Journal of Contemporary Educational Research, 2024, Volume 8, Issue 7
http://ojs.bbwpublisher.com/index.php/JCER
ISSN Online: 2208-8474
ISSN Print: 2208-8466

The Brilliance of a Poet in Different Musical Works: Exploring the Poetry of Emily Dickinson

Yingting Qin*

University of Missouri-Kansas City, Kansas 64110, United States

***Corresponding author:** Yingting Qin, qinyingting688@gmail.com

Abstract: It is easy to see that many composers' success throughout Western music history is due to the perfect match between their songs and lyrics. This phenomenon is lateral evidence of the importance of beautiful poetry for composers. A good poem can provide different inspiration for many composers. In music and other artistic fields, creators have always faced the same dilemma: How do they highlight their creations in a blossoming body of work? How do they reform or innovate after peaking at a certain point in a field? In this paper, we will take a look at the poet Emily Dickinson and four songs based on her poetry, examining how different composers bring out the unique beauty of her works.

Keywords: 20th-century American art songs; *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*; Aaron Copland; André Previn; Richard Hundley

Online publication: July 30, 2024

1. Poet

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born in 1830 and left this world in 1886 when she was 56. In the 19th century, her poetry seemed out of place and did not reach the public eye. From the 20th century onwards, however, her poetry was frequently "requisitioned" by composers, resulting in many of her most popular poems. For almost half of her life, she had isolated herself from the world. In those 20 years, she produced more than 1,800 poems, but only ten were published. She did not lose her passion for expressing the world in words because of her isolation from the world. The 20 years of solitude did not take away her aura. In her poetry, the perception and understanding of nature, death, and life have never ceased [1].

2. "There Came a Wind Like a Bugle" and "The Chariot" from *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* by Copland

Aaron Copland is undoubtedly one of the most iconic American composers who dedicated his life to creating a modern style with an American theme. In 1950, he composed *Twelve Poems by Emily Dickinson* for voice and piano. For a long time after 1948, people dubbed Aaron Copland the "Father of American Composers." During

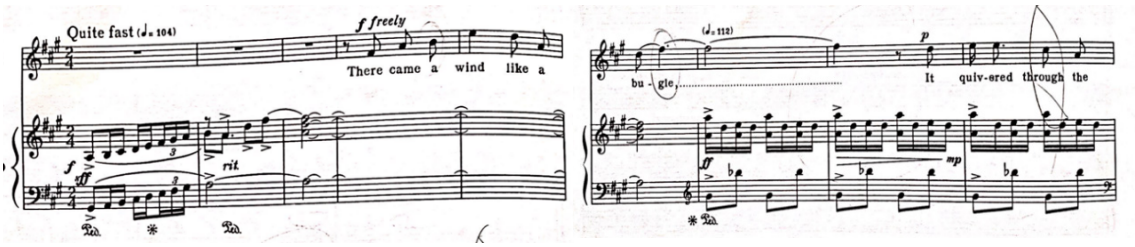
this time, people questioned some of Copland's progressive values because of politics and changes in people's consciousness, such as the Depression. Elements of the country, popular, folkloric style of music were less popular than before the war. Meanwhile, Copland also worked as a conductor and lecturer during these years, so his creative time became less than adequate. However, this suite of his compositions for Dickinson's poems remains famous for its subtle combination of music and poetry. The famous soprano of the time, Phyllis Curtin, commented that Aaron was the composer who knew Dickinson best, tapping into the musical voice that best suited Dickinson's poetry [2,3]. **Figure 1** shows the text of "There Came a Wind Like a Bugle."

Text of "There came a wind like a bugle"
There came a wind like a bugle,
It quivered through the grass,
And a green chill upon the heat
So ominous did pass
We barred the window and the doors
As from an emerald ghost
The doom's electric moccasin
That very instant passed.
On a strange mob of planting trees,
And fences fled away,
And rivers where the houses ran
The living looked that day,
The bell within the steeple wild,
The flying tidings whirled.
How much can come and much can go,
And yet abide the world!

