

A Musical Enigma:

A Theoretical and Analytical Approach to Poetry by Emily Dickinson through Composition

Introduction

As a Music Theory major, I analyze various classical repertoire to investigate every aspect of these compositions, including form, harmonic analysis, and motivic development. Rarely is there an opportunity for theorists to use our growing knowledge of music to create our own music. This project serves as a bridge between my education at the University of Connecticut and my creative output based on my knowledge of music theory. The goal of my University Scholar Project is to analyze a selection of Emily Dickinson poems and set them to music in a 21st Century style American song cycle. At the project's end, I will go through all of the steps in order to compose, perform, and record a song cycle.

Emily Dickinson is one of the best known American poets today. Her poetry is ideal for setting to music for many reasons. For instance, most of her poetry is concise, has strong rhythm, and also includes multiple levels of interpretation. Because there are many interpretations for each Emily Dickinson poem, it can be challenging to illustrate the different levels while setting the text to music. No more importance should be placed on the music than the text which the music describes. With the help of one English faculty member and two music faculty members to form my University Scholar committee, I am excited to confront and address all of the challenges presented by this project.

Review of Literature

The most essential piece of literature for this project will be a collection of the complete works of Emily Dickinson. There are many versions of these collections, differing in text and numbering. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* as edited by Thomas H. Johnson is one of the more complete collections of Emily Dickinson poems.

When composing music, ideas can be gathered from previous compositions. Analyzing other American art songs can be useful for adding to the musical language in my own compositions. There are analyses of American art songs available in print. For example, Ruth C. Friedberg analyzed American art songs spanning mostly over the 20th century in *American Art Song and American Poetry*, where American art songs began to take on a form of their own. The three volumes of analyses discuss the relationship between the music and the text in great detail. Several of these analyses include songs set to Emily Dickinson poems. Aaron Copland has the best known song cycle of Emily Dickinson poems. Larry Starr wrote an in depth investigation of Aaron Copland's setting of the Emily Dickinson poems in *The Dickinson Songs of Aaron Copland*. While Aaron Copland's setting of Emily Dickinson is the most famous, there are many other composers who have taken up this momentous task themselves. *A Singer's Guide to The American Art Song 1870-1980* is a great source to find some of these other settings that are in the standard repertoire for vocalists.

For analysis of other composers' settings of Emily Dickinson poems, I will need music scores, which can be found through the music library and interlibrary loan. With every composer comes a different approach to the setting of the text and the musical accompaniment supporting the text. Using both professional analyses and my own personal analysis, I will look at the differences of each setting of Emily Dickinson poems and investigate what did or did not work.

Methods

There are three main segments to my project, which will have deadlines so that it will be completed by the end of the 2010 Spring semester.

The first segment of my project is to select and analyze text for musical setting. For the cohesiveness of the song cycle, I intend to choose poems which have a common underlying theme (i.e. an unobtainable love, the soul, etc.). Once the poems are selected, they will need to be dissected and analyzed. Poetry often has subtle and archaic messages which can be lost at first glance. This is especially true for Emily Dickinson where sometimes there are multiple levels of interpretation of her works. The interpretations of the poems are important so the music can enhance these hidden motives rather than detract from them. Goethe, one of the most important German poets of all time, criticized Franz Schubert, one of the greatest composers of *lieder*, which is German for songs, for some of Schubert's settings of his text because it appeared to focus on the music rather than the poetic meaning (Rolland 177). By tackling Emily Dickinson's poetry in this song cycle, I will need a detailed analysis of the selected poems to keep the integrity of the text when applying it to music. Professor David Abraham, an Emily Dickinson expert, will help me analyze and interpret these poems. This segment of the project will be completed during the 2009 Spring semester.

After the analysis and interpretation of the selected poems are completed, the next step is to set the poems to music. Musical composition is a personal experience. The first step to approaching composition is to react to the poems musically. Motives, themes, or harmonic structures are some of the possible musical responses to the poem. Over time, these ideas have to be refined. Well composed music will create musical imagery and texture that respond to the text. There are, however, other factors to consider when writing music for voice. When setting text to music and rhythm, prosody becomes an issue. Because there are metrical strong and weak

beats in music, it is important to make sure there is no emphasis on the wrong syllable. Vocal range is another issue to consider. Unlike other instruments, singers can have different vocal ranges. It is important to know the extremes of these ranges in order to ensure the feasibility of performance. Dr. Kenneth Fuchs, Professor of Composition at the University of Connecticut, will be my main University Scholar Project advisor. His expertise in the subject has proved useful during the past three semesters of independent compositional study. Prosody, relevance of the musical accompaniment, vocal range, and the expansion or contraction of musical ideas are some examples of topics that would be discussed during my composition lessons. At times, this process could take weeks or months. Sometimes, however, it can take just days.

For others to sample a few of my compositions, I have set up a website where one can stream MP3s or download them for free. This can be found at <http://www.soundclick.com/DevinChaloux>. Here, one can find samples of *An American Sonata for Violin and Piano* and the *Whoever You Are* short song cycle. *Whoever You Are* is based off of the poem "To You" from *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman. It is my first attempt at writing for voice and piano in preparation for a larger vocal project. While these are rudimentary recordings out of Finale, a composition program, they can offer insight to the productivity of my composition lessons. The compositional process will start once the interpretations of the poems are complete. The compositions will be completed by the end of the 2009 Fall semester.

