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“Invisible, as Music – But positive, as Sound –” : The Intertextual Continuum of Poetry, Music, and Song in Aaron Copland’s *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Benjamin Britten’s *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*, and Benjamin T. Martin/Alexandre Tchaykov’s *I See and Unsee: Five Memory Songs*

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

by

Alexandre Tchaykov

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"Invisible, as Music – But positive, as Sound –" :

The Intertextual Continuum of Poetry, Music, and Song in Aaron Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Benjamin Britten's *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*, and Benjamin T. Martin/Alexandre Tchaykov's *I See and Unsee: Five Memory Songs*

by

Alexandre Tchaykov

Doctor of Musical Arts

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Jenny Olivia Johnson, Co-Chair

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This study introduces a critical and creative discourse about the interdisciplinary connections between lyric poetry and music through the lens of three poets and three composers whose distinct art forms come together in three unique collections of art songs. Beginning with an analysis of selected works by poets Emily Dickinson and William Blake, I show how an attention to the semantic, sonic, and visual details of their poems reveals an underlying musical poetics that locates meaning in temporal perception and performance. Dickinson's poems feature fascinating metric modulations, phonetic patterning, and motivic development that put linguistic meaning into musical motion, while Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* posits the

concept of words set to an invisible music, navigating a central thematic duality that extends to the aural patterns of closely related pairs of poems. Visually, Dickinson's manuscripts reveal experimentation with spatial relationships between words, while Blake's intricately crafted illuminated prints embed his poems in contrasting illustrative worlds, reflecting their mutual understanding of the poem as a transitional process rather than merely a static object. Following this literary analysis, I turn to selections from two 20th-century song cycles based on these poets' works: Aaron Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson* and Benjamin Britten's *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*. Examining how the composers have read the poets and placed their words within the musical syntax of counterpoint, harmony, rhythm, and texture introduces the idea of a song as a realization and extension of a poem's musicality. Furthermore, the form of each cycle embraces a "lyric" perspective that prioritizes the perceptual details of each poem's language and unsettles the reading of a definite, overarching narrative throughline. Finally, I outline my recent collaborative endeavor with composer Benjamin T. Martin on a new song cycle based on some of my own poetry – *I See and Unsee: Five Memory Songs* – by contextualizing the interactive genesis and formal shape of the work. Ultimately, attention to the multivalent conversation between these artistic works and domains yields a more dynamic and ecological understanding of the creative process as an evolving, intertextual continuum.

The dissertation of Alexandre Tchaykov is approved.

William Andrew Kinderman

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University of California, Los Angeles

2024

DEDICATION

To my family, friends, teachers, and students who have personally supported me in countless ways throughout my academic journey.

To Inna Satunovsky, Liza Stepanova, Andrea Lakly, and Casie LeGette for your truly inspiring teaching and indispensable contributions to my musical and literary growth.

To Baba Ceci. Обичам те!

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PREFACE

The following exploration of the perceptual overlap between poetry and music draws from my individual experience as a poet and a pianist in the Western, Anglo-American world. Akin to this experience, the theories and texts examined in this study emerge from that world and comprise only a fraction of the discourse surrounding the cultural history and significance of these arts. Nevertheless, it is my hope that situating the project in this particular frame enables the reader to observe a detailed and comprehensive interdisciplinary inquiry that seeks to contribute a novel perspective to both fields of creative endeavor.

VITA

Education

Northwestern University, Evanston, IL — 2021
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University of Georgia, Athens, GA — 2019
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Selected Performances

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Schoenberg Hall, Los Angeles, CA

Recital – Crumb: *Makrokosmos III*, Schoenberg: *Pierrot lunaire* — 2024
Lani Hall, Los Angeles, CA

Tanglewood Music Center Fellowship – Roslavets: Piano Trio No. 3, Brahms: Horn Trio, Thorvaldsdottir: *Aequilibria* and *Hrím*, Prokofiev: Symphony No. 6, Stravinsky: Concertino and Scherzo a la Russe — 2023
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New Music on the Point Fellowship – Anthony Cheung: *Recombinant*, Participant Composer Pieces — 2023
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Recital – Stockhausen: *Kontakte* — 2023
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Public House Concert, Beverly Hills, CA

Recital – Haydn: F minor Variations, Berg: Sonata Op. 1, Webern: Piano Variations, Messiaen: *Catalogue d'oiseaux* Book 2, Franck: Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue — 2022
Lani Hall, Los Angeles, CA

Kneisel Hall Chamber Music Festival – Shulamit Ran: *Soliloquy*, Shostakovich: Piano Trio in E minor, Mendelssohn: Piano Trio in C minor, Smetana: Piano Trio in G minor — 2022
Kneisel Hall, Blue Hill, ME

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Essay: Grudges and Tears: Mapping Conflict in Two Songs from *Dichterliebe* — 2021

Essay: "Subtleties o' th' isle:" Musical Processes in *The Tempest* — 2020

University of Georgia English Departmental Awards: — 2018
The Performance of Lyric in Whitman and Dickinson
"Truly The Moon Shines with a Good Grace": The Musical Poetics of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Poetry Collection: *Con Moto*, exploring intersections between musical and poetic forms — 2016

Prelude: A Fragment's Physics

How does a poem move? I begin with a close look at the following standalone couplet by poet Emily Dickinson from the interlocking perspectives of its theme, its linguistic sound, and its manuscript:

> In this short Life that only lasts an hour
> How much – how little – is within our power[1]

In this concise poetic fragment, Dickinson carefully balances the scarcity and the abundance of life. The poem's attitude toward this duality is ambiguous: the first line emphasizes the brevity of our time on earth, but the second postulates (or questions?) the extent of possibilities inside that timeframe. One wonders: is it better to have "much" or "little" within one's power, is "little" a revision or an expansion of "much," and can these two seeming opposites somehow support each other? Depending on how one reads that second line, the tone of the poem ranges from defeated, to awestruck, to calculated, to even witty, and the power of this isolated fragment lies in its ability to suggest these differing interpretations without confirming one over the other. As one rereads the compact couplet, its potential meanings shift and multiply, branching further and further out from their source.

Sonically, two contrasting, competing forces are at work in these lines: rhyme and meter. I say contrasting because *rhyme* emphasizes the way words sound phonetically in relation to each other, while *meter* emphasizes the position of words in a rhythmic chain. I say competing because in this case, rhyme pushes the poem forward to its conclusion, while meter pulls the poem back, reflecting its semantic ambivalence. Due to its strong, resonant end rhymes, the couplet as a poetic device is an instrument of finality, a way to bring closure to (or, in musical

[1] "1292." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.* Edited by R. W. Franklin. Harvard University Press, 2005.

terms, provide cadence to) an idea. As one reads the lines in time, the “hour-power” rhyme becomes the axis on which the poem turns, inevitably framing its contents while also placing those words in a semantic resonance that suggests the relationship of one to the other.

Metrically speaking, Dickinson’s poem works against the finality suggested by its rhyme as the couplet itself does not flow within one, unified pulse. A quick scan of the first line shows two weak syllables (“In this”) followed by two strong (“short Life”) followed by an iambic succession of weak-*strong* to the end of the line (“that only lasts an hour”). Perhaps Dickinson intends to bring the subject of the poem – “short Life” – into momentary focus, and perhaps the iambic section restores the flow of the “hour.” Whatever implications one draws about the significance of these flows to the meaning, what is certain is that this metrical whiplash unsettles the temporal, musical experience of reading this line. The second line’s metrical interruption is even more apparent and causes one to pause and consider the thought that is unfolding. Disturbing an otherwise smooth, iambic flow, the dashes around “how little” abruptly stop the reader before they can reach the concluding fulfillment of the rhyme.

Stopping the metrical flow at this point has two extremely poignant effects. First, we can hear the contrasting phonetic and syllabic structure of “much” and “little,” two words which are already in semantic opposition. Second, the restoration of metrical flow for the remainder of the line (“is within our power”) is quite jarring, as the dash after “little” briefly suspends the upward motion of its unstressed second syllable in the air. Perhaps Dickinson echoes this initial suspension by ending with the two-syllable “power,” which leaves the thought of that word hanging against the single-accented syllable “hour.” Even in the end rhyme, meter here is an opposing, resistant force that works against the rhyme’s momentum.

So far, I've identified an essential clash between rhyme and meter that complicates the reader's experience of this couplet. Now, I'd like to highlight a few sonic elements in this fragment that are more "ornamental" in nature. I mean ornamental in scholar Theo Davis' sense of the concept: "the flickering life of nonessential ornamental contacts" that are working to generate potential meaning and complexity in a more transient manner on the musical surface of the poem.[2] Simon Jarvis, analyzing the role of rhyme and meter in a passage of couplets by English poet Alexander Pope, identifies this third, more transient kind of sonic activity at the level of *phonemes*:

> Pope's rhyme has the power it does partly because of its opening itself to all sorts of other, less metrically foregrounded, tinklings and jinglings. The illicit, perverse attachment which Pope shows to passages of deeply saturated phonotextual repetition achieves a power in itself which pulls sometimes against, rather than always with, the semantic organization of argument.[3]

What are some of the "tinklings and jinglings" of this Dickinson couplet, and what is their potential? Consider the way "our" not only immediately precedes "power" but also is a homonymic echo of "hour," creating a conceptual bridge in the form of a pronoun between the definite measurement of time and the indefinite human possibility within that measurement. Consider also how the repeated vowel sound of "how" echoes that of both "hour" and "power" and pulls the reader along the axis created by the gravitational rhyme. Consider how the vowel sounds in "is within" extend the vowel sound of "little" across the interruptive dash, heightening that word's sonic and semantic impact, and contrasting the expansive, open sound of "Life" with the more circumscribed, closed sounds of "little." This list of ornamental elements is not exhaustive, but it suffices to show the highly relational and resonant music of this poetic

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[2] Davis, Theo. *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

[3] Jarvis, Simon. "Why Rhyme Pleases." 2011. In *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Edited by Jackson, Virginia and Prins, Yopie. John Hopkins University Press, 2014.

fragment. These microscopic verbal details and patterns play an indispensable role in the way the fragment navigates its thematic and sonic space.

The *musicality* of Dickinson's fragment emerges in the way we sense associative forces at work in the language itself, altering our sensation of the rhythm and timbre of particular words and thoughts as we experience the progression of the lines in real time. Importantly, this interconnected musicality does not merely represent or assume the poem's semantics: it creates the space in which different kinds of mindful attention to semantics can contact each other. Dickinson's couplet is a site where the physical energy of linguistic interactions – acceleration, force, momentum, magnetism between sound and idea – creates the vivid, fleeting sensation of musical performance.

I want to turn now to examine a perhaps unlikely kind of performance space for these lines: the visual domain of this fragment's manuscript (Figure 1). The fragment comes from a collection of texts by Dickinson that scholars identify as her "envelope writings," a name that emerges from her practice of writing on different areas of actual envelopes in which she enclosed her letters, often manipulating the material dimensions of the envelope to achieve different sorts of visual spaces for her thoughts. A glance at A252, the manuscript for the fragment I've been investigating, will reveal a form that looks nothing like standard lines of poetry[4]:

[4] Werner, Marta and Bervin, Jen. *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*. New Directions Press: 2013.

Figure 1: Manuscript A252

Here, Dickinson has inverted the triangular flap of an envelope to create a funnel shape for her text. Suddenly, the words are not merely representing a thematic idea, but actively performing it: as the space on the funnel gradually shrinks, fewer and fewer words fit on the paper, creating the visual impression that space, and indeed time, is running out. An incredible, breathless physical energy directs the reader towards the final word as the increasing boundedness of the material focuses the eye and the ear downward to the thought's conclusion. Notice particularly how broken up the syntax and meter of the couplet's second "line" becomes as the poem reaches the crux of its thematic question. Materially, this envelope flap is both "little" and "much:" so little in its scale, but so much in that it affords the poet the means to externalize her creative thoughts. And of course, when we reach the "little" finite point at the bottom of the flap (or any of the sides for that matter), it beautifully points to the "much" – the physical universe that exists in real time alongside the poem. The power of this manuscript is not only that it reorients our perception of the way the words move musically across time, but also that it encourages us to see the fragment itself as a kind of moving, breathing ornament to the surrounding world.

Another unique facet that appears conspicuously in other Dickinson manuscripts as well is the presence of potential word substitutions nested in the body of the text, here manifested in the way "merely" occurs simultaneously under "only" as another possible poetic path.[5] In this case, "merely" has a slight connotative difference to "only" in that the former suggests comparison between "mere Life" and something else, while the latter gives "Life" more singularity. In addition, the different vowel-consonant combinations in the front part of each word change the feeling of the poem's sonic flow: the "r" in "merely" continues the consistent consonant flow of "short" to "hour," while the "o" in "only" continues the vowel flow of "short" to the more open "hour." The existence of this choice contributes to the sense that the poem is not simply a definite object which contains meaning but rather an ongoing process, an invitation to actively consider the way different readings – different performances – of the text can result in different experiential meanings, however subtle.

The interwoven semantic, sonic, and visual dimensions of this single couplet invite us to consider the ways in which a poetic text can exist as an irreducible performance instead of a framed, stable entity from which to extract representational meaning. In her Preface to *The Gorgeous Nothings,* a collection of facsimile reproductions of Dickinson's envelope writings, the poet Susan Howe poignantly writes: "Does form envelop everything? Can a thought hear itself see? These writings are suggestive, not static."[6] Much like a musical performance in which physically produced sounds move through time, the language of this fragment moves with a dynamism that for Dickinson is the poetic occasion more so than the implication of a particular meaning. To perform in writing is not to dictate statically, but to notice, adorn, and change in a

[5] For a full discussion of the aesthetics of choice in Dickinson, see Sharon Cameron's *Choosing Not Choosing: Dickinson's Fascicles*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.
[6] Werner, Marta and Bervin, Jen. *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*. New Directions Press: 2013.

particular moment, in the same way that each new musical performance brings different factors of a composition to our attention.