Figure 1. Text of "There Came a Wind Like a Bugle"

The second song in the cycle depicts a thunderstorm scene. In the beginning, the piano plays an upward scale on both hands and a sharp rise from eighth notes to sixteenth notes to sixteenth notes triplets. Even though the lyrics are not yet present, the listener feels the tension of the impending storm. The lyrics begin to appear at measure four, accompanied by a leaping melody of one syllable corresponding to one note, accurately portraying the bugle's character. The combination of piano accompaniment and vocals conveys to the audience that the wind is coming like a horn. At bar seven, the piano's left-hand part keeps the eighth notes advancing while the right hand plays non-stop sixteenth notes, like rain continually washing over the earth. The composer marked the first phrase with the dynastic of forte and the second with piano (Example 1), which is a challenge for singers to contrast such a massive change in strength in a short period.

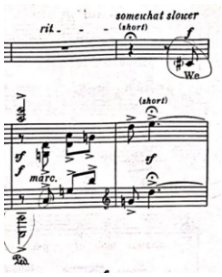
Example 1:



When the first passage is over, the piano moves into a relatively free tempo (Example 2) and then stays on the diminished seventh formed by the F sharp and E natural (Example 3) to create a haunting atmosphere that fits the lyrics well. At the lyric "passed," the piano reverts to the shape of the seventh bar again (Examples 1 and 4), as if it is like a moccasin and other debris been swept up by the wind and kept speeding past the window, creating a strange and panicky feeling in the house. In this section, the piano's left-hand part moves toward the

lower register, showing the house's people are drifting further and further out of sight (Example 5).

Example 2:



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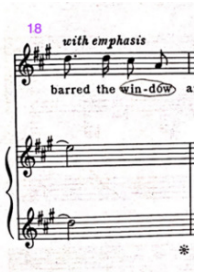

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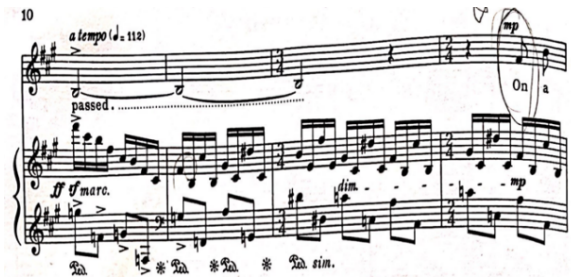
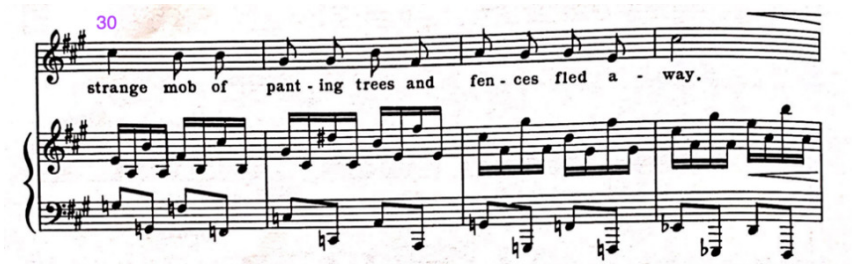
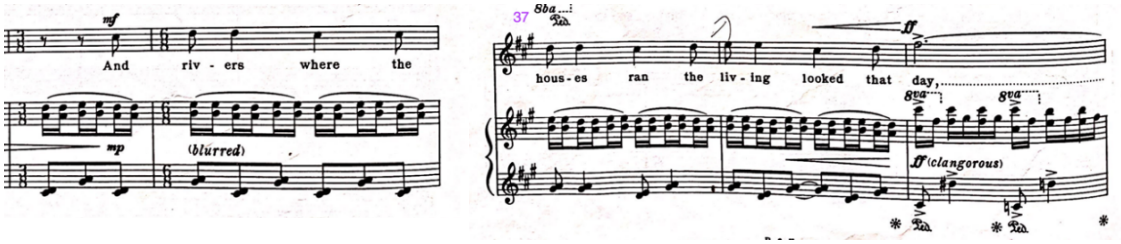