My final segment for this project is to perform and record this song cycle. The biggest issue for this segment is whether or not I will be able to secure a grant for the rehearsal, performance, and recording of the song cycle. Regardless of a grant, this part of the project will be completed. My hope is to hire a professional singer and pianist for the performance and recording of the song cycle. There are many options to choose from for both vocalists and

pianists due to their abundance here at the University of Connecticut and the surrounding area. If I cannot secure a grant to hire professionals, I, a student pianist here at the University, will personally work with a student vocalist to provide a quality performance and recording. Heading up this segment of the project will be Dr. Robert Miller. Dr. Miller is in charge of many of the recording facilities available to the music program. His knowledge and expertise of recording music at the University of Connecticut will be invaluable to creating a quality recording. This song cycle will make its debut at my composition recital in the von der Mehden Recital Hall in the Fine Arts Complex during the 2010 Spring semester. The University Scholar Project will conclude once the performance and recording are complete.

Plan of Study

Because there are only several students who major in Music Theory, several of these courses are offered only once every two years, and many are only offered once a year. I do not yet have access to which semesters some of these classes will be offered. For those classes for which I have information, I will place them in my plan of study. The plan of study does not include elective classes such as performing ensembles.

Every class I take in my Music Theory major can be applied to my compositional techniques. With the increase of knowledge of how music works, my compositions will become more diverse and sophisticated. The University Scholar Project will increase the number of credits earned for my composition lessons from two to three. The senior thesis is required to complete the Music Theory major. The Music Theory thesis, for which the University Scholar Project cannot substitute, will most likely be related to topics observed in preparation of the University Scholar Project. Composition I is only offered during the spring semesters. Unfortunately, this class conflicts with Form and Analysis II during the Spring 2009 semester. The topics covered in Composition I, however, are similar to my Independent Study with Dr. Fuchs.

When time permits, I hope to take a graduate level theory class. These classes typically are seminars for which topics are yet to be determined. When the opportunity arises to take more music theory classes, I will take advantage of that opportunity.

Spring 2009

Class ID	Class	Credits
MUSI 3322W	Form and Analysis II	3
MUSI 3351	Orchestration I	3
MUSI 5348	Schenkerian Theory and Analysis	3
MUSI 4999	Independent Study (Composition Lessons)	3
MUSI 3222	Applied Music (Piano Lessons)	2
Minimum credits taken:		14

Fall 2009

Class ID	Class	Credits
MUSI 3222	Applied Music (Piano Lessons)	2
MUSI 4999	Independent Study (Composition Lessons)	3
MUSI 4999	Independent Study (Senior Thesis)	3
MUSI 4731	Conducting I	2
MUSI 3631	Jazz Arranging I	2
Minimum credits taken:		12

Spring 2010

Class ID	Class	Credits
MUSI 4999	Independent Study (Composition Lessons)	2*
MUSI 3331	Composition I	3
MUSI 3410W	Music History Elective	3
Minimum credits taken:		8

Classes not mentioned (due to lack of information) but need to be taken:

MUSI 3361 – Counterpoint I (3 credits)

MUSI 3371Q – 20th Century Theory and Analysis (3 credits)

Content Area 3 Lab Q Class (4 credits)

*Composition Lessons go back to 2 credits as the composition portion of the University Scholar Project is complete

References

- Dickinson, Emily. The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. New York: Back Bay, 1976.
- Friedberg, Ruth C. American Art Song and American Poetry Vol. I : America Comes of Age. New York: Scarecrow P, Incorporated, 1981.
- Friedberg, Ruth C. American Art Song and American Poetry Vol. II : Voices of Maturity. New York: Scarecrow P, Incorporated, 1984.
- Friedberg, Ruth C. American Art Song and American Poetry Vol. III : The Century Advances. New York: Scarecrow P, Incorporated, 1987.
- Rolland, Romain. "Goethe's Interest in Music." The Musical Quarterly 17 (1931): 157-94.
- Starr, Larry. The Dickinson Songs of Aaron Copland. New York: Pendragon P, 2003.
- Villamil, Victoria E. A Singer's Guide to The American Art Song 1870-1980. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow P, Inc., 1993.

Significant Work in the Field

Examples of Early Important Song Cycles

- Beethoven – *An die ferne Geliebte*
Schubert – *Die schöne Müllerin*
Schubert – *Winterreise*
Schumann – *Dichterliebe*

Sample of American Song Cycles with Emily Dickinson Poems

- Ernst Bacon – *Five Poems of Emily Dickinson*
Aaron Copland – *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*
John Duke – *Six Poems by Emily Dickinson*
Sylvia Glickman – *Emily Dickinson Songs*
Timothy Hoekman - *To Make a Prairie: Four Emily Dickinson Songs*
Lee Hoiby – *Shining Place: five poems of Emily Dickinson*
Lori Laitman – *Four Dickinson Songs*
Ronald Perera – *Five Summer Songs*
George Perle – *Thirteen Dickinson Songs. Two Rilke Songs*
Leo Smit – *33 Songs on Poems by Emily Dickinson*
George Walker – *Emily Dickinson Songs*