Dickinson's powerful, lyrical fragment reveals an underlying musicality at work in the semantic, sonic, and visual motion of its language. The idea that lyric poetry evinces musicality emerges in the descriptor "lyric," which derives from "lyre," a stringed instrument used in ancient Greece to accompany song and recitation. However, as the "lyric" poem has since evolved into a distinctly literary category accessed through writing and reading, its relationship to music has become far more abstract, located not in an act of physical musical performance, but rather in the workings of the complex instrument that is language. Craig Dworkin, assessing the loaded history and associative relationship between the two art forms, writes:

> In particular, because of its inextricable historical enmeshment with music, *lyric* is stressed with a special pressure by the degree to which the category of music is dilated and freighted and stretched. The terms are irreversibly linked, but their denotations are not as fixed as our habitual use of them, in forging that linkage, would like us to believe.[7] [emphasis mine]

Dworkin characterizes the connection between *lyric* and *music* as arbitrary, yet highly flexible and suggestive: to begin the elusive task of defining one of these packed terms is to consequently shape the other in the process.

The study at hand embraces this theoretical, interdisciplinary mirror as a means of productively examining what poems can convey about musical processes and what music can convey about poetic processes. One of the richest sites for observing the implications of this aesthetic overlap is the genre of Western art song, which curiously both restores the lyric's ancient, concrete musicality by setting poems as sung texts with accompaniment, and engages

[7] Dworkin, Craig. "Lyric and the Hazard of Music." 2008. In *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Edited by Jackson, Virginia and Prins, Yopie. John Hopkins University Press, 2014.

the lyric's modern, abstract musicality by placing independently conceived lyric poems in conversation with actual musical parameters. To focus this mirror further, I will emphasize four different kinds of texts in my discussion, all emerging from the Anglo-American world: late 18th and 19th-century lyric poetry by Emily Dickinson and William Blake; 20th-century songs that retrospectively set this lyric poetry to music by Aaron Copland and Benjamin Britten; concurrent 21st-century poems by myself and musical settings by Benjamin T. Martin; and 20th/21st-century theories about Anglo-American lyric poetry as a genre. As we will see, a complex intertextuality emerges in the way a song's poem and music interface.

Accepting that an abstract musicality is inherently at work in poems involves making a distinction about the way poetic language functions. In everyday life, language serves a largely utilitarian role, providing a means of representing thoughts and intentions in communication. In a poem, however, we face a paradox: language with all its attached social context acting in surprising, unexpected ways that illuminate the fragility and transience of how we construct meaning. By accentuating particular semantic, sonic, and visual dimensions of language, a poem complicates language's role as a straightforward, purely representative medium and asks its readers to attend to this complication. As just one example, consider the phenomenon of a line break, which causes a visual attention to how poetic lines and the number of words in them are separated, but also causes a sonic attention to how the ending sounds of one line pass to the beginning of the next and a semantic attention to how syntax flows and/or breaks over the cliffs of white space. By creating unfamiliar environments in which to contact and negotiate language, poems destabilize language's immediate, practical purpose and allow us to observe the expressive possibilities of the medium afresh.

Musicality applies not only to a poem's multidimensional language, but also to an ethos of performance, which in the art of music is an action necessary to viscerally realize a composition. Literary critic Jonathan Culler, defending the lyric as a distinct genre that resists historical categorization, maintains that lyric poems display "performance or perlocutionary efficacies" that mark a uniquely "ritualistic" rhetoric:

> The fundamental characteristic of lyric, I am arguing, is not the description and interpretation of a past event but the iterative and iterable performance of an event in the lyric present, in the special "now," of lyric articulation. The bold wager of poetic apostrophe is that the lyric can displace a time of narrative, of past events reported, and place us in the continuing present of apostrophic address, the "now" in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur.[8]

More recently, scholars Theo Davis and Sharon Lattig have extended Culler's notion of ritual, offering ephemeral and dynamic metaphors – ornamentation and ecology – for understanding the ongoing creative process in lyric poetry. Both their theories present poetic creation as an act of phenomenological perception that dissolves the oppositional binary between subject and object in favor of an interactive field of relationality. Their concepts prove extremely productive frames for this study, which examines how hearing a poem set to music provides a way of interfacing with the potential of its inscribed perception.

Theo Davis outlines the way writings by Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman embrace an "ornamental" poetic practice. For her, the meaning of "ornamental" is not trivial or superfluous, but attentive and kinetic:

> Ornamental aesthetics turns on two primary types of gesture: paying attention to and placing upon. These two forms fan out into activities and movements of body, mind, and image, which include going toward, moving along with, pressing down upon, attaching to, and being buoyantly raised up by. They all concern the relationship of a kind of attention to an act of physical placement […] This attention is, in turn, taken as the heart of poetic practice in each author's work.[9]

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[8] Culler, Jonathan D. *Theory of the Lyric*. Harvard University Press, 2015.
[9] Davis, Theo. *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

What interests me about Davis' account is the way she understands *movement* as indicative of perceptual attention, imagining a kind of mechanics that locates meaning in different varieties of relational motion. The poet's goal is not necessarily to embody an experience, but to engage with the volatility of experience in real time like a musical performer, the poetic text existing as a testament to each new performance in time.

Sharon Lattig outlines the "inherently ecological literary form" of lyric poetry, describing poems as mediating sites that "enable the negotiation of a relationship of organism and environment."[10] Part cognitive theory and part literary ecocriticism, Lattig's work centers perception as the cognitive faculty through which an individual first contacts their environment and witnesses its potential meaning, illustrating how lyric poems artistically embed perceptual processes in their language. Like Davis, Lattig describes *temporality* and *movement* as key aspects of the lyric mode, viewing meaning as something that constantly fluctuates in the ecosystem of poet, poem, and reader.

Poetry's musicality, then, is not simply a matter of how a poem displays "musical" features like meter or rhyme, but more specifically a matter of how one's mind creates a sense of perceptual relation between a poem's linguistic parts. Rather than mimesis, "poetry is a measuring," an active process of testing and exploring language's limits and horizons as a mode of understanding.[11] Like a piece of music, a poem proceeds in time, using language as a material that uniquely contacts itself and undergoes simultaneous semantic, sonic, and visual changes in the process of passing from a beginning point to an ending point. To read a poem musically is to attend to its transitional physics, to the way that language establishes and moves through a

[10] Lattig, Sharon. *Cognitive Ecopoetics: A New Theory of Lyric*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
[11] Heidegger, Martin. "… Poetically Man Dwells …"1951. In *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Edited by Jackson, Virginia and Prins, Yopie. John Hopkins University Press, 2014.

timeframe, acting on and reacting to itself. Understanding poems as *processes* that open perception rather than as merely textual objects that codify narrative or symbolic meaning enlivens the site of the poem as a distinctly musical space for ongoing performance and discovery.

Articulating a complete theory of how a wide variety of lyric poems enact their charged musical spaces is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I turn specifically to the work of two poets whose works bring the implications of these discussions about musicality into sharp, dramatic focus: the 19th-century American poet Emily Dickinson, and the 18th/19th-century English poet William Blake. The richness of these two poets' engagement with temporality and perception emerges in the intertwined semantic, sonic, and visual dimensions of their language. Dickinson's poems feature fascinating metric modulations, phonetic patterning, and motivic development that put language into semantic motion, while Blake's poems in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789) offer an array of stanzaic forms, points of view, and rhyme schemes that differently sound the work's central thematic duality. Furthermore, both poets also engage with unique visual spaces in which their poems perform: Dickinson's manuscripts reveal an experimentation with spatial relationships between words and phonemes, while Blake's intricately crafted illuminated prints embed his words in contrasting, expansive worlds of illustration. In Chapter 1, I analyze selected works by both authors and show how an attention to the total linguistic physics of their compositions brings their perceptual meanings to life.

Using these analyses as a starting point, I then turn in Chapters 2 and 3 to the way elements of actual musical physics – pitch, rhythm, and timbre, for instance – extend poems' linguistic art into the intertextual realm of song. I call specifically on two influential song-cycle settings of these poets from the 20th century: Aaron Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*

(1950), and Benjamin Britten's *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* (1965). Rather than attempt to chart an overarching story in these cycles that discourage the linear narrativity of earlier works in the genre of song cycles, I interpret their "cycling" as a more transient action that associatively explores the different temporal and musically expressive registers of the poets' works. In my analysis I work with different "operative definitions of intertextuality." [12] I unpack overlapping meanings that emerge between the poetic and musical language of selected individual songs, as well as overlapping meanings that emerge between the different poems/songs within each cycle. Examining how these composers have each "read" the poets and placed their words within a musical syntax has significant implications for the performance of such multivalent works.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I offer insight into my recent collaborative process with American composer Benjamin T. Martin (b. 1998) as we craft a new song cycle from some of my own poetry. Seeing how a living poet and a living composer negotiate the creative energy of their distinct, yet intertwined media serves as a counterpoint to the analytical reconstruction of this process in Chapters 2 and 3. This earlier framework provides an awareness of the ways poetry and music can attend to each other, acting as a lens through which to appreciate the creative nuances of the contemporary work more deeply. My ultimate aim is to illustrate how critical attention to the intricate crossover between artistic works and domains, exemplified here in the meeting of poetry and music in song, yields a more dynamic understanding of each medium as a living, ecological site where meaning is not a preexisting, embodied object, but a process of ongoing, empathetic perception that connects creators and readers.

[12] Klein, Michael. *Intertextuality in Western Art Music*. Indiana University Press, 2015.

<u>Chapter 1 – Performance and Perception: The Poetics of Emily Dickinson and William Blake</u>

Can a thought hear itself see?

– Susan Howe

Dickinson's Musicality

Emily Dickinson was an accomplished musician, and scholars have posited the influence of her early musical life on her poetry. Gerard Holmes, examining late 19th-century musical settings of her poems, writes: "She was literally a musical poet: a musician before she was a writer, playing the piano at age two and a half, attending singing school, and continuing to sing and play piano sufficiently well that friends and family members, some of them also musically sophisticated, remembered and remarked on the fact decades later."[13] George Boziwick has examined the poet's "music book" that contains the solo piano pieces she performed for relatives and close friends, illustrating her knowledge of the musical repertoire of her day, and providing accounts of her attending and praising concerts of renowned performers like pianist Anton Rubinstein.[14] When discussing the way these musical activities come to bear on her poetry, Boziwick claims that as Dickinson made a decisive "shift" from performing music to focusing on poetry, she continued to "think musically" in her usage of both "musical imagery as a means of remembrance and borrowing from past musical events," and the rhythms of "the music and hymns she knew and played, sang, improvised, and danced to." While I agree with the importance of these elements to her work, I argue below that the way her poems "think musically" is not simply through reference to her musical background and influences, but

[13] "Invisible, as Music –": What the Earliest Musical Settings of Emily Dickinson's Poems, Including Two Previously Unknown, Tell Us about Dickinson's Musicality." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 28, no. 2 (2019): 101. https://doi.org/10.1353/edj.2019.0005.
[14] Boziwick, George. "Emily Dickinson's Music Book: A Performative Exploration." *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, vol. 25 no. 1, 2016, pp. 83-105. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/edj.2016.0005.

through marked acts of perception, their language bestowing a precise attention to the temporal nature of reality.

Dickinson often applies musical terms to the sounds and movements of nature, but more importantly, she connects the process of music unfolding and transforming in time to a concept of nature as a process that is also in constant change. In the following poem, she isolates a motif from a bird song and tracks its effect on the surrounding landscape with each passing hour:

> At Half past Three
> A Single Bird
> Unto a silent sky
> Propounded but a single term
> Of cautious Melody.
>
> At Half past Four
> Experiment had subjugated test
> And lo, her silver principle
> Supplanted all the rest.
>
> At Half past Seven
> Element nor implement be seen
> And Place was where the Presence was
> Circumference between. [15]

The song is not a fixed object mused on by the poet, but a process that gains a different character with each hour: it begins as a tentative "single term," develops into a bustling "Experiment," and finally recedes enigmatically into "Place." The poem measures the hours musically; each stanza articulates the changing quality of the song, acting like timestamps that gradually build to the overall form or trajectory of the melody. Dickinson challenges the classic trope of the poet addressing the symbolically immortal bird of poetry by showing that the value of the bird's song is not that it is sublimely other to the poet, but rather that it too, like the poem at hand, undergoes a process of rising and falling, a melodic arch, a "Circumference." Perhaps,

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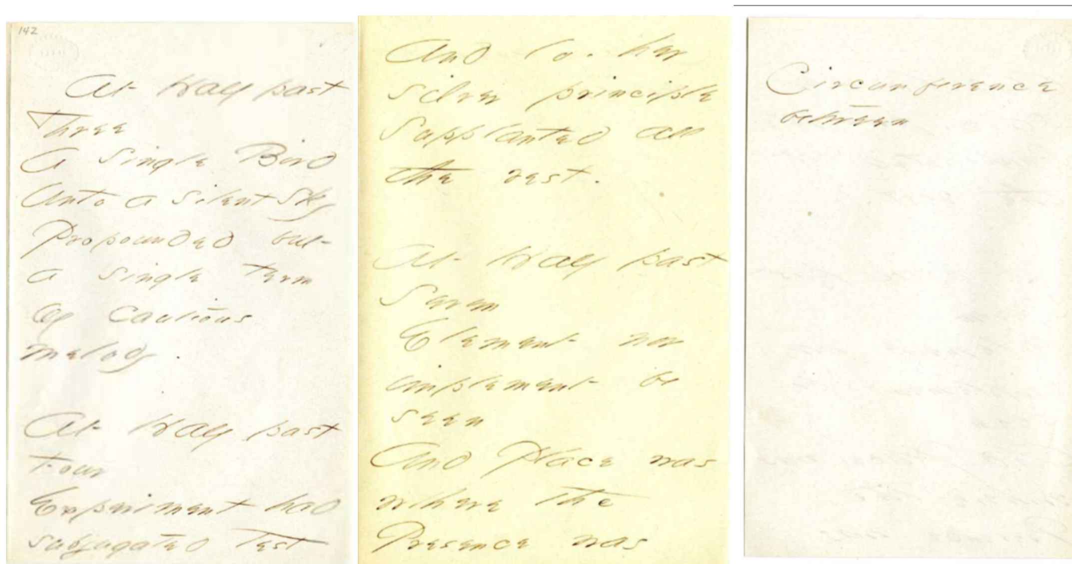
[15] "1099." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*

we are further invited to imagine that the poem was not all written at once, but rather in each of the hourly intervals that open the stanzas.

In one of the early manuscripts of this poem, the final line "Circumference between" appears markedly by itself on its own page, visually calling attention to the circular connection or "Circumference" created between the beginning and end of the poem[16]:


142

At half past
Three
a single Bird
Unto a silent Sky
Propounded but
a single term
of cautious
melody.

