavily on the thumb as a pivot or bridge between hand position changes; enabling more fluent and agile traversing across the score. Johann Hummel, in his Treatise *The Art of Playing the Pianoforte*¹⁴ articulates what Dickinson clearly and instinctively gleaned:

¹³ C.P.E. Bach (ed. W. J. Mitchell), *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, Eulenberg (1949), p. 53

¹⁴ J. N. Hummel, *The Art of Playing the Piano Forte*, George Manry, London (1827), p.61

The thumb is the most important of the fingers, it is the pivot or point of support about which, whether the hand is to contract or to expand, the other fingers must turn, and direct themselves with the utmost possible facility and quickness, and without the least audible separation of the sounds.

Fingering (ink and pencil)

The following example demonstrates Dickinson's workings with various fingerings, and amendments in both pencil and pen. It is relatively rare for a pianist to use pen when marking scores – this creates permanency that may work against the pianist, not allowing further amendments.



F. Hunten, *Take them, I Implore Thee (Deb Conté)*, arranged from the opera *Norma* with variations, Boston (1831), p.3, extract from Emily Dickinson's music book. Houghton Library Special Collections, Harvard University

Fingering (x (+) as thumb/variant)

The following is an example of Dickinson's preference for using the thumb, in addition to miscellaneous markings. A perfect example of Dickinson's piano practice-at-work, she annotates fingering markings in both treble and bass clefs, with particular focus on the X (or +) marking for the thumb. Dickinson also employs additional annotations as directives, specifically in relation to the repeat signs via the use of the word D.C. (*Da Capo* or "from the cap/top") and *Fine* (finish).



C.H. Keith, *The Basket Cotillion*, Boston (1824), p.1, extract from Emily Dickinson's Music Book. Houghton Library Special Collections, Harvard University

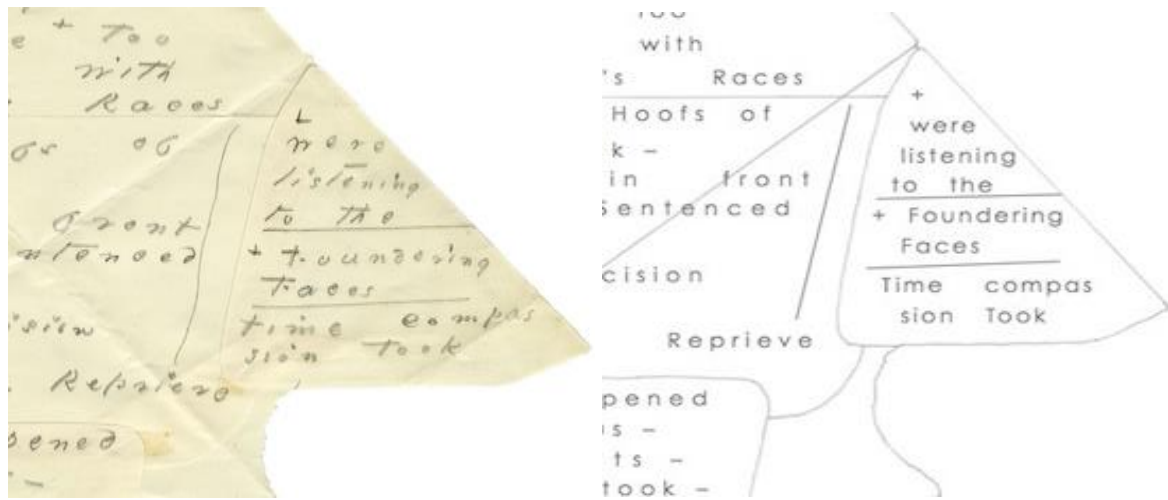
Further, the choreographic directives below the score, as below, suggests that the score may have been used in live performance as backing for dancing within Dickinson's immediate domestic space.

Forward two - cross over - chasse de chasse - cross to place - four ladies join hands, half round and retain position - four gentlemen forward, join hands, half round and back - the whole form a wreath, ballance and turn partners to places.

C.H. Keith, *The Basket Cotillion*, Boston (1824), p.1, extract from Emily Dickinson's Music Book. Houghton Library Special Collections, Harvard University

Dickinson's annotations, particularly her use of the thumb, serve as an indication of variant – an alternative to the existing status quo – and offers insight into the way that she approached her music-making. The use of variant provides tailor-made options for the performer, ideally to explore a more bespoke, body-based reading of the score.

Dickinson's envelope poems (x (or +) as variant)



We Talked With Each Other, Fr1506(A) (1879) from *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems*, J. Bervin, M. Werner and S. Howe, New Directions (2013)

Dickinson's use of the X (or +) in her piano music can, arguably, be directly aligned with her use of the X (or +) in her poetry. In the final copies of many of her poems she would mark a word or a phrase with an X, thereby offering the reader an alternative choice to that which was originally stated. Michele Ierardi, in her paper entitled *Translating Emily: Digitally Representing Dickinson's Poetic Production* states "By doing this, she opened up the possibilities of meaning and challenged the notion of closure".¹⁵ Sharon Cameron, states "variants indicate the desire for limit and the difficulty of enforcing it....it is impossible to say where the text ends because variants extend the text's identity in ways that make it seem potentially limitless".¹⁶

Dickinson's use of X (or +) as variant was not necessarily due to her changing her mind. Rather it was used as a means of offering more than one alternative: options that exist in synthesis and complement to each other; contrasting but not in competition. Like her choices of piano fingering in many examples of the piano music she performed, the use of X (or +) as a physical,

¹⁵ M. Ierardi, *Translating Emily: Digitally Representing Dickinson's Poetic Production using Fascicle 16 as a Case Study*, <http://www.cs.virginia.edu/~ajf2j/emily/emily.html#2> (1997), p.1

¹⁶ S. Cameron, *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles*, University of Chicago Press (1992), p.6

tangible notation arguably offered Dickinson the opportunity to proceed performatively, on the piano and on the page.

Conclusion

Emily Dickinson was a poet that whilst having acknowledged implicit social and literary norms also actively defied them by embracing self-constructed views of the human condition. Various influences played a role in fashioning her literary themes and style yet music, as a vital and expressive tool, was to permeate her mind, heart and soul.

As a music practitioner and scholar one of the most satisfying aspects of this study was the discovery that Dickinson's musical and literary practice can provide a unique opportunity for the performer to extend their own professional practice. Whilst this could be true of many poets Emily Dickinson presents a rare creative challenge because her writing is both oblique and tightly woven. At first glance her poems seem so perfectly formed as to be impenetrable, certainly not material that immediately attracts performance-led response or commentary. However, the opportunity to work closely with her texts, with particular reference to the musical signposts within them, crystallised my theory of how potentially powerful and instructive her poetry can be for one engaging with performance practice.

Ultimately, it is my intention that this study will emphasise the possible ways in which the 'performer' is afforded a unique and potentially crucial pathway into new and innovative ways of 'reading' Dickinson. By delving and foraging into Dickinson's submerged sub-textual literary corridors, by experiencing Dickinson's creative 'wheel in the dark', we are then invited to synthesise our findings through our own creative filters. Development of this research will not only promote existing work but will also serve as a future guide for Dickinson-based scholarship and performance.

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