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## The Role of the Piano in The 12 Poems of Emily Dickinson by Aaron Copland

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THE ROLE OF THE PIANO IN THE *12 POEMS OF EMILY DICKINSON* BY AARON  
COPLAND

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Submitted in Partial fulfillment of  
University Honors Program Requirements  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

by  
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## Abstract

In the song cycle *12 Poems of Emily Dickinson* by Aaron Copland, one may observe the interplay between the piano and the narrator. Throughout all twelve songs, the piano plays different roles. In several songs, the piano plays a certain character: in “Nature, the gentlest mother,” the piano is personified as Nature, while in “Dear March, come in!” the piano is March. In other songs, the piano reacts to the narrator—for example, in “Going to Heaven!”, the narrator announces a statement, and the piano follows with fast, tumbling eighth notes that portray the narrator’s scattered thoughts. Every song in the cycle has a specific character, and the piano collaborates with the voice to paint an aural image of the meaning of each song. This paper analyzes the piano’s role in each individual song.

## Key Words

12 Poems of Emily Dickinson, Emily Dickinson, Aaron Copland, song cycle, piano, vocal music, recital

The *12 Poems of Emily Dickinson* by Aaron Copland is a unique song cycle I had the pleasure of performing. When I first sought to undertake this work, I did not realize the extent of understanding the performer would have to possess of the music and poetry in order to do it justice. Over about a year of learning the music, I read as much as I could about Copland and Dickinson and discussed the poetry's meaning with anyone who would listen in order to inform my performance of the song cycle. After analyzing the poetry and music extensively in order to perform the cycle, I quickly came to the realization that there is no possible way to write about the cycle comprehensively and concisely. Thus, the aim of this paper is specifically examine the interplay between the piano and the voice, and what role the piano occupies in relation to the narrator. The poems have vastly different subject matters—specifically the themes of life, death, nature, and eternity. Thus, the piano does not occupy the same role throughout the cycle. Rather, it morphs between mirroring the narrator's thoughts, acting as a catalyst—prompting the narrator/singer to react, and portraying another character.

In “Nature, the gentlest mother,” the piano *is* Nature, in all its moods. The expansive range in this song, particularly the five octaves between the B flats in the right and left hand at the start of the narrator entrance, presents Nature as an all-knowing, omnipresent force. This style is similar to many other famous works by Copland, evoking that quintessentially American mood similar to “the music of the “open prairie” at the beginning of *Billy the Kid*” (Starr 54). The fast sixteenth note motifs high in the right hand piano part depict the “impetuous bird” referenced by the narrator in the text of the poem. While it is daytime and Nature serenely observes her kingdom, the birds chirp away and various activity happens through the kingdom, characterized by busy but pleasant piano music. However, as twilight falls, all the “children” under Nature's care go to sleep, as she “turns to light her lamps”—a lovely image representing

the stars in the sky—and the piano again brings back a left and right hand separated by many octaves, as if Nature is reminding her children of the great magnitude of her power. Finally, Nature reminds her children to be silent, not once but twice, although that “impetuous bird” peeps once more with a descending B flat triad in the right hand before finally falling asleep. Overall, the piano effectively balances portraying Nature as a gentle omnipresent mother while injecting the humor and lightness of the myriad of creatures under her care.

The second song, “There came a wind like a bugle,” explores the complete opposite side of Nature as a destructive, unpredictable force. The piano starts off with the hands a ninth apart, as if the pianist was caught off guard and didn’t have time to get hands into position before playing. The following piano parts seem random at times, at least upon listening, and they are somewhat out of time. While this provides a significant challenge for the singer, this unpredictable pattern perfectly parallels the scene the narrator is describing: windblown trees, broken fences, and wild church steeple bells. However, despite all the chaos, the piano part slows down at the end and the narrator observes: “How much can come / and much can go, / And yet abide the world!” In this case, the piano is portraying things flying about and a crazy windswept scene, completely opposite of the gentle mother the first song portrayed. Although this music may not necessarily sound pleasing to the ear, Copland once wrote that music should have character rather than beauty, and “when all this is smoothed away by removing the outward marks of personality...we get nothing but a simulacrum of beautiful (in themselves) sonorities” (Copland and Kostelanetz et al. 291). Clearly, the piano has a very distinct character.

Moving on from the theme of nature into the theme of eternity, “Why do they shut me out of Heaven?” is a short charming piece in which the narrator is seemingly barred from heaven’s gates. Much like a pouty child, the piece starts with simple accompaniment and the declaration

“Why do they shut me out of Heaven? / Did I sing too loud?” As the narrator insists that she can be quiet, the music shifts to a quieter, more tonal harmonies. However, the narrator clearly is again pushed out, because the piano abruptly stops and the narrator begs “don’t shut the door, don’t shut the door!” The piece ends with the narrator again asking, “Why do they shut me out of Heaven? / Did I sing too loud?”, but the last note is a step higher than when first intoned, almost as if it is a “literal shout of defiance” (Starr 63). Rather than ending with this rebellious proclamation, however, the narrator’s true intentions are betrayed by the subdued piano in the postlude—making it clear that the narrator does, in fact, worry and care about getting into Heaven.