Example 5:



When talking about the river a little further away, the piano accompaniment's weave becomes a little thicker, just in time for the change from a small window to a large river. The right hand, played on only two chords, E major and D major, is like a river that never stops flowing eastward, while the left hand's major second maintains the tension. The wavy melody surrounding C sharp, D natural, and C natural is like a wave, one after the other. From the word "day," the accompaniment changes again, the range of the right hand going up an octave [4]. The right hand moves between intervals built by octaves and fifths, while the left hand keeps going down with major ninth intervals (Example 6).

Example 6:



The song stops at c^1 sharp in a gradual slowdown, signifying that the storm has also temporarily ceased. The whole song is ever-changing, inventive in harmony and melody, and with a strong personal touch from Copland. Copland's ingenuity is not only in creating details but also in the general direction. Through dissonant harmonies and extreme speed, he sets the tone for the entire poem's frenzy and excitement. The range is not too wide, between c^1 sharp to g^2 natural, but technically it is not simple. Chords that are not in the key demand singers have good listening skills. The quiet fast speed requires the singer to sing the lyrics clearly and consistently. The occasional wide leap requires the singer to change from the middle voice and *passaggio* to the head voice seamlessly. This song is not a simple piece for both pianists and singers, and it suits a graduate student or above to achieve the best results.

Figure 2 shows the text of "The Chariot."

Text of "The Chariot"
Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality

We slowly drove, he knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too
For his civility

We passed the school where children played
Their lessons scarcely done
We passed the fields of gazing grain
We passed the setting sun

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground
The roof was scarcely visible
The cornice but a mound

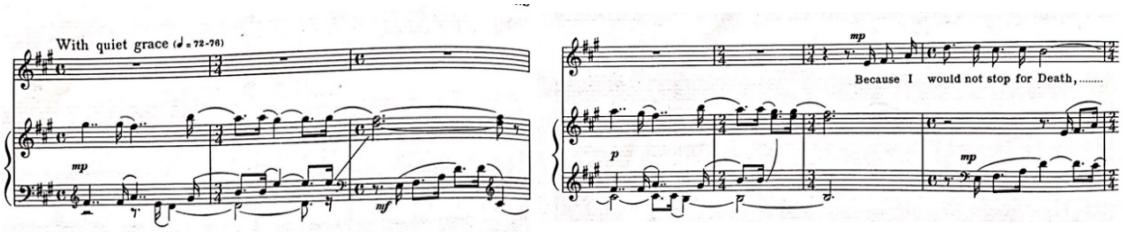
Since then 't is centuries; but each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity

Figure 2. The text of "The Chariot"

The twelfth song of the suite, "The Chariot," is equally significant. The poem explores life and death, seemingly reaching its end but pointing through it to eternity. The composer opens the piece with two three-bar melodic phrases. Both sentences are repetitive and end with a stop on a supertonic chord in A major. This beginning suggests that the composer did not want to add too complicated melodic lines to the piece and shows that the beauty and lightness of the song's melancholy echo the "with quiet grace" that the composer wrote

at the beginning of the score. At the end of the first phrase, the right-hand part stops on an interval while the left-hand plays the melody, and the melody subtly foreshadows the singer's first melody (Example 7). The singer's melody begins with the dominant in A major, rising to d^2 nature and then slowly descending. This musical language marks out the two most essential words in the lyrics—"would not," which shows the poet's helplessness towards death and implies her small struggle against fate.