At half past
Four
Experiment had
subjugated test

And lo, her
silver principle
Supplanted all
the rest.

At half past
Seven
Element nor
Implement be
seen
And Place was
where the
Presence was

Circumference
between

Figure 2: Amherst Manuscript 142 – "At half past three, a single bird"

Dickinson invokes the "Circumference" of the poem as the shape of its temporal creation, the means by which the poet's initial "single term" of musical thought grows into a larger "Experiment" and ultimately decays back into silence, leaving behind only the memory of the creative act. The poem leaves one with the feeling that the opening "Presence" of the bird's song has somehow dissolved into or gained some kind of relationship with the surrounding "Place," and that the only way to truly appreciate this transformation is to hear the musical "Circumference" of the poem, the creative development by which perception is transformed.

[16] Dickinson, Emily. *Amherst Manuscript # 142 - At half past three, a single bird.* From *The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Variorum Edition*. Edited by R.W. Franklin. Belknap Press: 1998.

This poem, in a sense, undoes itself by showing that the point and interest of writing any poem is not where one ends up, but rather the "Experiment" that happens in the midst of writing. The question it poses is musical, not hermeneutical; that is, like a piece of music, the poem shows us how something develops over time and suspends us in the possibility of that development rather than bring us to a conclusive meaning about the process. We cannot know what the abstract pitches or rhythms of the bird's song intrinsically mean, but we can witness how those elements dance in relation to our own simultaneous experience of time.

Another element of Dickinson's uniquely "Experiment[al]" musicality comes across in the way her language often seems to be trampolining off itself, charting its course forward by associative relations between vowels and consonants:

> From Blank to Blank –
> A Threadless Way
> I pushed Mechanic feet –
> To stop – or perish – or advance –
> Alike indifferent –
>
> If end I gained
> It ends beyond
> Indefinite disclosed –
> I shut my eyes – and groped as well
> 'Twas lighter – to be Blind – [17]

The sounds of the words in this poem play off each other in a propelling fashion, the poem contemplating its own fruition as it progresses. For instance, the sounds of "Blank" in the first line contribute to a plethora of words in the succeeding lines – the "l" in "Threadless," the "a" in "Way," the "k" sound in "Mechanic," the "an" in "advance," the "l" and "k" in "Alike," and the "n's" in "indifferent" all derive from the onset of that first noun. Other sonic relationships are also present – the "m" in "From" reappears in "Mechanic," the "e" sound in

[17] "484." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*

“Threadless” reappears in “Mechanic,” the “p” and “sh” sounds of “pushed” and the “e” of “Mechanic” come together in “perish,” and so on. The “an” of “Blank” begins a kind of sonic theme of “vowel followed by ‘n’” that runs throughout the entire poem, reappearing in “Mechanic,” “advance,” “indifferent,” “end,” “gained,” “beyond,” “indefinite,” and “Blind.” We might also note an obsessive pattern of words ending with “d” in the second stanza, such as “end,” “gained,” “beyond,” disclosed,” “groped,” and “Blind,” which can all be derived from the “d” in the first stanza’s “Threadless.” From these relationships, one can see just how in tune Dickinson is with the phonetic qualities of language as a means of creating a pathway or “Thread” through the poem that draws our attention to the striking similarities and contrasts between the words.

Below, I’ve provided three diagrams that map three different, yet interrelated sonic threads, collectively illustrating how the sounds of “Blank” in the first line transform over the course of the poem into the sounds of “Blind.” In the first diagram, I follow the “a” (green) and “k” (blue) of “Blank” as they intersect over the course of the first stanza and then gradually fade out in the second. In the second diagram, I follow the the “i” (purple) and “d” (yellow) of “Blind” as they appear in the first stanza and increase in frequency across the second. In the third, I follow the “l” (orange) and “n” (red) of both “Blank” and “Blind” as they interact across the entire poem like a common connective tissue from beginning to end.

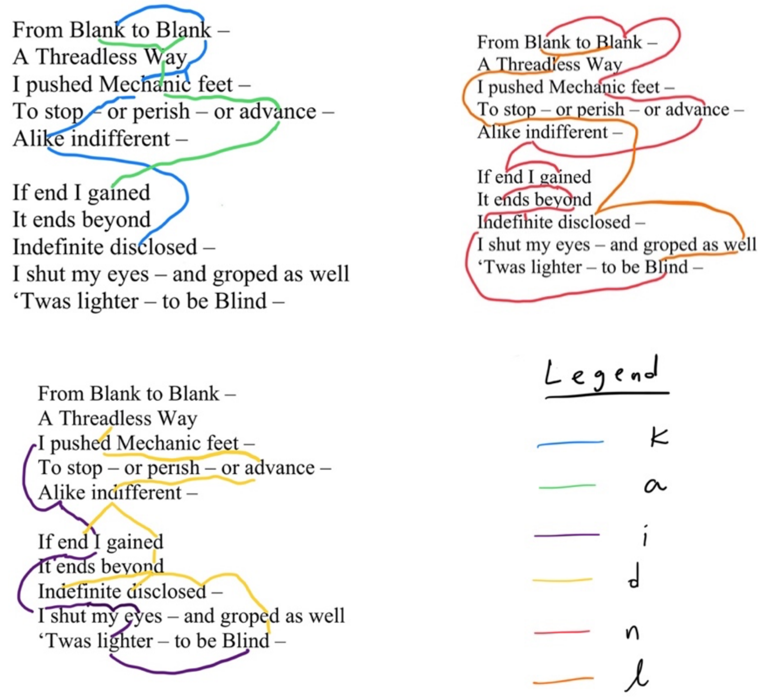


Figure 3: Phonetic Diagrams of "From Blank to Blank"

Though certainly not exhaustive of all the potential sonic pathways, these diagrams suggest that the sequencing of words in the poem emerges from a phonetic energy that works alongside the semantic and metrical ("Mechanic feet") qualities of the language. "Blank" is phonetically not too far from "Blind," and yet, the poem's journey from one to the other charts a transformative, associative process that opens a wider world of linguistic possibility between these two axes. This process is one example of what Lattig terms "systemic connectivity" in her discussion of lyric poetry's propensity for ambiguity:

> In implementing a directionality outward into language as a whole, the genre foregrounds systemic connectivity, and in so doing, competes with and downplays language's aptitude for determined reference. It manifests a lexicality that resonates as a signifying physicality, a physical system of signs.[18]

[18] *Cognitive Ecopoetics*, 113.

Through the shifting combinations of phonetic sounds, the poem's words and their meanings physically join and part, compress and expand, approach and recede. The resulting relational sound patterns create a sense of a continuum that exists between all the words in the poem as they encounter one another, similar to how harmonies in a piece of music encounter one another and create fleeting tonal relationships between their pitches. Dickinson invites us into the initially "Blank" reality that accompanies the start of any poem and encourages us to hear the unfolding of the verse over time as a distinctly musical performance. In other words, the poem becomes a space in which meaning arises from temporary relations and is not the end, but rather the continual means, the "Thread" of the experiment. Whatever "end" the poet thinks she has reached is false, for as much as she has tested and "pushed" the language, more "Threadless Way" remains ahead, the full implications of her experimentation "end[ing] beyond" the confines of the poem at hand.

Blake's Composite Art

Emily Dickinson's awareness of the poem as a site of performance finds many analogues in the work of William Blake, whose handcrafted illuminated prints reveal poems embedded in networks of visual illustration, challenging the idea of a poem as a closed linguistic text. Allan Cunningham, one of Blake's contemporaries and biographers, describes the interdisciplinary nature of the artist's creative process:

> In sketching designs, engraving plates, writing songs, and composing music, he employed his time […]. As he drew the figure he meditated the song which was to accompany it, and the music to which the verse was to be sung, was the offspring too of the same moment. Of his music there are no specimens—he wanted the art of noting it down—if it equalled many of his drawings, and some of his songs, we have lost melodies of real value.[19]

[19] Cunningham, Allan. *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters and Sculptors*. Leagre Street Press, 2023.

Although the potentially realized "music" of Blake's process is lost to time, its shadow remains in the semantic, sonic, and visual aspects of his work. As an example, take the poem "A Poison Tree" from the *Songs of Experience*, which provides another fruitful study in how poetic language performs musically:

> I was angry with my friend;
> I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
> I was angry with my foe:
> I told it not, my wrath did grow.
>
> And I waterd it in fears,
> Night & morning with my tears:
> And I sunned it with smiles,
> And with soft deceitful wiles.
>
> And it grew both day and night.
> Till it bore an apple bright.
> And my foe beheld it shine,
> And he knew that it was mine.
>
> And into my garden stole,
> When the night had veild the pole;
> In the morning glad I see;
> My foe outstretched beneath the tree.[20]

Like Dickinson's fragment, one of the essential musical elements at work in this mysterious, insidious poem is the rhymed couplet, which in this context takes on an eerie kind of restraint in the context of the work's dark emotional implication. The regularity of the poem's meter allows the hypnotic ringing of the rhymes[21] to take center stage.

In the first stanza, the two contrasting couplets distinctly mark the two paths outlined by the subject: one in which they vent their anger, and one in which they allow it to fester. Throughout the poem, the continuous paired couplets are vessels for this latter internal suppression; the force of rhyming locks the subject into the journey in which they gradually sow

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[20] *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Edited by David V. Erdman. University of California Press, 2008.

[21] For an analysis of Blake's complex creative relationship to rhyme, see Lucy Kellett's 'Crooked Roads without Improvement': Rhyming and Unrhyming in Blake."

the seeds of the titular tree. As the vowel sounds of the end rhymes change, the speaker's psychology transmutes: "fear" in the form of "tears," and "wiles" in the form of fake "smiles" fuel the growth of the first stanza's "wrath." In the third stanza, Blake breaks the scheme of the previous stanzas, fixating on a singular vowel sound at the end of the lines to bring the poem to an insistent crescendo where the "foe" encounters the fruit of the speaker's labor. Perhaps these multiple rhymes sound the subject's obsession with the appearance of the "apple," or perhaps the poem is acknowledging that the internal wrath is spilling over into something the subject can no longer hold back.[22] The end of the poem, showing the deadly aftermath of the poisoned, forbidden fruit, returns to the alternating couplet structure and is quite matter-of-fact, not providing a conclusive moral lesson about the situation.

Interestingly, the couplets in this poem do not provide a sense of closure or finality; instead, their cadence is unsettling and emblematic of the way in which the speaker "grows" his wrath: quietly and calculatedly. The true darkness of the poem is not just that the poison grows, but that the subject *desires* that growth and patiently allows his emotion to transform into an externalized, sinister symbol. The neatness and tunefulness of the rhymes seemingly belie this intention while ironically being the instrument that perpetuates the seething, secret process of the tree's development.

Blake's illustrated plate containing this poem shows the pervasive influence of the enacted tree spreading into the text itself:

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[22] From my poem, "24 Preludes:"

> 22.
> Apples at dusk
> Oscillate like dust

Figure 4: "A Poison Tree" Illuminated Print

Similar to how Dickinson's fragment from her envelope writings interacts with the visual space in which it floats and thus animates a mode of performance, Blake's text grows into the tree that frames the plate (or perhaps it is the tree which grows into the text). In any case, the poem does not merely represent, but in fact feeds the insidious symbol that also worms its way through the language. Note how the tail of the "y" in the last line of the poem physically links the text to its visual surroundings, creating a continuum between what the language abstractly describes, the aurality of the description, and its concrete pictorial realization. Furthermore, the visual presence of the tree ornaments our reading the poem: as we progress from top to bottom, the tree accompanies our experience, viscerally cutting into the stanza breaks and increasing in density. This sense of movement and growth crescendos at the bottom of the plate, where the tree splits into numerous limbs that unnaturally cage the human figure. The intertwined nature of the artistic media confounds attempts to say that one is a precursor to the other: the text, in both its

semantic and sonic dimensions, coexists with the image, each impacting the other. Blake himself theorized his composite, visionary art, stating that "Painting, as well as poetry and music, exists and exults in immortal thoughts," and that the three together are "Powers in Man of conversing with Paradise."[23]

Networks of Innocence and Experience

Blake's binaristic *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* establishes both a larger thematic counterpoint between the seeming oppositions of its title and a more particular intertextual counterpoint between certain poems in these volumes. Comparing two such poems – one "innocent" and one "experienced" – from the perspective of their linguistically musical qualities offers an example of how Blake associates each of these two "states of the human soul" with unique sonic, visual, and semantic energy:

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

[23] Blake, William. *Descriptive Catalogue* in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Edited by David V. Erdman. University of California Press, 2008.

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

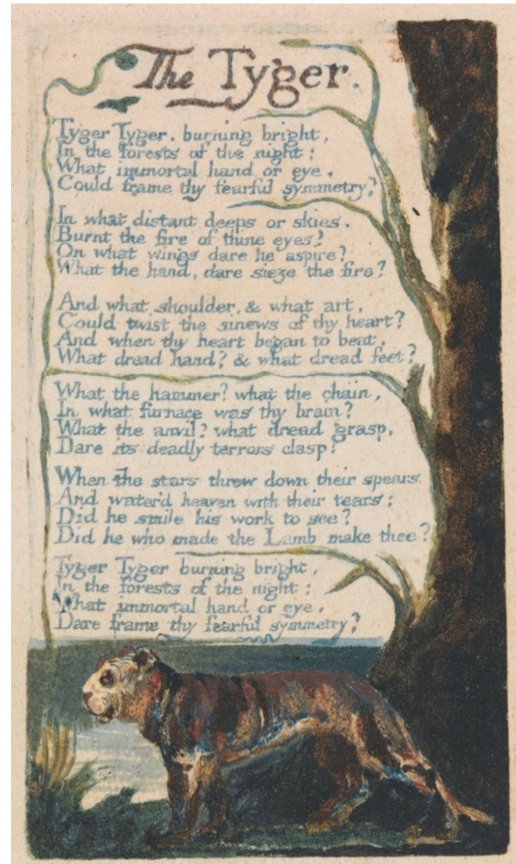

Figure 5: "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" Illuminated Prints

Both "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" are poems that ask how something is created while simultaneously enacting a musical texture that animates their respective "innocent" or "experienced" perspectives on this matter. The former's blatantly symmetrical form and recurring rhyme and metrical schemes grate against the latter's insistent internal questioning and dynamically shifting sonic patterning.