“The world feels dusty” begins with a few simple general phrases, telling the listener how when a person is on their death bed, a person wants kindness and love rather than ceremonies and honors. The piano is simple, although when the narrator proclaims “flags vex a dying face,” the accompaniment consists of grand, forte chords as if to parallel the type of pomp and circumstance flags would bring. The real change in the piano occurs in when the narrator acknowledges “But the least fan / Stirred by a friend’s hand / Cools like the rain.” On the word “rain,” the voice sings an unexpected A sharp, not at all in the key signature:

Truly, it seems to come out of nowhere. And I think that is precisely Copland’s intent. He wants it to take us totally by surprise: to make us literally *feel* the unexpected transport and relief of the friend’s presence and assistance in the hour of death. Indeed, the music is even more daring than the poetry at this point. “Cools like the rain” is a fine simile, but it is one prepared by the poet—most particularly by the earlier reference to “dew,” and by the fact that a fan not only “cools” but gently moves as well, like rain. Although the piano part maintains continuity through its motivic material in bar 17, it accommodates the shift in the voice with a striking harmonic shift of its own, and the resulting consonance is equally, and independently, surprising. How delicate and tender is this rain! (Starr 66)

From this point on in the song, the narrator takes the general statements invoked earlier and makes them personal. She proclaims “Mine be the ministry / When they thirst comes.” This new harmonic shift from the word “rain” on parallels the shift in thinking from general statements to a personal relationship of the narrator’s, and that dramatic shift is what makes this particular song so beautiful.

“Heart, we will forget him” poignantly follows “The world feels dusty,” leaving the listener who listens to the cycle as a whole to draw a storyline connection between the loved one the narrator ministers to in the previous song and now wants to forget because it hurts so badly. The piano is noted to be played “very slowly, dragging,” as if the narrator cannot face up to the task at hand: forgetting her loved one. However, as the narrator implores her heart forget certain aspects of the loved one, there are multiple markings for the piano and voice to be “moving forward.” On the words “I will forget the light,” the piano shifts abruptly to a high, tinkling C sharp minor chord, providing the listener with an aural image of the light the narrator is missing. As the song closes, the narrator implores her heart to “Haste! lest while you’re lagging, / I may remember him!” However, the word “him,” the voice is held for a many counts plus a fermata, proving that the narrator is engaging in “the act of remembrance, not to forgetting” (Starr 71).

A great contrast occurs between song five and song six in the cycle, mounting a distinct challenge for the singer emotionally in switching gears. “Dear March, come in!” opens with groups of 3 fast eighth notes, simulating swirls of winds March ushers in. The narrator excitedly welcomes March into her home, amid this constant rush of wind in the piano, which dies down and starts up again intermittently. After some conversation with March, the piano part mutates to groups of eighth notes lower in pitch, followed by three accented E flats in the left hand followed by jarring silence, which in context sounds like the knocking of the door. The narrator questions,

“who knocks? / That April?” She is obviously displeased at the arrival of a new guest, as she demands “Lock the door! / I will not be pursued!” Throughout this action, the piano helps support by acting as “March”—the wind dies down and there is silence as “April” arrives, but when the narrator pushes April out, the wind starts up again with gusto. However, the poem ends with the narrator pondering how “blame is just as dear as praise / And praise as mere as blame.” At this, the “wind” in the piano dies down and in a typical Copland manner, there are chords spanning several octaves. There is a note for the chords to be played “indifferent,” and the final chord is marked “delicately”—almost as if the narrator has finally accepted the changing seasons, and the March—with the crazy wind gusts—that came in like a lion is now going out like a lamb.