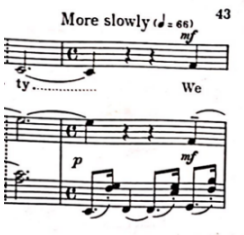
Example 7:



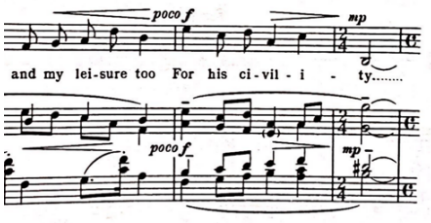
By bar 14, the piano suddenly changes to dotted rhythms, and the preceding note has a longer duration. At this bar, the lyrics are just in time to say she is in a carriage, moving forward slowly. This section's musical feel has changed, but instead of speeding up like a regular piece of music in the middle section, the speed is much slower. Moreover, the piano keeps playing the dotted rhythm (Example 8) as if the carriage wheels are spinning and imprinted on the land, one deep and one shallow.

Furthermore, we can see that when singing the lyrics "my leisure too for his civility," Copland asks the singer and the piano to make a crescendo and a diminuendo at the same time (Example 9). This phrase emphasizes the difference between "me" and "him," so the tone is slightly higher and more forceful. This phrase's vocal melody is the same as the second half of the first sentence as if to say that life is sometimes like a circle and that people coming to an end means returning to the beginning. The end of this phrase means the music finished the second stanza, and the accompaniment returns to the beginning with a faster speed (Example 10). The first verse also uses plenty of dotted rhythm on the piano.

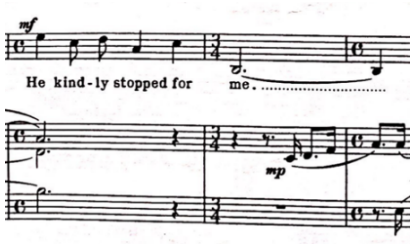
Example 8:



Example 9:



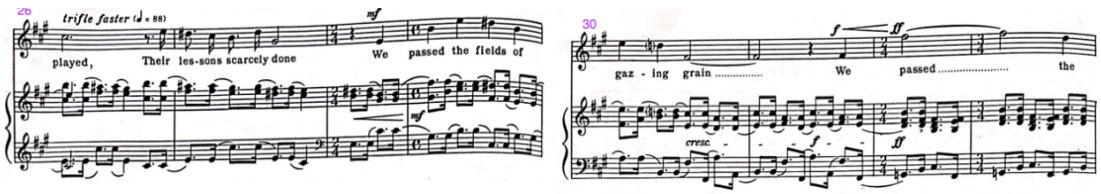
Example 10:



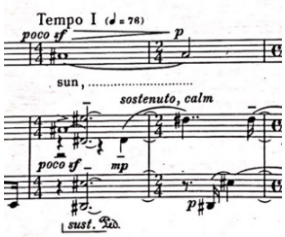
When the measure count comes to the 28th, the poem moves into the third stanza. Two bars earlier, Copland had quietly ramped up the speed and widened the weave of the accompaniment (Example 11). This section's trifle faster tempo echoes the lyrics talking about passing schools, fields, and sunsets, suggesting that the carriage is not slow. The left hand plays the same chord in tandem with the right hand, which slowly changes from playing two notes at the same time to playing three notes. The chords show the tonality shifts from B major to D major, giving a more solemn and more decadent atmosphere. Then the word "sun" appears, and the chord changes to a major ninth, consisting of D sharp and E sharp, with a sudden jump from darkness to light (Example 12). The rhythm pattern slowly widens, reflecting the fact that the carriage is ready to stop.

When the lyrics get to "visible," the melody takes on the song's only triplet (Example 13). Copland seemed to emphasize that the carriage was parked in front of a house that had a normal appearance. He then establishes a sense of minor key by resting the third stanza on a long $f^{\sharp}$ sharp. He even puts a long series of ellipses after the word "mound" (Example 13). In this way, Copland tells the singer that we are about to return to the first section's calmness after the third section.