The settled, crafted visual symmetry of "The Lamb" – note the marked lineation that encloses the sextet of each stanza while the outer couplets mirror each other – underscores the poem's settled, uncomplicated religious view of creation. The lack of a question mark after both instances of "Little Lamb who made thee," as well as the formulaic and repetitive nature of these indented lines in the first stanza, conveys a static, unhurried musical tone. The successive,

metrically identical couplets in the middle of the first stanza rhyme with their idyllic pastoral description, while the nearly palindromic sextet in the second stanza sounds the redundancy of its explanation. The overall semantic physics of this song are simple: the "question" of the first stanza passes to the "answer" of the second stanza, the poem's representative musical features assuaging the potential desire to probe creation any further.

"The Tyger," on the other hand, resists easy musical "fram[ing]," as the subject's desire to understand the intricacies of creation, laced with urgent question marks, comes to face the limits, and thus the renewable beauty, of human perception. The first stanza crescendos to its final word, propelled by the identical meter of the first three lines, the progressive vowel continuum of "Tyger," "bright, "night," "eye," and "thy," and the connectivity of the "r" consonant, only to land on the shocking word "symmetry" that disrupts both meter and rhyme. In this case, "symmetry" is not easily conclusive or representational as in "The Lamb," but rather something that the poem marks as musically "fearful," complex, and disruptive. The identical repetition of this stanza at the end (excepting the substitution of "Could" for the more provocative "Dare") not only rhetorically reignites the initial fire of the question, but also leaves the poem hanging on the same unfinished note with which it began. In between, the poem's enthusiasm for perceiving the unknowable force behind the creature's physicality grows as the number and density of questions beginning with "what" increases across the uniquely through-composed stanzas 2-4. Each of these questions about the tiger's "eyes," "heart," and "brain" further animate its presence with perceptive details – "fire," "sinews," "furnace" – that charge these body parts with a particularly visceral semantic energy. When the poem makes the explicit intertextual reference to "The Lamb" in the fifth stanza, the question itself is one of "experience," of newfound sensory perception challenging established and settled notions about

the process of creation. If "The Lamb" establishes a musical landscape where thought rests untroubled, "The Tyger" establishes one where thought runs and explores.

Like "A Poison Tree," the illuminated plates of both these poems extend their semantic implications into an illustrative sphere, which in turn suggestively interacts with the text's linguistic form and blurs the boundaries between the mediums. The unique botanical texture of each illustration bleeds organically and actively into the titles. Note how the whimsical frenzy of vines in "The Lamb" envelops a pastoral scene of untroubled idyll and neatly bifurcates the poem's two stanzas, while the comparatively barren tree branches in "The Tyger" cut abruptly into the poem's white spaces as the mysterious, multicolored tiger strolls alone at the bottom. Notice the energetic curvature Blake applies to the tail of each of the final "y" letters in both the title and the final line, visually marking and extending the energy of the sound and semantics in "Tyger," "thy," and "symmetry" (markedly the most energetic of these three) like the "my" in "A Poison Tree."

"Circumference" and "Energy"

My overall argument about both Dickinson's and Blake's lyric poetry concerns the idea that its meaning is gestural and constantly on the move: far from self-contained textual objects, the poems dynamically ornament and animate the space that surrounds them, extending their linguistic properties into a wider field of being. For both poets, the poem is a perpetual act, a process that linguistically enacts perception rather than a product that symbolizes meaning. Like a musical score, the poem's material, linguistic body is an evident, yet liminal "Circumference" that paradoxically intimates an unbounded "Energy":

> 2. Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy
> 3. Energy is Eternal Delight[24]

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[24] Blake, "Plate 4." *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*.

The Poets light but Lamps —
Themselves — go out —
The Wicks they stimulate
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns —
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference —[25]

Throughout this chapter, I have posited that the collective "music" of a lyric poem refers to an interactive, ecological complex where the intertwined semantic, sonic, and visual dimensions of language intentionally or unintentionally contact each other. The musical poetics of Blake and Dickinson resides ultimately in their understanding of each poem as a field of physical, visceral, and experimental "Energy" in which language newly notices and newly acts upon other language, creating reactive, associative perceptual links or "Circumferences" that subtly modify our senses, our reasoning, and thus, our reality.[26] To engage with their work is to see poetry as *performance* rather than representation: poetic language functions as an active, perceptual force that attends to the unfolding potentiality rather than the embodiment of meaning.

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[25] "930." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*

[26] From my poem, "Slant:"

Language lags like
A lunar fraction
Pursues itself endlessly
On a continuum of positions

Chapter 2 – The Cycling of Song I – Aaron Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*

Dying at my music!
Bubble! Bubble!
Hold me till the Octave's run!
Quick! Burst the Windows!
Ritardando!
Phials left, and the Sun!

– Emily Dickinson

"A Musical Counterpart"

I turn now to an analysis of Aaron Copland's and Benjamin Britten's 20th-century song cycles based on Dickinson's and Blake's works, keeping this interpretive spirit in mind: the music offered by each of these composers for the poems of these poets does not just "embody" the poems statically, but rather attends to their potentiality and further ornaments their dynamic artistic spaces. Setting a poem to music is an act of interpretation on the part of the composer that ideally extends rather than prescribes the meaning of the text by transforming the poem's abstract musicality into a visceral sonic syntax. These musical settings in particular allow the language of the poems to contact the fundamental musical forces of rhythm, pitch, and timbre – and in so doing, activate the physics of the poems' perceptual, kinetic navigation of language, image, and time.[27]

Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson was written from March 1949 to March 1950 and stands as Copland's major compositional achievement for voice. The composer's brief preface to the cycle provides a sense of his ambitions for this project:

> The poems center about no single theme, but they treat of subject matter particularly close to Miss Dickinson: nature, death, life, eternity. Only two of the songs are related thematically, the seventh and twelfth. Nevertheless, the composer hopes that, in seeking a musical counterpart for

[27] "So the poem gets into the body as kinetic traces, reverberations we can turn back into words." For more on kinetic poetics, see Tenney Nathanson's "'The Birds Swim through the Air at Top Speed': Kinetic Identification in Keats, Whitman, Stevens, and Dickinson (Notes toward a Poetics)." *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 2 (2016): 395–410. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26547607.

> the unique personality of the poet, he has given the songs, taken together, the aspect of a song cycle. The twelve songs are dedicated to twelve composer friends.[28]

These remarks reveal how Copland thought of the composer's role in setting poems to music: as an interpreter "seeking a musical counterpart" to each poem that reflects the "unique personality of the poet." Elsewhere, Copland reflects on the way his intimate and dedicated engagement with Dickinson's poetry gradually encouraged the creation of these musical reflections:

> Originally, I had no intention of composing a song cycle using Emily Dickinson's poems. I fell in love with one poem, 'The Chariot.' Its first lines absolutely threw me...The idea of this completely unknown girl in Massachusetts seeing herself riding off into immortality with death himself seemed like such an incredible idea! […] After I set the poem, I continued reading Emily Dickinson. The more I read, the more her vulnerability and loneliness touched me. The poems seemed the work of a sensitive yet independent soul. I found another poem to set, then one more, and yet another..."[29]

Copland's personal investment in reading Dickinson highlights the importance of the poetry as the source and heart of the cycle. In addition, the apparent lack of an overarching narrative agenda for the cycle on Copland's part highlights the composer's detailed, intentional engagement with each poem as its own unique, momentary lyric world. By closely examining some of Copland's selected poems and their musical realizations in song, we can begin to understand the way the composer approached the task of translating and rendering aspects of Dickinson's fascinating poetic musicality.

Cyclicality and Narrativity

Both Copland and Britten deviate significantly from the historical concept of the song cycle as a unified story told from the perspective of a single character. Many of the foundational song cycles in the German tradition, for instance – Beethoven's *An die Ferne geliebte*, after the

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[28] *12 Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Boosey and Hawkes, 1950.
[29] *Copland: Since 1943*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

poetry of Alois Jeitteles; Schubert's *Die schöne Mullerin,* after the poems of Wilhelm Muller; Schumann's *Dichterliebe,* after the poetry of Heinrich Heine – contain an intentional overarching storyline created by a particular sequencing of poems from the first-person perspective. This sequencing allows an audience to perceive the journey of a character navigating various tribulations of love and life, each song acting as a kind of narrative steppingstone. We hear the poet's work, but refracted through the voice of a character whose story and subjective psychology take center stage.

Copland and Britten each eschew this teleological structure in their own ways, but both start by removing the sense of a single character "speaking" the poems. The focus of their cycles becomes more about the perceptual details of each poem's language rather than the interpolation of a linear narrative. Copland, for his part, cycles through the innumerable thematic registers of Dickinson's work, each song painting a wildly different portrait of the poet and offering us a new glimpse into the complexity of her poetic technique and her humanity. Instead of a "dramatic sequence that begins in religious orthodoxy and ends in secular independence,"[30] as described by Dorothy Z. Baker, I argue that these songs are more akin to fleeting lyric snapshots than progressive scenes in a dramatic plot. As Beverly Soll and Ann Dorr have noted in their overview of the work, its supposed unity is much subtler, emerging through "small interrelationships"[31] in the composer's musical language, and as I will argue, through the way Dickinson's poems uniquely inform the resultant musical interactions of each song.

In contrast to Copland's approach to Dickinson's poetry, Britten sets his cycle of Blake's poetry by applying the operatic structure of a recitative followed by an aria, the main poems

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[30] "Aaron Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*: A Reading of Dissonance and Harmony." *The Emily Dickinson journal* 12, no. 1 (2003): 17.
[31] "Cyclical Implications in Aaron Copland's 'Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson.'" *College Music Symposium* 32 (1992): 99–128. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40374204.

embedded within shorter, pithy "proverbs" that interestingly foreshadow or reflect on the poems' images and sounds. This structure creates a nonstop, cyclical continuum of associations between Blake's different writings. Arnold Whittall, noting the way Britten's unique harmonic language creates narrative ambiguity, writes: "None of the song cycles tell stories: they are about states of mind, and the ways in which physical and emotional factors interact."[32] By employing these alternative large-scale structural strategies to the song cycle genre, both composers engage in a dynamic conversation with the creative energy of each poet's artistic process. Ultimately, the cycling of these song collections is not conclusively narrative, but ephemerally *lyric*.

In the following close reading of four songs from Copland's *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, I inductively examine the way a distinct musical process in each song – counterpoint, harmonic tonality, rhythm, texture – viscerally enacts the perceptual, experimental energy that emanates from each text by Dickinson. Though these musical processes obviously overlap and work together, I approach each one from a particular conceptual angle that highlights its primary role in navigating the potential of each text. I will argue that counterpoint engages awareness, tonality charts possibility, rhythm emerges as ecology, and texture shifts like perception. Although I consider each song individually, I also mark significant intertextual conversations between the songs, as well as conceivable intertextual relations between the texts of the cycle and other poems by Dickinson.

Contrapuntal Awareness

An interestingly related poem to Dickinson's "At half past three" analyzed in Chapter 1 is "When they come back," the eighth movement in Copland's cycle. Both poems consider the

[32] Whittall, Arnold. "Tonality in Britten's Song Cycles with Piano." *Tempo*, no. 96 (1971): 2–11. http://www.jstor.org/stable/943773.

passage of time as an "Experiment," which Copland reflects in a setting where the experience of time is on a shifting continuum of tempo and echoed in distinctly interlocking contrapuntal voices and harmonies. Here is Dickinson's original text:

> When they come back – if Blossoms do –
> I always feel a doubt
> If Blossoms can be born again
> When once the Art is out –
>
> When they begin, if Robins may,
> I always had a fear
> I did not tell, it was their last Experiment
> Last Year,
>
> When it is May, if May return,
> Had nobody a pang
> Lest in a Face so beautiful
> He might not look again?
>
> If I am there – One does not know
> What Party – One may be
> Tomorrow, but if I am there
> I take back all I say – [33]

The subject of this poem is in constant counterpoint with their surroundings, wondering what defines the space between their own experience of time and the time that continually washes over all of nature. Although the poem expresses initial uncertainty about the future, a growing sense of anticipation and celebration also underlies that uncertainty. The first three stanzas each present a different way that nature not only exists, but actively ornaments its existence: "Blossoms" reveal a kind of "Art," "Robins" engage in "Experiment," and "May" puts on a "Face." In the final stanza, the poet finally describes the experience of time as a variable "Party" wherein human perception interacts with the surrounding landscape in constantly shifting arrangements and circumstances. Musically, this marked fourth stanza also noticeably breaks from the syntactic, metrical, and rhyming structure of the first three: dashes in the middle

[33] "1042." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*

of lines 10 and 11 cause a distinct pause in the flow of the final thought, while the enjambments between "know / What" and "be / Tomorrow" slow the reading of the poem and emphasize the delay of the resolution of the phrase "If I am there." In this context, being "there" is more a state of mindful presence than a distinct place. For Dickinson, to be present is to attend to the conditional beauty of transience – the bloom of a flower, the chatter of birds, the look of a month – and the poem is a site to record the motion of this transience.

Theo Davis' insights about Dickinson's ornamental poetics are decidedly contrapuntal, emphasizing a "transiency" and "contingency of form" that emerges from "the ways thought and things are each continually changing in relation to one another."[34] Musically, Copland's setting of this poem activates this relationship between the passage of time and the poet's record of that passage, using shared contrapuntal lines between the piano and vocal lines, fleeting sense of key areas, and marked tempo shifts. Example 1 below illustrates these musical devices as they appear in the piano introduction and the first phrase of the vocal line:

Example 1: "When they come back," mm. 1-3
Red circles show interlocking counterpoint between hands. Blue circles show conflict between A-flat and E.

In the first three bars, the combination of the imitative counterpoint between the hands, the metrical obscurity created by beginning on an offbeat as well as placing tenutos in different parts of each bar, and the chromatic sliding between three different key areas thoroughly

[34] *Ornamental Aesthetics*: 139, 119.

disorients the listener, creating a sense of time's extraordinarily complex passage. We can hear these three musical processes collectively as interlocking time frames that echo one another: one from the motivic perspective of a displaced rising large interval followed by a falling smaller interval, one from the metrical perspective of conflicting rhythmic emphases, and one from the harmonic perspective of introduced chromatic pitches that resound across different registers (the A-flat and E-natural in particular). This combination already vividly enacts the poem's conceptual turning on the ideas of doubt and celebration: on the one hand, the lack of a single, apparent overarching element creates uncertainty, but on the other, the confusion of these different musical dimensions enriches the experience of time's possibility.