“Sleep is supposed to be” opens with a dotted rhythm analogous to the pattern at the beginning of “The Chariot” (the last song in the cycle). Why did Copland do this? He must have wanted to draw a parallel to the last song in some way. In this song in particular, the piano gives telling clues as to Copland’s interpretation of the poetry. After the dotted rhythm in the beginning (which will be discussed more in The Chariot section), the piano peacefully falls on a B flat chord, and then an E flat chord, while the narrator remarks, “Sleep is supposed to be, / by souls of sanity, / The shutting of the eye.” This tonal, pleasant accompaniment parallels the sweet message of the music of sleep as a peaceful occurrence. However, the narrator goes on to assert that sleep is actually “the station grand / Down which on either hand / The hosts of witness stand.” Some have interpreted this to be a metaphor of death, including the author Larry Starr in his *Dickinson Songs of Aaron Copland*, a reference that was very utilized in the writing of this paper. However, author David Preest suggests this interpretation is incorrect. Rather than being a serious poem, it is satirical:

Many of Emily's poems are about waking to eternal life, but, despite the last stanza, this one is not. The reader should not be misled by its grandiose language. It is in fact a poem of teasing, written as a letter to her father who, as she told Dr and Mrs Holland (L175), habitually rapped on her door to wake her. In the letter the poem is prefaced by the words 'To my Father – to whose untiring efforts in my behalf, I am indebted for my morning hours – viz – 3.AM to 12. PM. these grateful lines are inscribed by his aff 6 Daughter.' (L198) It is to be hoped that 3 am is a playful exaggeration, in line with her teasing her father as not being included in 'the souls of sanity' or 'the people of degree.' Anyway the message in her teasing is that all down the ages 'the souls of sanity' have known that sleep time is for sleep, and that day starts with the arrival of morning at daybreak, and not in the hours of darkness preceding it. 'And daybreak, in case you didn't know it, dearest papa, is when Aurora reddens in the East, the place of Eternity.'

Clearly, Dickinson wrote the text of this as a humorous, affectionate ode to her father's penchant for awakening her too early in the morning. However, it is unknown whether Copland had the background knowledge of the letter prefacing her poem. Did Copland score the accompaniment with a humorous and satirical intent, or with the grand statements about life and eternity in mind? When the narrator proclaims "morning has not occurred," the piano accompaniment abruptly shifts from the sweet, peaceful tonal setting to loud, clashing chords. The chord immediately preceding the narrator's statement that morning hasn't happened yet is marked *ff*, *sff*, and *marcato*. Clearly, Copland wanted a jarring impact. From that point on to the rest of the song, there are no less than seven *sforzando* markings in one page, as well as the markings *fortissimo*, *non legato*, *marcato*, and accent marks. On the highest note of the song and the cycle, a high B flat, the piano is marked with the word *clangorous* as well as *sff* and *fortississimo*. The final statement uttered by the narrator, "That is the break of day," is followed by a "long *fermata*" and the notation "long pause before starting No. 8." Although speculation as to Copland's intentions and interpretations of this piece is difficult, one would argue that much of the music and text's interpretation is up to the performer. The singer may decide through the performance of the music to take on a serious, important air. Or, one could interpret the music as

intentionally overdramatic, as Dickinson whines to her father about how early it is and to let her sleep! A quick side note: although this discussion may seem to be reading too much into the music, it is interesting to note that Copland himself did not necessarily intend for the listener to immediately understand his works. Copland writes, “My family naturally thought it was impractical to write works not easily grasped by an audience...But after all, you don’t write music thinking ‘is this practical?’” (Copland and Perlis 180).

After the denoted “long pause,” the music continues with the eighth song in the cycle, “When they come back.” In this song, the narrator worries that all the beautiful things in life won’t return the following season. To underscore this anxiety of being left behind, the piano mirrors the melody but is about a beat and a half ahead. As the narrator frets, “I always feel a doubt / If blossoms can be born again / When once the art is out,” the music gets gradually faster and faster, as if the voice is trying and trying to catch up with the piano but is unsuccessful. This pattern, with the piano a beat or two ahead and the narrator singing the melody in the piano but behind, continues for most of the song. However, the narrator acknowledges at the end of the piece that her worries may be erroneous—she pronounces that “if I am there— / I take back all I say!” It is not until her acknowledgement that she may still be present that the piano finally slows down and pauses for the narrator to utter this statement.

The ninth song in the cycle, “I felt a funeral in my brain,” has a very distinctive piano accompaniment. At the beginning of the piece, the left hand contains chromatic sixteenth notes, with the right hand containing chords. It is marked “heavy, with foreboding (blurred, uneven)” and the effect of the sixteenth notes paired with disjunct chords creates an unsettling, rhythmic pounding. As the narrator complains “And mourners to and fro, / Kept treading, treading, treading till it seemed / That sense was breaking through,” the piano illustrates this sense that is

trying to break through. The music slows down on the phrase, and it is denoted “broader.” In addition, the distance between the right hand and left hand in the piano grows apart, so that as the vocalist repeats the word “treading, treading, treading,” all these elements combine to sound like the narrator is pushing through a sea of sound into clarity. Finally, on the word “through,” the narrator does finally break through the confusion and the piano drastically switches accompaniment patterns to more sparse, although still heavy, octaves in the left hand. These octaves are representative of the “service like a drum” that “Kept beating, beating, beating till I thought / My mind was going numb.” Again, slightly further on in the song, the piano sounds like what the narrator describes when the vocalist compares the space around her as tolling like a bell—the piano incorporates high, ringing, open fifth and fourth chords that simulate that bell the narrator refers to. All in all, this song in particular is a brilliant example of how Copland perfectly pairs the piano to create the aural image of what Dickinson describes is going on in her brain.