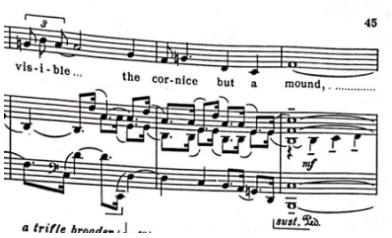
Example 11:



Example 12:

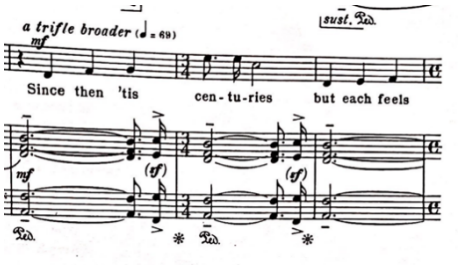


Example 13:

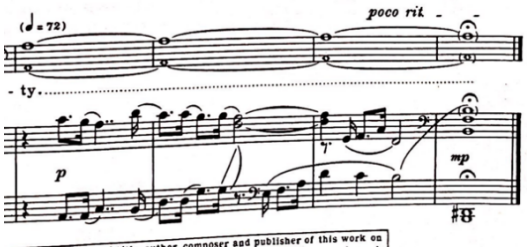


Instead of continuing to immerse himself in the dotted rhythm into the fourth passage, Copland chose to form an accompaniment by pairing a note of considerable duration with a note of short duration (Example 14). This way, he slows down the entire song's mood while highlighting the stark contrast between the lyrics of a long century and a short day. When the last word "eternity" appears (Example 15), the piano simultaneously plays the second half of the opening phrase's melody—the beginning is the ending.

Example 14:



Example 15:



This piece's range is like the second one, between b and f^{l} sharp, with the relatively heavy lowest notes expecting a soprano with an excellent midrange to sing. Copland creates an accompaniment that is highly supported by the melodic vocal line and uses an inventive rhythmic pattern. As expressed in this poem, Dickinson's thoughts on life and death are wholly unleashed in Copland's music.

3. "Will There Really Be a Morning?"

Figure 3 shows the text for "Will There Really Be a Morning?"

Text of "Will there really be a "Morning"?
Will there really be a "Morning"?
Is there such a thing as "Day"?
Could I see it from the mountains
If I were as tall as they?

Has it feet like Water lilies?
Has it feathers like a Bird?
Is it brought from famous countries
Of which I have never heard?

Oh some Scholar! Oh some Sailor!
Oh some Wise Men from the skies!
Please to tell a little Pilgrim
Where the place called "Morning" lies!

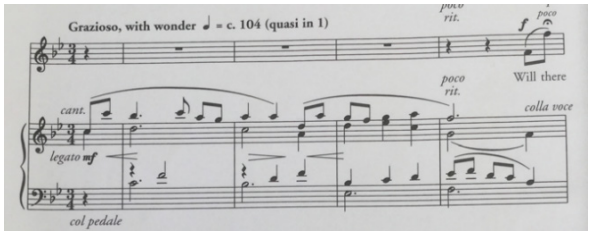
Figure 3. The text for "Will There Really Be a Morning?"

3.1. "Will There Really Be a Morning?" by Richard Hundley

Richard Hundley has an outstanding resume, is educated at the best conservatories, and works with the best vocalists. Hundley's output is mainly solo vocal art songs and solo piano. Although his early work was met with skepticism, audiences and singers alike loved his music [5]. He is adept at giving life to poetry, and he manages both direct and straightforward styles and complex ones well. He could even enhance the poetry, but because he crafted each piece, his output was modest. In "Will There Really Be a Morning?" he has captured the innocence and longing that Dickinson hides in her lyrics and Hundley's melodrama is a perfect match for Dickinson's poetry [6].