Example 2: "When they come back" mm. 4-8
Red circles highlight continued interlocking counterpoint between voice and piano.

The vocal line joins this complex fabric as the poetic subject's human presence interfacing with the surrounding world: the piano plays tag with the voice, each line subtly shadowing and influencing the other (Example 2). Copland's attention to Dickinson's dashes in the first stanza shows in his setting of "if Blossoms do" in measure six under different harmonic

circumstances and as a suspended, upward rhythmic question to which the rest of the phrase answers in streams of flowing eighths. This response in measures 7-14 once again complicates the temporal frame, using all three of the previous techniques in addition to a more obvious fourth shift in the form of an *accelerando*. Motivically, we first hear the vocal line and the right hand continually exchanging the leap up to the E-flat while the left hand engages in a rhythmically augmented and melodically extended version of this ascending gesture, creating three interlocking layers of counterpoint. Metrically, the true downbeat becomes impossible to perceive due to the continual displacement of the leaps in each voice, and harmonically, the music makes another brief sharp turn to D-flat major in measure 11 through a subtle intervallic shift in the vocal line from a perfect fourth to a minor third, which again jars our perception of the musical time within the phrase (Example 3).

Example 3: "When they come back" mm. 9-11
Blue circle highlights intervallic and harmonic shift to D-flat major.

These forces fall under the larger umbrella of the *accelerando*, which warps the velocity of all these complex interactions and literally creates the impression of truly fleeting temporality as the music rushes forward like a released slingshot. Once again, Copland intentionally superimposes several interlocking timeframes: harmonic time, metrical time, contrapuntal time, and now, tempo, time's velocity. Rather than fashion a sense of hierarchy, the piano and voice seem to thoughtfully notice each other's cyclical movements within these frames and ornament

each other's presence. The musical result is the feeling of traveling on a "Route of Evanescence" that Dickinson beautifully describes in another one of her poems:

> A Route of Evanescence,
> With a revolving Wheel –
> A Resonance of Emerald
> A Rush of Cochineal –
> And every Blossom on the Bush
> Adjusts it's tumbled Head –
> The Mail from Tunis – probably,
> An easy Morning's Ride –[35]

The language of this poem provides a rich, expressive vocabulary for the song at hand. As the "Ride" of "When they come back" continues through its remaining stanzas, Copland continually redefines the musical parameters of the song to alter the "revolving" interactions between the piano and the voice, each stanza enacting a slightly different passage through the same opening motif of a rising third followed by a falling fifth. For example, the second stanza replaces the first's imitative complexity with homorhythmic unison between the two lines, creating a newfound sense of alignment between the poet and the surrounding world (Example 4).

Example 4: "When they come back" mm. 19-23
Red circles highlight newfound unison between voice and left hand.

[35] "1489." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*

The absence of arresting dashes in this stanza gives Copland the license to run with the motion created by the faster tempo and create a climactic buildup to the final word of the stanza, "year." As the two lines rise in progressive whole steps from C to F-sharp, marked by upward leaps that stand out in the mostly scalar melodic motion, the harmonic ground beneath them shifts more frequently, acting as a kind of counterpoint to the simplicity of the unison. Before the melodic lines reach the G-sharp and F-sharp in measure 26 to suggest a movement to E major, the piano has already subtly introduced both pitches in the right hand of the previous measures: it's as if the voice notices this change and mirrors the intended harmonic direction in measures 26-27 (Example 5).

Example 5: "When they come back" mm. 24-27
Red circles highlight the influence of the right-hand G-sharp on the melodic lines in mm. 26.

In measures 28-29, however, the unison melodic lines briefly return to G-natural and F-natural and clash with the piano right hand's sharps, creating an unexpected cross-relation when compared with the previous measures. This sudden harmonic discrepancy makes the arrival on the F-sharp in measure 30 through a leap of an 11th even more jarring as the fortissimo climax of this unison episode (Example 6). In this stretch of the "Route," Copland in a sense performs another "Experiment" between the two parts, resulting in a different conceptual ornamentation of the temporal experience.

Example 6: “When they come back” mm. 28-31
Blue circles show brief melodic shift back to G and F. Red circle shows climactic melodic leap to F-sharp.

The setting of the third stanza once again changes the “Face” of time through a marked textural contrast between the two parts in the first line that then blends into the first stanza’s imitative texture for the remaining three lines. Unlike the start of the second stanza, the piano part seems initially unaware that the vocal line has begun the third iteration of the head motif in measure 34, still reeling from the excitement generated by the arrival in measure 32; Copland appropriately rhythmically augments the longer notes in the vocal line in measures 34-38 as if it were waiting for the piano line to notice this discrepancy. When the piano *does* seem to finally notice in measure 38, the roles reverse as the piano takes the E-natural from the voice and returns to the earlier ruminating, polyphonic texture where the voice shadows the right hand’s leaps (Example 7). This marked shift once again alerts us to the fact that the two parts are actively “Adjust[ing]” to and relationally defining each other, creating new “Resonance” and “Rush” in our experience of time’s passage.

Example 7: “When they come back” mm. 36-39
Red circles highlight imitative counterpoint now passing from voice to piano.

The setting of the final stanza reflects the poem's ideas about the relationship between presence and transience, creating a poignant sense of flux between time's ongoing "Party" and the poet's observation of that event. In addition to returning to the slower opening tempo, the vocal line presents the most augmented version of the theme, complete with a *ritardando* that lingers on the uncertainty of "one does not know" before the piano prompts the voice back into the mechanics of the imitative texture. This time, however, the vocal line leaps up to an F on the "mor" of "tomorrow" in measure 62 rather than continue in its previous downward fashion, physically turning our attention in a different direction towards the sense of possibility suggested by that word's anticipation of future time (Example 8).

Example 8: "When they come back" mm. 55-63
Blue circle highlights rhythmic augmentation. Red circle highlights upward intervallic turn.

This upward trajectory continues as the vocal line reaches its highest pitch on the italicized verb of being "*am*" in measure 66: time is markedly "held back" here, giving the poet a chance to clearly articulate her presence in its fabric while the piano echoes this statement of presence in its ascent to the same high G. As elsewhere in this song, this shadowing of the vocal line obscures the idea of a single "there," turning presence into a process rather than a location:

for Dickinson, to be truly present at time's "Party" is to understand one's existence as a kind of ongoing relationality with the world.[36] Even the singer's final note receives an ornamental nod of acknowledgment as the piano journeys imitatively through the thirds of "*am* there" in the final measures to meet the singer's C one octave higher (Example 9). We end in the same place on the "revolving Wheel" that we began, the final harmony and rhythmic figure identical to that which preceded the singer's first entrance, gesturing to the incredible breadth of the temporal "Route" covered in between. The music's ability to give time character and complexity enacts Dickinson's "ornamental" *awareness* outlined by Theo Davis where one's existence is in constant contact with differing temporal and spatial possibilities.

Example 9: "When they come back" mm. 64-74
Red circles highlight imitative echoes of "*am* there" in piano. Blue circle highlights cyclical rhythmic/harmonic profile from mm. 3-4.

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[36] From my poem, "This Spring:"

> We watch each other
> Like two accustomed to what
> The season entails – bloom
> Of identity, as it slips,
> Pistol to pistil.
> […]

Tonal Possibility

Another powerful example of Copland's music enacting the uniquely temporal poetic "Routes" in Dickinson's work occurs in the cycle's tenth song, "I've heard an organ talk sometimes," which describes the poet's mysterious, transcendent encounter with the instrument in a cathedral. Out of the twelve chosen poems, the tenth stands out in particular as one where Dickinson invokes music not just as technique or metaphor, but as the subject of her poetic inquiry. The complete text, which contains one slight discrepancy in the final line with Copland's setting, is below:

> I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes –
> In a Cathedral Aisle,
> And understood no word it said –
> Yet held my breath, the while –
>
> And risen up – and gone away,
> A more Bernardine Girl –
> Yet – knew not what was done to me
> In that old Chapel Aisle.[37]

Although this poem gives us a record of a memory of listening to music, Dickinson leaves the exact details of that process to the imagination. The organ "talk[s]" and has a transformative, suspenseful effect on the listener, but the evanescent syntax and mechanics of the organ's language – its "word[s]" – remain a fascinating enigma to them. Copland's setting of this poem locates that sense of mystery in the gravitational field created by musical tonality, embedding the poem within subtly changing harmonic paths to conceptualize the listener's experience of the organ as a kind of passage through a field of dynamic, yet liminal harmonic relations.[38] By exposing the listener to different areas of "tonal pitch space" – a concept I borrow

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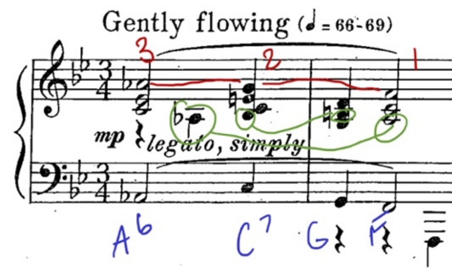
[37] "211." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*

[38] From my poem, "[portrait]":

from the music theorist Fred Lerdahl, who posited tonality as a series of cognitive pathways that a listener can trace – Copland's song creates the sensation of an unfolding, perceptual awe that Dickinson's poem outlines.[39]



Example 10: "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes" mm. 1-2
Red line highlights 3-2-1 descent; green circles highlight cross relations.

The opening bars of the song establish its motivic conceit: a descending, scalar melodic line accompanied with a choral, hymn-like texture continues to loop, each time traversing a new grey area of tonal pitch space (Example 10). Even the first iteration of this motif unsettles the cadential closure suggested by the 3-2-1 descent in the melody: one can sense the outline of an authentic cadence in F major, but it is hidden by the chromatic harmonies taking prominence on the downbeats of each measure. The A-flat root in the first chord clashes retrospectively with the F major's A-natural in measure 2; the E-flat in the first triad grates against the E-natural in the seventh chord; and the immediate juxtaposition of the B-flat in the C7 chord and the B-natural in the G triad upsets the tonal inevitability of a potential V7 resolving to I. This chromaticism not only creates cross-relations in the voice leading, but also blurs the harmonic function of the

[…]
When she memorized how lakes
And swans moved contrary

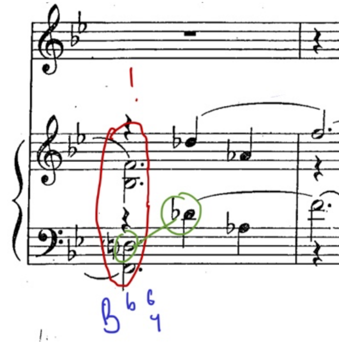
To each other, to her, making
Fields of everything
[…]

[39] Lerdahl, Fred. *Tonal Pitch Space*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

progression by implicating key areas that pull the ear in different directions. The first progression alone uses all but two of the possible notes in the chromatic aggregate, D-flat and G-flat, which Copland gradually introduces into the texture as the song progresses.

Example 11: "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes" mm. 3-4
Red circle highlights new harmonic expanse; green circles highlight cross relation.

When the descending melodic line repeats in measure 3-4 sequenced a whole step higher, the harmonic context shifts, not just because of the transposition, but because the functional role of the voice-leading has changed despite the B-flat/B-natural cross-relation remaining intact (Example 11). In the first progression, the B-flat was a seventh on the third beat, whereas in the second, it is the fifth of an E-flat major triad on the downbeat, changing the precise course of its motion to B-natural around the common tone G. After a contrapuntal echo of the G major harmony in measure 4, the next chord progression steps down melodically to A-flat again, while the bass jumps a tritone to a new pitch, D-flat, changing our understanding of the melodic A-flat from a root to a fifth. Then, instead of following the established pattern of root position harmonies leading from one to the next, Copland reharmonizes our hearing of the F in measure 6 with a 2nd inversion B-flat major harmony, creating a new cross relation between D-flat and D-natural as well as opening an even more unstable harmonic ground (Example 12).



Example 12: "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes" mm 6-7
Red circle highlights new inversion; green circles highlight cross relation.

The following contrapuntal echo confirms the D-natural/D-flat conflict and crosses over into the first beat of the following measure, metrically displacing the entrance of the following progression. In these opening measures before the voice has entered, Copland invokes a chorale-like texture that suggests the outline of something tonally familiar, but in reality unchains the harmonic language from the sense of a unified tonal center, creating a complex syntax where harmony proceeds according to associative relations in voice leading, a field of perceptual *possibility* where each new progression reveals a new layer of the musical space.

As the singer enters, the organ chorale continues to "talk" in this harmonically and metrically explorative way, gradually ornamenting the poem's experience with new dimensions of surprise over the same descending melodic tune from the opening. In the piano part, the marked F in the top voice hangs over the entire next progression that shifts our perception of the pitch from D-flat major to D minor, the first invocation of the minor mode in the song. Meanwhile, the vocal line meets the piano's transformed F on the downbeat of measure 8 and emphasizes the cross relation between D-flat and D-natural. The height of the vocal phrase, an A on beat 2, coincides with the start of the piano's echoing gesture, which achieves its climax on an A-flat one octave higher, creating yet another marked cross-relation as well as a more discordant version of the imitative noticing that we saw in "When they come back." Another moment where

the vocal line shadows the piano is when its F in measure 9 hangs over to meet the piano's F in measure 10, its tonal context changing from a D-flat major triad to now a more dissonant B-flat major seventh chord (Example 13).

Example 13: "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes" mm. 7-10
Red circles highlight new harmonic expanses; green circles highlight cross relations.

With each progression, Copland opens a new harmonic expanse: in the next progression, the first chord in the sequence returns to the downbeat with the brand new sound of a first-inversion sonority, and the third chord introduces G-flat into the texture for the first time, which clashes both with the F in the dissonant B-flat add 6 chord on the downbeat, as well as the G from the downbeat of measure 11. In measure 14, a new F minor harmony starts the harmonic chain for the first time, and Copland creates a stretto effect for the first time by interlocking the end of the Ab-G-F descent with the start of another A-flat in measure 15. The progression in measure 15 and 16 reaches new heights of harmonic dissonance as the 3rd beat's minor second

between F and G-flat leads to another minor second on the downbeat between B-flat and B-natural, the previously established melodic cross-relations now coinciding in the same harmonic moment. The vocal line's high notes continue to hang over the bar line, again causing us to hear the transient harmonic context of those pitches. The constant, dynamic harmonic evolution going on here is truly bewildering: every single progression seems to trampoline off the previous and add some new element that further complicates our initial hearing of the opening chorale (Example 14).