Ironically, the tenth song in the cycle starts with an A flat major chord in first inversion in the right hand, which is exactly the first chord in the previous song, but with a completely different aural landscape. “I’ve heard an organ talk sometimes” describes the narrator’s awe and uncertainty in her spiritual encounter in “that old hallowed aisle” of a church. To represent the feeling of a grand, old church, the chords in the music are mostly tonal, slow, and widely spaced over several octaves. Like a hymn or traditional church song, the music is in 3/4 time the whole through except one measure: when the narrator says that she “held” her breath, that measure is in 4/4—the extra count provides that suspension of holding breath (Starr 40). When the song ends with the words “in that old hallowed aisle,” the piano is marked to be *broadening* and due to doubling of octaves and full chords, the music sounds very grand and majestic.

“Going to Heaven!” has an extremely active piano accompaniment that mirrors the narrator’s thoughts. Incredulous, the narrator exclaims: “Going to Heaven! / I don’t know when / Pray do not ask me how, — / Indeed, I’m too astonished / To think of answering you!” Oftentimes in this song, the narrator will proclaim something with sparse or no piano accompaniment, and then the piano will follow with an iteration of quick eighth notes. It sounds as if the narrator says something, and then immediately her brain starts whirling and going in a different direction thinking something else—thus the piano reflects the narrator’s frenzied thought pattern. When the eighth notes continue but abruptly come to a halt on a low accented B, it is as if the narrator has just been struck with a revelation: “Perhaps you’re going too! / Who knows?” This abrupt epiphany by the narrator almost makes the listener laugh—it comes across as comical, especially if interpreted as such by the singer. Of course, the eighth notes start up again as the narrator starts thinking about the possibilities of this and instructs the listener that “If you should get there first, / Save just a little place for me.” The change happens about halfway through the piece, where the piano again stops and the narrator reiterates she is “going to Heaven! Going to Heaven!” She then pauses and announces “recitative style,” that “I’m glad I don’t believe it, / For it would stop my breath.” At this section, the piano is completely silent, as if the narrator has less frenzied thoughts and a more definitive, set, mindset. Later, the piano intones sparse chords as she contemplates that “I am glad they did believe it,” referring to her loved ones that are “in the ground”—aka dead. Thus, the comical, lighthearted tone set at the beginning of the piece by the playful, “impetuous,” piano is quickly tempered by the sober realization by the listener that although the narrator tries to make light of the situation, she perhaps does hope Heaven is real for the sake of those she loves.

And at last, after the emotional weight of the previous eleven songs, we reach the end: “The Chariot.” As the music denotes, the piano should be played “with quiet grace.” As will become apparent, this song is very unique compared to the rest of the cycle in that the narrator is looking back at her life from “centuries” later, rather than currently struggling with an issue as is the case in the other eleven songs. This perspective creates the emotional space for the narrator and listener to take a step back and observe. The music opens with the same dotted rhythm that is heard in song number 7, “Sleep is supposed to be.” This dotted rhythm can be interpreted as horses hooves trotting. The narrator describes her journey with Death, who is personified as a gallant suitor, as they journey in a chariot led by horses (Ford 27). Through their pilgrimage, the narrator sees and reminisces on various scenes from her life. Throughout, the horses’ steady trot is heard through the dotted rhythms. After describing her gravesite, the narrator acknowledges that “since then ‘tis centuries,” which is the first time the listener realizes that the narrator has been reminiscing this whole time on events that happened long ago—in short, the narrator has been dead for a long time now. However, as the narrator says as she closes out the song cycle, each century “Feels shorter than the day / I first surmised the horses’ heads / Were toward eternity.” In essence, she is reflecting on that moment of awe she first realized there was something after death than being buried in the ground. This realization is especially poignant given the previous song, in which the narrator proclaims she doesn’t believe Heaven is real. During this final phrase, the piano simply climbs up the scale, as does the voice, providing an aural image of the narrator ascending to eternity.

In conclusion, it is clear the song cycle occupies a wide range of themes and emotions, as does the piano. However, despite—or maybe because of—the myriad of aural images, the song cycle is a cohesive, emotional journey which leaves the listener in awe. There is perhaps no way

to fully understand the music besides repeated listening and study, and even then there is always something new to be discovered on subsequent hearing. This paper, examining the specific role of the piano, is just the tip of the iceberg of the many joys to be discovered upon study of this unique and breathtaking song cycle.

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