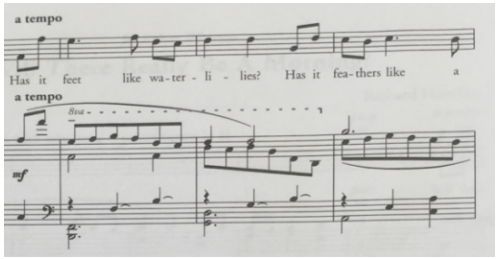
Hundley set the tempo at a quarter note equal to 104, thus setting the song's relaxed, graceful feeling. In the short first line, the composer writes several markers—slightly slowed down, back to the original speed, forte—like the ever-changing mind of a toddler. There is a pause in the word "there," like a child is thinking of a question or thinking of how he can ask questions (Example 16). After every two questioning phrases, Hundley gives a break of at least two-quarter notes, representing a child who is continually throwing out questions but often gets stuck because he is overthinking [7].

Example 16:

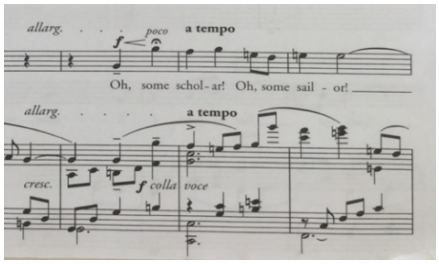


Throughout the first stanza, the harmonies are consonant and pure. Except for the words "Will there," here is an octave leap, other places played in a stepwise figure, giving a sweet feeling to the melody. After another short break, we have the second stanza from bar 14, and this music reflects more innocence and liveliness. For Hundley uses what feels like a more fluid accompaniment here, and the range goes straight up an octave (Example 17). The third passage from bar 23 onwards uses the same melody as the first, but the whole phrase moves up a major second (Example 18). This setting reflects that the children's thoughts, no matter how whimsical they may be, are pure at heart, and their thoughts are not complicated. Moreover, this setting serves as a metaphor for the children's tendency to raise their volume when they are curious about something.

Example 17:

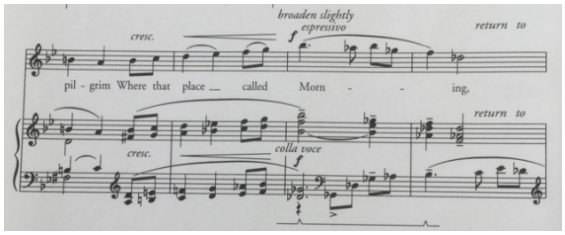


Example 18:



The melody's difference in bars 33 and 37 highlighted when the other melodies and harmonies have remained sweet and calm (Examples 19 and 20). The composer illustrates the children's exaggerated and illusory imagination with some accidentals reference to the children's anticipation and longing for the "morning"—life and vitality. At bar 41, the music finally returns to its graceful intelligibility, and the accompaniment returns to the shape it had initially, no longer agitated. Meanwhile, at bar 44 (Example 21), the composer marks a pace of nearly half as slow as before, gradually taking one's mind away in an interrogative phrase.

Example 19:



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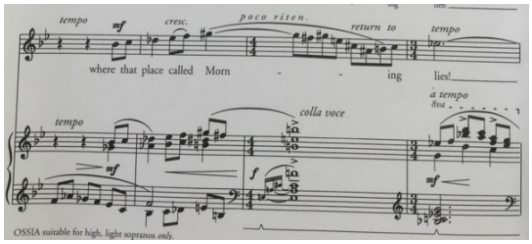

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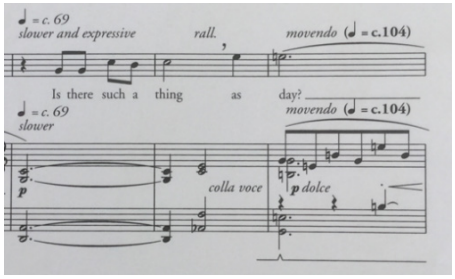


Unlike Copland, Hundley is better at using simple, direct language to express his lyrics. Hundley's work may not have as much variation in detail as Copland's, but the work sounds smoother because he sets the poem, rather than portraying a single focused word. The piece has a broader range than the first two songs introduced, from f^1 nature to b^2 flat. This range, paired with a relatively fast speed, is not ideal for a soprano with a heavy voice.