Example 14: "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes" mm. 11-12 and mm. 14-16
Red circles highlight new harmonic expanses; green circles highlight cross relations.

The final line of the first stanza of this poem serves as a kind of static oasis in Copland's setting, a moment in which to pause and reflect on the journey. Copland dissolves the perception of the strong ¾ downbeat by inserting a measure of common time and slows the harmonic

rhythm, alternating consistently between an E-flat major triad and a D minor triad. Similar to the final stanza of "When they come back," this moment slows the sensation of time's passage and allows the singer an opportunity to articulate their presence with the marked highest melodic pitch in the song and acknowledge the humanity of the perplexing experience of time (Example 15).

Example 15: "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes" mm. 18-21
Harmonic stasis; Red circle highlights melodic climax.

When the chorale starts up again in measure 22 for the poem's second stanza, it navigates a similar, twisty harmonic trajectory as the opening but with each progression seems to inch closer and closer to the final B-flat major triad, the ultimate surprise as the hidden, implied tonic of this song (Example 16). Root position F major in measure 24 slightly shifts to a first-inversion D minor in measure 27, which then pivots to a second-inversion B-flat in measure 29. In measure 31, B-flat arrives as the bass root from a plagal motion from E-flat major, but the vocal line's insistent D-flat still pulls the harmony towards minor; the true arrival of B-flat major occurs in measure 33 with the last two measures bringing the major aspect into focus by emphasizing the third of the chord on the downbeats.

Example 16: "I've heard an Organ talk, sometimes" mm. 23-35
Red circles highlight harmonic transformations. Green circles highlight final D-flat/D cross relation.

In Copland's setting of this poem, the source of the poet's awe lies in the way that the organ's music ornaments their experience, opening new mental "Routes" and associations in its exploration of the physics of tonal pitch space. Similar to how Dickinson's poem notices a "Resonance of Emerald" or a "Rush of Cochineal," Copland's musical language notices cross-relations, inversions, major/minor polarity, and the pull of various key areas as significant forces that alter perception, generating newness, difference, and unique paths of temporal experience. Giving careful attention to the way these interrelated forces contact each other creates an open space of poetic "Possibility," as Dickinson outlines in another poem:

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise –[40]

What is so fascinating about Dickinson's poetics is the way she insists on the continual performance of a process as the true work of poetry. "Possibility" is not a removed symbol or a desired end, but a complex, contoured network of "Windows," "Doors," "Chambers," "Gambrels," and "Visitors" in which the poet continually "dwell[s]" and navigates. As Sharon Lattig remarks, Dickinson's "house of poetry" is ecologically "opened to potential in the form of its relationship to the informing environment (which environment in poetry is perforce linguistic)."[41] Poetic creation, linguistically realized as a literal and metaphorical "This" in the final stanza, is a site of continual perception: of the referential self – the "I" – actively interfacing with its surroundings – through the sensory "eye" – in search of new mediative pathways and expressions of "Paradise."[42] An eternity of "numerous," "Superior," "everlasting" meanings exist within the prescribed social and temporal confines of life, and the poem's linguistic enactment of this potential outlines and celebrates its existence. Like poetry, music, an art form that

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[40] "466." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*
[41] *Cognitive Ecopoetics*, 111.

[42] From my poem, "Seven":

[…] and in your eyes
I see mine and see the frame
Through which I have seen.

simultaneously overlays different varieties of sonic motion (contrapuntal, harmonic, metric, etc.), also creates material, associative environments in which one can dwell and perform the act of perception. To perform in either medium – as either creator and/or reader of its material surface – is to perceive reality afresh, to move through and be moved by the everchanging physics of the present.

Rhythmic and Harmonic Ecology

Hearing a poem set to music accentuates this process of discovery as a listener interfaces with multilayered dimensions of both sound and language. Another one of Copland's songs that makes us aware of the infinite kinetic pathways Dickinson gestures to in her work is the first movement, "Nature, the gentlest mother." "Nature" in this poem is not a generalized representation of the external world, but rather a uniquely omniscient, motherly force that accompanies one's perception of that world:

> Nature – the Gentlest Mother is,
> Impatient of no Child –
> The feeblest – or the Waywardest –
> Her Admonition mild –
>
> In Forest – and the Hill –
> By Traveller – be heard –
> Restraining Rampant Squirrel –
> Or too impetuous Bird –
>
> How fair Her Conversation –
> A Summer Afternoon –
> Her Household – Her Assembly
> And when the Sun go down –
>
> Her Voice among the Aisles
> Incite the timid prayer
> Of the minutest Cricket –
> The most unworthy Flower –
>
> When all the Children sleep –
> She turns as long away
> As will suffice to light Her lamps –
> Then bending from the Sky –

With infinite Affection –
And infinite Care –
Her Golden finger on Her lip
Wills Silence – Everywhere - [43]

Like the inexplicable talking "Organ," nature's encompassing "Voice" fills the "Aisles" of the ecosystem; like the dwelling of "Possibility," nature oversees a complexly fashioned "Household." In both these metaphors, "Nature" performs a mediating function, invisibly linking the "Traveller" with specific factors in her environment – "Squirrel," "Bird," "Sun," "Cricket," "Flower," "Sky" – in an ecological understanding of their relationship. A "Summer Afternoon" is not just a temporal marker, but a continuous, overheard "Conversation" between the elements moving within the timeframe that points to an undisclosed, relational meaning within their actions and interactions. The benevolent "Silence" that closes the poem "– Everywhere –" suspends its motion through this field, as if deferring the ultimate significance of its enclosed perceptions and sounds to another time.

Example 17: "Nature, the gentlest mother" mm. 1-6
Red, blue, and green curves show an ecology of voices.

[43] "741." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*

Copland's music, acting here as the dynamic force of "Nature," moves through Dickinson's ecological field and perceives the momentary interactions between its organisms. In the opening, sparse piano introduction, the music explores various "Aisles" of the environment, each one enlivened with particular rhythmic character and contrapuntally set against another, creating discrete moments of influence and dialogue between the lines (Example 17). For example, the fleeting, isolated "crystalline" 32nd note figure that opens the piece pauses to listen to the joint response from an upper and a lower voice in measure 2, the lower voice's dotted rhythm eventually influencing the upper voice in measure 4 as they steadily climb down. In measure 4, the lower voice imitates the opening figure in its own register, which leads to a sudden, accelerated response from the middle voice. In measure 6, the upper voice introduces a suspended, syncopated rhythm with a B-natural grace note, creating a slight shift in the primary harmonic focus on B-flat and influencing the middle voice's final, upward response towards E and A naturals. These attentive voices, motivically bouncing off one another and given further dimension through Copland's dynamic markings, collectively form a microcosmic ecosystem that the listener perceives gradually through the rhythmic, melodic, and dynamic interaction of the voices. What their "Conversation" ultimately means is a question that the music seems to ask, but not answer: "Nature," the flow of musical time, weaves the different strands into a web of potential associations.

As the poetic text enters the song, the piano part notices and echoes the contours of the vocal line, imparting the shadow relationship found in "When they come back" and creating the sense that the poetry has a life and generative resonance beyond its initial presentation or recitation. Indeed, as the poem continues to unfold in the voice, the piano part gradually tumbles

down a rabbit hole and enacts "Nature's" ecological dynamism through the notable acceleration of rhythm and harmony, forces that themselves work together in a sort of musical *ecology*.[44]

Example 18: "Nature, the gentlest mother" mm. 16-25
Red circled harmonic downbeats coincide with blue circled rhythmic acceleration.

In measure 21, eighth notes first give way to sixteenths, this exchange aligning with a striking harmonic change to D-flat major, and then give way to thirty-seconds two measures later as the harmony falls again a whole step down to C-flat major. The thirty-seconds in measure 23-

[44] From my poem, "Leafcutter Ants":

> […]
> All around parades of earth
> Unfold at various paces
> Like chain reactions run
> In latent heat of noon.
> […]

24 articulate the delightful, active consonants in “Restraining Rampant Squirrel” and in measure 25 reinstate the song’s opening motive as the harmonic direction shifts unexpectedly up a half step to C major. This progressively unfolding rhythmic and harmonic spectrum not only gives each line of the second stanza a marked presence, but also a sense of continuous relationship to the other lines, both in the ecosystem of the poem’s natural images, and in the ecosystem of the poem’s linguistic craft (Example 18).

Example 19: “Nature, the gentlest mother” mm. 37-43
Red circles highlight harmonic chromaticism; blue circles highlight rhythmic acceleration/apotheosis.

In the third stanza, the music’s rhythmic and harmonic continuum resets in measure 27 and wildly accelerates to measure 43, aided by an increase in overall tempo. Rhythmically, the flow in the piano part progresses from eighths, to sixteenths, to triplet sixteenths, to thirty-

seconds, and finally to a double trill, a point of maximal acceleration (Example 19).[45] Harmonically, two factors work together to create this acceleration: increased chromaticism in the descending bass line, and increased frequency of harmonic changes. The chromaticism complicates the structure of Nature's "household" as the musical space reveals new, in-between colors that are only hairs apart from each other, while the faster harmonic rhythm in measures 36-39, coupled with a longer, continuous melodic line, creates a sense of forward motion to the arrival on C-flat in measure 40. So much excitement and suggestion of "minutest" possibility occurs in this passage that the texture seems to dissolve with the trill in measure 42 in a kind of apotheosis of the song's overlapping, charged ecological interactions – between piano and voice, nature and wanderer, text and music, rhythm and harmony.

Example 20: "Nature, the gentlest mother" mm. 56-67
Rhythmic deceleration. Red circle highlights alternate harmonic path. Blue circles highlight shared echoes between voice and piano.

[45] Another instance of this kind of dissolution occurs in the second movement of L.v. Beethoven's final Op. 111 piano sonata, in which the increasing rhythmic diminution of each variation leads to a double trill between the hands that momentarily stops time.

For the final stanza, Copland offers another reset of the musical environment, cycling back to the original tempo and the hollow B-flat octave in the piano part that first introduced the vocal line. However, this time “Nature” takes another path: towards secretive “Silence” in measure 60, the word marked with silence in the piano part, a wide vocal leap, and the highest melodic pitch in the song. Prior to this measure, the downward harmonic sequence from stanza 2 reappears in measures 51-57 but ultimately takes a different course, continuing down to a D natural in measure 57 that gets held for three full measures in anticipation of the moment of “Silence.” Like the impact of the climactic words “am” in “When they come back” and “held” in “I’ve heard an Organ talk” (both also held in moments of silence), the impact of “Silence” here reverberates in the piano part, which decelerates its rhythmic motion in its quarter note imitation of the vocal line in measure 60 and its following half note imitation of the same line in measures 65-66 (Example 20). If Copland gradually revealed and reveled in the “Possibility” of nature’s ecological interactions through the profound rhythmic and harmonic acceleration of stanzas 1-4, here his deceleration conceals those interactions, performing the work of Dickinson’s “Nature” slowing the activity of the environment and putting the ultimate meaning of the day to bed. The quick grace notes in the pianississimo final measure subtly allude to the shape of the 32nd note motif in the introduction, suggesting the implied, active meanings that still buzz within these longer note values. Ultimately, Copland’s setting places Dickinson’s poem on another temporal, dynamic “Route,” allowing its ecology to play out as the musical field gradually shifts from expectant morning, to lively afternoon, to reflective evening. The music is not simply a play-by-play mimesis of the poem’s environment, but the active force of “Nature” that moves invisibly through this environment and enables its perception.

Textural Perception

One of Dickinson's poems that complexly ties together ideas about music, poetry, and perception is "I felt a funeral in my Brain," which navigates the unique perspective of a lyric "I" that gradually becomes more and more unembodied until its presence dissolves. Copland's setting of this poem, tracing this process, notably leaves out its significant final stanza, due to an erroneous omission of that stanza in the poem's initial publication. The complete poem is below:

> I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
> And Mourners to and fro
> Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
> That Sense was breaking through –
>
> And when they all were seated,
> A Service, like a Drum -
> Kept beating - beating - till I thought
> My mind was going numb -
>
> And then I heard them lift a Box
> And creak across my Soul
> With those same Boots of Lead, again,
> Then Space - began to toll,
>
> As all the Heavens were a Bell,
> And Being, but an Ear,
> And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
> Wrecked, solitary, here -
>
> And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
> And I dropped down, and down -
> And hit a World, at every plunge,
> And Finished knowing - then - [46]

In the process of trying to rationalize and make interpretive "Sense" of the ritualistic, musical proceedings of the "Mourners" in the "Brain," the "I" eventually encounters a realm of otherworldly "Being" where pure sensory experience, in the form of an "Ear" hearing the music of "Space" and the "Heavens," replaces the grammatical subject's socially constructed form of knowledge. Perception, here in the form of listening, creates a "toll[ing]" entropy that bypasses

[46] "340." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*

what language can ultimately represent and leaves the "I," the voice of this linguistic social order, at an impasse. The final stanza, propelled suddenly forward by the insistent repetition of "And" at the beginning of each line, acts like a trapdoor out of the poem's conundrum: the lyric subject gets "dropped," crashing through the "World[s]" of logic and narrative that support "Reason," and temporarily "finishe[s] knowing" until a new poem, foreshadowed in the marked disclaimer "- then -", reconstitutes the subject's presence. Dickinson deconstructs what writing or reading a poem entails: a negotiation of the space language occupies as both an established social code of expression, and as an active tool that unsettles this prescribed code by enacting the entropy of individual *perception*.

Lattig describes this poem as "chart[ing] the process of leaving the concrete world for the imagined sensory realm of composition."[47] Though Copland does not set the final stanza, his musical reading of the first four engages with the poem's gradual progression from "Brain" to "Being" and suggests the tension of their poetic interdependence. Distinct textural shifts in the piano part enact visceral changes in the subject's thought process to lead to the moment of reflective, disembodied wreckage at the end of the fourth stanza. However, the close relationship of these textures to one another suggests their cyclicality, illustrating the fine line that separates one mode of thought from another.

Example 21: "I felt a funeral in my brain," mm. 1-2
Opening texture: conflicting diatonic and chromatic layers between the hands.

[47] *Cognitive Ecopoetics.* 69.

The song opens with a striking juxtaposition between the right hand's repeating I-V-IV-V functional tonal progression and the left hand's rapid, murky chromatic figuration, as if the "I" were mulling over a thought, its harmonic clarity obscured by the "treading" sixteenths (Example 21). Starting in measure 7, the right hand's progression adopts an upward contour, which becomes a vehicle for introducing new harmonies that chromatically slide upward and venture past the initial tonal center, intimating a climax on the horizon. The singer mimics this voice leading, passing from D-flat, to E-flat, to E-natural, and ultimately "breaking through" on the F in measure 16 to a new environment with a slower tempo and a marked textural shift (Example 22).

Example 22: "I felt a funeral in my brain," mm. 13-21
Textural transformation: harmonic confusion replaced with percussive stasis.

Gone is the motoric chromaticism in the left hand, which now musically "beat[s]" rather than treads, maintaining its oscillating quarter notes while dryly accenting the downbeat of each measure with percussive octaves. The harmonic rhythm comes to a screeching halt as the right hand repeats the same seventh chord over and over, creating a static timbral effect that starkly contrasts the first stanza's harmonic wandering. The physics of the subject's processing are

shifting; the thinking "mind" is "going numb" and moving away from its initial irritable reaching for harmonic reason, venturing into a realm of primal rhythm and textural bareness.

Example 23: "I felt a funeral in my brain," mm. 37-46
Creating resonant "Bell" texture through augmented rhythm, wide registers, and quintal harmony.

In the third stanza, Copland transforms the "Drum" of the previous texture into the upcoming resonant "Bell," maintaining the left hand's established rhythmic oscillation while augmenting its values into dotted eighths in measure 29 and eventually quarters in measure 35. When the singer announces that "Space - began to toll," accompanied by wide distance between registers, quintal harmonic structures, and dotted rhythms that further open and announce said space, the music seems to realize the perceptual, auditory realm of "Being." Breaking from the poem's stanza format, Copland sets the first line of the fourth stanza with no break from the previous line, leading to the song's melodic climax on the word "Bell," which hangs for two full measures as the musical space "tolls" around it (Example 23). However, even in this otherworldly texture that indeed sounds so far removed from the opening's dense confusion, Copland maintains the left hand's steady rhythmic thread that accompanied the subject's gradual

approach to this moment, suggesting that these worlds of “Brain” and “Being” exist on a textural continuum and are never fully detached from each other.

Example 24: “I felt a funeral in my brain,” mm. 47-62
Closing texture synthesizing previous three: red highlights opening harmonic progression, green highlights “Drum” pattern in left hand, blue highlights “Bell” augmentation in right hand.

As the song closes, the I-V-IV-V progression from the opening returns in a slower harmonic rhythm starting on the word “Ear,” first in A major and then in the original A-flat major (Example 24). As “wrecked” and “solitary” as the subject’s initial line of harmonic thought now sounds in the slower tempo, punctuated by individual, isolated bass notes, the song’s recall of this line is yet another reminder of the ongoing tension between “I” and its contact with “Being,” between the poem as a site of embodied, rational expression and the poem as a site of perceptual, liminal transformation. In fact, elements of all three previous textural worlds come together in these final measures: the wandering harmonies of the “Brain,” the

insistent beating of the “Drum,” and the sustained ringing of the “Bell” coincide as the music reflects on the poem’s journey through these worlds. Copland’s associative textures in this song, each one unique but derived in some way from the other, allow one to physically feel the continuum of thought and sensation that Dickinson as poet straddles.

“Beyond the Music of Both Arts”

In the introduction of his book *Music and Imagination*, Copland writes about the relationship of music to poetry:

> To my mind poets […] were trying to make music with nothing but words at their command […] I came gradually to see that music and poetry were perhaps closer kin than I had first realized. I came gradually to see that beyond the music of both arts there is an essence that joins them – an area where the meaning behind the notes and the meaning beyond the words spring from some common source.[48]

In this excerpt “music” functions both as a label for the medium of purely sonic art, and more interestingly as an overarching metaphor that informs both mediums and that provides access to the “meaning” of each. To understand “music” as a larger operative force at work in both mediums entails turning our attention to the transient perceptual processes that invite us to notice links between individual words and between individual sounds. Though processes like counterpoint, harmony, rhythm, and texture do not have exact linguistic counterparts in poetry, they impel us to attend to the complexity and richness of time in the same way that a poem’s multidimensional language alerts us to the dynamic and evolving evanescence of life and life’s meaning. Each of the songs I’ve analyzed in this chapter is a perpetual mirror in which the poem and the music observe each other’s perceptual physics.

[48] *Music and Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961. 1.

Chapter 3 – The Cycling of Song II – Benjamin Britten's *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake*

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

– William Blake

Cooperative Fusion

Benjamin Britten completed the *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* in 1965 and premiered the work in June of that year at the piano with the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, to whom the work is also dedicated. Unlike Copland, who personally selected the Dickinson poems that would comprise his song cycle, Britten set Blake texts specifically chosen by his partner and longtime collaborator, the tenor Peter Pears.[49] Pears' intertextual selection and ordering of Blake's texts sets up the cycle's unique formal scheme in which poems from the *Songs of Experience* are nestled within shorter proverbs from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and the "Auguries of Innocence." The resulting proverb/recitative—song/aria pattern imbues the work with a distinctive operatic flow in which the poems become individual characters accessed via passage through the transitional corridors of the proverbs. Given Britten's extensive history as a composer of both song cycles and operas, this late work stands as an intriguing fusion of the two genres, shaped by Pears' essential, cooperative role in the compositional design.

The following close analysis of two distinctive songs from Britten's cycle, "A Poison Tree" and "The Tyger," builds on the literary analysis of these *Songs of Experience* from Chapter 1. Though understudied in the composer's works, the *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* provides a compelling example of what Kate Kennedy describes as Britten's ability to "inhabit

[49] For a detailed account of Britten's and Pears' lifelong personal and professional correspondence, see Fiona Shaw's *My Beloved Man: The Letters of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears*. Edited by Vicki P. Stroeher, Nicholas Clark, and Jude Brimmer. NED-New edition. Boydell & Brewer, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt19x3hvc.

his texts to the point of developing and enhancing the emotional logic and internal structure of the poem."[50] Like Copland with Dickinson, Britten engages in a creative conversation with Blake, not merely setting his texts, but providing musical realizations that convey an interpretation of their implicated "Energy." For each song, I examine the way Britten musically realizes the complex, dynamic concepts – poison and symmetry – at work in the poems, emphasizing how these elements are not simply represented in the music, but rather form an integral part of its evolving processes. In between, I turn my attention to the curious recitative proverbs that precede each song and illustrate how they intertextually extend the meaning of each song beyond its designated position in the cycle and thus complicate overarching narrative readings of the work.

A Poison Fugue

Britten's setting of Blake's "A Poison Tree" enacts the insidious growth of the poem's wrath from stanza to stanza, bringing the seed of this emotion to its deadly fruition through a dense fugue that viscerally feeds this developmental process.[51] Britten's fugal techniques – among them imitation, rhythmic displacement, inversion, augmentation, diminution, and stretto – subtly interweave the song's melodic themes into a seething network of poison that waits until the final two lines to unleash its accumulated power. As the song progresses, the lethal dynamics at work beneath the poem's seemingly benign meter and rhyme scheme gradually surface.

Like the way Blake surrounds his poem with an illustration that extends its creative energy beyond the linguistic text, Britten nests the text of this song within two incredibly opaque

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[50] Kennedy, Kate. "Introduction." In *Literary Britten: Words and Music in Benjamin Britten's Vocal Works*, edited by Kate Kennedy, NED-New edition., 1–8. Boydell & Brewer, 2018.

[51] At their heart, all fugues illustrate the way a lone melodic subject has within its shape the capacity for networked complexity like a single seed of life or thought contains the capacity to germinate and evolve.

piano solos, which themselves are thematically and sonically nested by the surrounding proverbs (Example 25).

A POISON TREE
Slow and solemn (♩=48)
(little movement)

Example 25: "A Poison Tree," mm. 1-2
Dense chromatic uncertainty gives way to a tonal bridge through a liminal pedal change.

The chromatic aggregate, which takes on a central role in the song's navigation of tonality, reverberates in the pedaled murkiness of *pianississimo* triplets like a distant, untethered dark energy. In measure two, the single B-flat dominant seventh chord, notably lacking a directional leading tone as it gives way to E-flat minor in measure three, connects this primordial, wordless angst with the form of the text by a pedal change that shifts the ear from total harmonic ambiguity to more directional tonality.

The unsettled, disturbed nature of the introduction lives on in the singer's opening phrase from measures 3 to 6 as the chromatic obscurity from which the poem emerges descends on the poetic subject and finds form and expression in words and a more coherent triadic harmonic language (Example 26).

I was an - gry with my friend: I told my wrath, my wrath did end.

Example 26: "A Poison Tree," mm. 3-6
The blue pitch class numbers above illustrate the melodic tone row. The red tonal harmonic analysis below illustrates the common tone relations in the voice leading.

However, beyond the homorhythmic triads and the clever "end" on another E-flat minor "tonic," the tonality of this phrase is extremely ambiguous as it passes through every possible first inversion minor triad in the manner of a twelve-tone row, each new harmony approached by either half step or a 3rd/5th relation.[52] Britten highlights the eerie, polar couplet rhyme between "friend" and "end" by placing them only a half-step apart on the same beat of the meter and with the same rhythmic value. Furthermore, the words "angry" and "wrath" receive longer, syncopated rhythmic values that mark the troubled nature of these emotions by causing noticeable irregularities in the metrical flow. This single, terrifyingly quiet phrase, though structurally closed, contains the seeds of all the fugal transformations that Britten will employ: already, the poison is taking root.

The piano's knotty, festering triplets return as an unexpected interlude in measures 7-8, Britten heightening the semantic tension between the first stanza's couplets by drastically separating them from each other, yet linking them both to the same malevolent, chromatic source. This second couplet begins as the melodic and harmonic inversion of the first, the singer's melody beginning on E-flat and traveling the same intervallic distances in the opposite directions (Example 27).

[52] The tone row here is also the full fugue "subject," this juxtaposition highlighting the fascinating similarities in compositional procedure between 12-tone and fugal writing.

Example 27: “A Poison Tree, mm. 7-13
Chromatic reshuffling and festering, followed by a nearly symmetrical inversion of the first phrase.

Through this subtle, yet impactful change in direction, the music posits the fine line that exists between “friend” and “foe” and highlights the associative tension lurking in Blake’s seemingly straightforward, aphoristic couplets. In measure nine, “I told it not” breaks from the inversional pattern by rising to the same rhythmically active A minor triad as “I told my wrath,” “these two lines intoned on precisely the same pitch before the former ascends a half step and the later descends a half step in mirror image.”[53] This marked repetition emphasizes the way these lines semantically hinge on one another in the poem, the latter both remembering and going against the path taken by the former. When Britten further breaks from the poem’s progress to repeat the line “I told it not” at a higher dynamic level, the regularity of both the pitch inversion

[53] Sly, Gordon Cameron. 2023. “Songs and Proverbs of William Blake.” In *Britten’s Donne, Hardy and Blake Songs*. Vol. 15. United Kingdom: Boydell & Brewer, Incorporated.

and the expected four-bar phrase structure also break, alerting the listener to the alternate perceptual path the music is taking: allowing the “wrath” to “grow” instead of “end.” Tonally, instead of closure on E-flat, Britten leaves this phrase melodically open on the dominant pitch B-flat in measure 14.

At the onset of the word “grow,” an incredible contrapuntal density in the form of a fugue with three distinctly interlocking themes derived from the opening embeds the sensation of the tree’s sinister growth into the poetic subject’s reflections on sustaining such growth in the second stanza (Example 28).

Example 28: “A Poison Tree,” mm. 14-22
Fugal entrances at different rhythmic levels: red is quarter note, blue is half note, green is eighth note.

The three themes, each uniquely operating on a different subdivision of the beat, receive an interwoven stretto treatment in which they overlap in multiple voices, creating constant rhythmic displacements that obscure the sense of meter. Before the quarter note theme (in red), derived from the setting of the earlier "I told it not," has a chance to finish in measure 14, a new iteration of the same theme begins in a different voice now on the beat like two alternate stems shooting from the same root. The same twisted overlap occurs between the half note "grow" theme (in blue) that starts on the downbeat in measure 15 in the voice and again on the second beat of measure 16 in the piano, as well as the eighth note "fear" theme (in green) that starts on the downbeat in measure 17 in the voice and again on the second beat of measure 18 in the piano.

For the last two lines of this stanza, Britten melodically inverts all these themes in the same manner as the inversion of the second couplet on the first page, creating even more contrapuntal variety and subtly shifting the listener's directional awareness to the stanza's next couplet. The intricate complex created by these three themes constantly sliding over each other at different rhythmic levels gives the music the sense of a dynamic life force with differently moving limbs: both singer and piano are active, echoing parts of this musical body. Britten's setting brings the poem's retrospective gaze into the present moment, revealing a larger contrapuntal "growth" process that undergirds Blake's successive couplets.

Britten further emphasizes the hidden tonal attitude of Blake's poem through manic repetitions of certain phrases and a dynamic/rhythmic pattern in the second and third stanzas that hints at an approaching climax before once again receding into the shadows.

Example 29: "A Poison Tree," mm. 22-27
Contrasting settings of "smiles" and "wiles" that both manically repeat their endings.

Example 30: "A Poison Tree," mm. 28-29 and 36-39
Two instances of the ghostly line "My wrath did grow" hanging between stanzas.

For instance, the melismatic repetition of “with smiles” that curves like a smile in measure 24 and the contrasting syllabic, agitated repetition of “with soft deceitful wiles” in measure 27 highlight the eerie, calculated, and obsessive nature of the rhyme (Example 29). The same echoing of rhyme manifests in the repetition of the third stanza’s “an apple bright” and “he knew that it was mine,” both of which also highlight the forceful saturation of the “i” sound at the end of each line in this stanza.