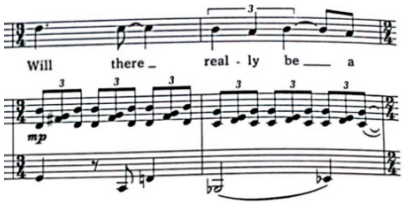
3.2. "Will There Really Be a Morning?" from *Three Dickinson Songs* by André Previn

Unlike most classical musicians, André Previn has spent his life in classical music, jazz, and even Hollywood. Previn's music shows not only American music elements but also German influences, as he studied piano at the Berlin Conservatory [8]. Previn's version is somewhat shorter than Hundley's, since in the last section, Hundley asks the question again, and Previn does not. Previn set the piece very fast, which is a technical difficulty for singers, especially non-native English speakers.

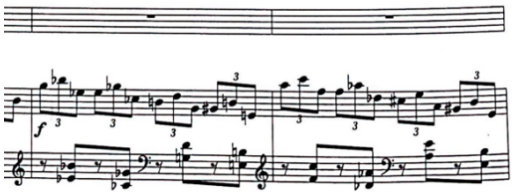
There is hardly a bar in the piano part that does not have to go to a triplet, while a two-beat rhythm may sing in the vocal part. Previn does not linger on stressed syllables for too long, going the other way and joining

words together to form triplets, which brings a refreshing new feel to the listener. As he does with the lyrics "really be" (Example 22), he instead freezes time on the word "be," which may not be that important.

Example 22:

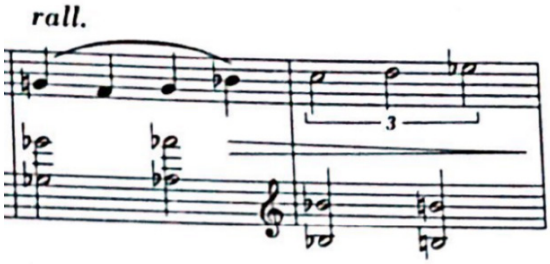


Example 23:

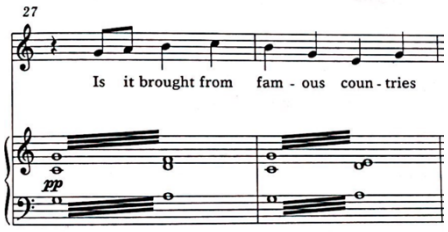


Previn's delicate designs do not stop there. He does not add too many accidentals in the vocal parts, but in the interlude (Example 23), he ventures into various out-of-key chords that tell the listener that a whole new piece of music is coming next. In bars 17, 21, and 27 (Examples 23, 24, and 25), Previn uses different accompaniment weaves and language, showing that he has different ideas in mind for each different interrogation. It is not until bar 31 that the music returns to the first image, and the last stanza has the same melody as the first. The entire work ranges from f^{1} sharp to a^{2} flat, a light range for a soprano.

Example 24:



Example 25:



4. Conclusion

Emily Dickinson's poetry is not just set by these three composers. The poem "Will There Really Be a Morning?" alone has been used by Richard Hundley, André Previn, Ernst Bacon, Ricky Ian Gordon, and many

other composers, which shows the charm of Dickinson's poetry [9]. Despite the social conditions of the time, scholars did not recognize Dickinson's poetry for the first time they appeared. However, over time, Dickinson's poetry became one of the favorite composers and listeners. Given enough time, Dickinson's poetry and the "cross-century collaboration" of composers will continue to bring us great works.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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