The constant, parenthetical appearance of the “My wrath did grow” motif from the first stanza in the vocal part disrupts the expected sequential flow of the lines like a ghost that haunts the poem in the white space between each stanza (Example 30). The dynamic irony of this motif is that on the word “grow” in both measures 29 and 39 following the second and third stanzas, Britten dramatically scales the dynamic back to *piano* after a crescendo, linking the insidious process of growth described in the text to the painfully slow actualization of that growth in the music. Rhythmically, the piano part also ironically accelerates around this motif (the first time with eighths and the second time more extremely with sextuplets) but immediately returns to longer rhythmic values at the start of the following stanza, creating the effect of someone pulling a slingshot without releasing it. As the subject’s wrath grows in the restrained, festering quality of the fugue, these significant swells at the end of the stanzas disturbingly warn of an impending climactic consequence.

Example 31: "A Poison Tree," mm. 40-46
The wrathful climax in mm. 46 is approached by a brooding statement of the 3rd/4th lines' melodic phrase in bass octaves.

The setting of the fourth stanza is an apotheosis of the fugue's poisonous energy, acting as the ultimate release of the growing contrapuntal tension (Example 31). From measures 40-45, Britten transforms the entire vocal melody from the third line of the poem into a rhythmically augmented bass line, which moves ominously in low octaves under an extremely disjunct melody that chromatically pulls at the seams of the couplet "And into my garden stole / When the night had veil'd the pole." The wide, grating intervals formed between these musical lines, in addition to the ongoing crazed stretto in the piano's other voices, lead to an inevitable dynamic climax in measure 46 in the proclamatory, homorhythmic style of the first stanza. Unnervingly, Britten exchanges the minor chords in the first stanza for major chords, creating a Schubertian

tonal juxtaposition between the lyric subject's "glad" emotion and the dead foe "outstretch'd beneath the tree."[54] The stark repetition of E-flat in the bass of these measures confirms the resolution of the tonal conflict that left the first stanza "open" on the dominant B-flat; the introductory evil has run its course through the intervening poetic lines and found victims in both the lyric subject and their posited enemy. This darkness then quietly exits the body of the poem in the final measures with the return of the chromatic, atonal triplets from the opening, now however linked to the hanging, deadly resolution of the E-flat bass. The fugal physics of Britten's song perceptually enact the progressive growth of the unnerving, twisted, mysterious "poison tree" that permeates the semantic-sonic-visual continuum of Blake's original text.[55]

As a final note, intertextually comparing Britten's use of imitative counterpoint here with Copland's in "When they come back" illuminates the way a common musical process can engender widely different semantic implications. In the former, counterpoint locks the two parts together at the root of the sinister tree, whereas in the latter, counterpoint attends to a game of shadowy, ornamental tag between piano and voice.

Proverbs: Intertextual Energy

Surrounding "A Poison Tree" in Britten's cycle are two "proverbs" that both musically and thematically extend the meaning of the song beyond its prescribed formal outline, highlighting its associative resonance with selected fragments from other works by Blake. Both Proverbs III and IV reference *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a larger work of prophetic,

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[54] The musical and thematic connection to Franz Schubert's "Der Lindenbaum," in which Schubert plays with the poem's perception of death by altering the minor/major tonal lighting of the linden tree, is uncanny.

[55] "Rather than merely communicating the poetic text, his music expresses an extrinsic 'attitude' or 'point of view' about the poem's subject matter. Taken further, this notion suggests that, similar to the subtle nuances in language used by a speaker or writer to express an implied meaning in a discourse, the composer is able to lead the listener through his setting of a text by musical means. Put another way, Britten affects a listener's understanding of the text through his musical discourse." Vicki P. Stroeher, "'Without Any Tune': The Role of the Discursive Shift in Britten's Interpretation of Poetry."

poetic prose that navigates the interconnected dualities of passivity/action, Reason/Energy, Good/Evil, and Heaven/Hell. Taken from a section in that work titled "Proverbs of Hell," these neighboring, provocative aphorisms are free-floating musical and perceptive "Energy" that hovers around the metered incantations of the songs. In his recent analysis of the cycle Gordon Cameron Sly has argued that all the proverbs collectively "enact the central argument of Britten's arrangement of Blake's poems," a notion I problematize below by illustrating how both the text and music of the proverbs disorient rather than clarify an overarching narrative interpretation.[56] The proverbs are more like threads in the larger "web" of the cycle, "show[ing] that texts are interlinked in multiple directions."[57] Though unified in their recitative-like musical texture, the proverbs serve a markedly transitional, liminal function in the work, rather than a representative, conclusive one, as they intertextually foreshadow and reflect on the work's progress.

Proverb III, preceding "A Poison Tree," reads: "The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship." Sonically, Blake establishes a continuum between the "e" sounds in "nest," "web," and "friend" as well as a continuum between the "r" sounds in "bird," "spider," and "friend," both suggesting the potential semantic likeness of the words in each analogy. The analogic flow of the proverb is clear enough, but what's truly untethered and "Energetic" about it is the ambiguous line of reasoning by which Blake makes these analogies. "Nests" and "webs" are natural homes for their respective creatures, but they are also painstakingly crafted by those same creatures: is "friendship" – a decidedly abstracter concept that "A Poison Tree" interrogates – then a place of trusted refuge, or a carefully constructed artifice?

[56] Sly, Gordon Cameron. 2023. "Songs and Proverbs of William Blake." In *Britten's Donne, Hardy and Blake Songs*. Vol. 15. United Kingdom: Boydell & Brewer, Incorporated.
[57] Klein, Michael. *Intertextuality in Western Art Music*. Indiana University Press, 2015.

Example 32: "Proverb III"
An unstable, rising [0127] tetrachord leads to the final word of the proverb, "friendship," and transmutes into a descending [0129] tetrachord leading to "A Poison Tree."

Britten's recitative setting of this proverb provides no clear answer to the riddle and maintains the propulsive, yet indefinite energy of the text (Example 32). As the piano rises ametrically and monophonically through repetitions of an unstable [C-Db-B-F#] tetrachord, the singer moves with an independent tempo and melodic profile, each part forming fleeting rhythmic and tonal relationships with the other. The rising contours gesture towards the final analogy about "man:" as the singer reaches this word on the pitch B, the piano part echoes the

pitch high above and suddenly turns to a long A, breaking from the previous tetrachord pattern and the regular quarter note flow. The rest in the singer's line is a perceptual response to this rupture before stepping down a half step on "friendship" to complete the final analogy on B-flat, breaking from the established pattern of rising whole steps. This charged word prompts a distinct shift in the musical environment – the chain of analogies is now syntactically complete, but the question of its meaning remains as the piano part coalesces into a new descending [A-G#-Bb-F] tetrachord that harmonically intimates the tonal dominant of "A Poison Tree" and its discussion of the tenuous line between friend and foe. Furthermore, the piano part's dramatic, pedaled descent to the lowest note on the instrument seamlessly bridges the end of the proverb to the murky beginning of the song. The notion of what "friendship" is as a concept musically hangs at the edge of a poem whose first line engages that very concept and takes it in a new direction: "I was angry with my friend." The proverb and song exist in counterpoint to each other, each highlighting the other's potential semantic implications.

Example 33: "Proverb IV"
Distinct rising and falling tetrachords mirror the contrasting actions of the text.

Proverb IV, following “A Poison Tree,” reads: “Think in the morning, Act in the noon, Eat in the evening, Sleep in the night.” Again, Blake sonically connects the syntax of the proverb through the “n” sound that runs through “morning,” “noon,” “evening,” and “night,” collectively suggesting the temporal outline of a single day. The semantic energy here lies in the ambiguous difference between the discrete and the continuous: on the one hand, the discrete actions – “Think,” “Act,” “Eat,” and “Sleep” – occur in particular stretches of time, but on the other, the continuous passage of time between these temporal markers suggests a collective cyclical process between the actions. In the context of “A Poison Tree,” a song that explicitly references both “night” and “morning” as settings in its fugal drama, this proverb takes on the tone of an afterthought or addendum, as if some invisible observer were watching the lyric subject continue on with daily life after the unnerving end of the poem.

Britten’s setting of this proverb emphasizes its juxtaposition between the discrete and the continuous, using the full chromatic aggregate to invoke a distinctly transitional musical and semantic space (Example 33). The overall texture is similar to that of Proverb III, where the piano moves in unmetered quarter notes beneath the singer’s free-floating recitative. However, the tonal variety of tetrachords and the frequency of their directional changes is much greater, creating a shape that groups the first two actions and the last two actions in a cause-and-effect manner. “Think in the morning” sounds above a rising [G-Eb-Fb-D] tetrachord, while “Act in the noon” answers above a falling [Db-C-F#-B] tetrachord; “Eat in the evening” sounds above a rising [A-Bb-G#-F] tetrachord, while “Sleep in the night” answers above a falling [G-D-Eb-Fb] tetrachord. Each action and time receives a particular color through the unique combination of tetrachord and direction, while the repetition of the rising/falling pattern and the presence of the same tetrachord in the first and fourth phrases creates a cyclical continuity between the actions.

In the process of searching for the next site of confirmable tonal action, the music explores the entire chromatic aggregate in these tetrachords as a kind of open, harmonically associative universe in which Blake's ephemeral, charged proverb exists. When the singer arrives on the final D-sharp at the end of the proverb on "night," the previous song's enharmonic E-flat tonal center and "night" setting echo while the following song's third-related B tonal center and "night" setting are both in sight.

Saree Makdisi has identified the way Blake's works exemplify the idea of a "decentralized text" that celebrates the "unstable, ever-varying relations among and between different elements," inviting an interpretive openness that ornamentally notices rather than prescribes meaning.[58] Britten's setting of the proverbs in the cycle furthers this notion: the proverbs exist in the liminal, but intensely energetic harmonic region between the poems/songs, extending their semantic "Possibility" into a wider intertextual sphere. The proverbs encourage a reading of the cycle as a text in which the meanings generated by the songs perceptually emerge from and unravel into an ethereal, transitory space.

Dynamic Symmetry

Following Proverb IV, "The Tyger" begins as an utterly different textural world compared to "A Poison Tree:" fleet, crisp, muted figuration in the piano part sounds like the rumblings of the propulsive musical energy in Blake's poem. Within this mechanized timbre, Britten associates the tiger's "fearful symmetry" with tonal and rhythmic patterns that act symmetrically and yet still maintain the unresolved ambiguity of the creature's presence. Like the developmental fugue of "A Poison Tree," musical symmetry emerges as an unfolding

[58] Makdisi, Saree. *Reading William Blake*. Cambridge University Press, 2015. 70.

dynamic that informs the way the poem evolves rather than as a symbolic representation that discretely expresses the concept.

Example 34: "The Tyger," mm. 1-6. 13-17, 37-40, and 70-72
Gradually building the symmetrical diminished 7th chord.

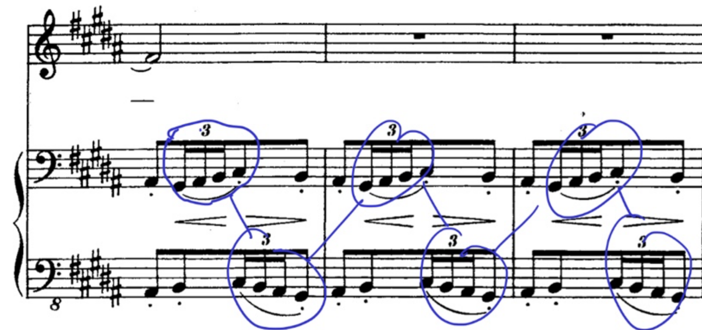
As an example, consider how Britten "frame[s]" the diminished 7th chord, a symmetrical pitch collection that divides the octave neatly into minor thirds, as a source of additive dynamic intensity and as a complication of tonal clarity. Each new member of the chord spelled F#-A-C-Eb appears gradually as the top note of the piano's accented, rolled chords that provide moments of framed vertical harmony in the otherwise running texture of unisons between the two hands (Example 34). These accented pitches in the piano part transfer to the vocal part, or vice versa, building together in dynamic intensity with each new stanza as the poem's questioning of the tiger's presence becomes ever more insistent. In measure 3, the F-sharp transfers in measure 4 to the singer's syncopated F-sharp that unexpectedly and energetically places the strong syllable of the word "tiger" on an offbeat.

As the setting of the first stanza continues, Britten introduces a previously unheard A natural into the piano part in measure 15, which catches up to the voice on the word "eye" in measure 17 while the piano's roll confirms this new pitch, unsettling the tonal gravity of the previous A-sharp resolving to B. The next series of rolls drops back to the original F-sharp to close the stanza in measure 23-24.

In the second stanza, both parts visit the F-sharp and A again in a more accelerated manner in measures 29 and 33 but continue past these pitches to further outline C natural. The voice first articulates a C natural on "aspire" in measure 36 and again in measure 39 on the rhyming "fire," which then prompts the piano's new set of rolled chords with C-natural as the top pitch. Once again, Britten's interpolation of this new pitch not only builds the symmetry of the minor 3rd relationship, but simultaneously unsettles the C-sharp that dominated the texture until this point and allows the contour of the poem's questions to expand. Halfway through the third stanza, the music recedes into the distance as the pitch drops to A again in measure 45 and

F-sharp again in measures 48-49. Leading to the end of the fourth stanza, Britten invokes the song's dynamic climax as the music accelerates through each of the previous pitch expanses (mm. 54, 55, 64/66) and lands on the final member of the diminished 7th chord, E-flat, in measure 70 on the word "clasp."

By gradually unveiling this chord and positioning each of its members to alter the tonal landscape and effect the increasing urgency of the text, Britten realizes Blake's "fearful symmetry" as a musical process that underpins the poem's perceptual progress over time. What makes this sensation of a present, yet unresolved symmetry musically possible is the way the outlined chord functions in an octatonic context – a closer look at the vocal line's pitches in this climactic section reveals an octatonic collection [D-D#-E#-F#-G#-A-B-C], composed of two interlocking diminished seventh chords that symmetrically divide the octave without framing a unique pitch center. Like the unexplainable symmetry of the poem's tiger, the symmetry of this octatonic pitch collection functions as an active source of mysterious ambiguity and perceptual transformation.



Example 35: "The Tyger," mm. 49-51
Rhythmic symmetry between the hands.

Another prominent source of active, enigmatic symmetry emerges in the rhythmic counterpoint between the two hands of the piano part. The mirrored, incessant eighth note pulse

shared by the hands in unison drives the energy of the song forward like cooperative gears in a machine that the poem's subject is observing at work. The sixteenth triplets that Britten weaves into the fabric of these eighths provide moments of fleet imitation between the hands, further creating the sense that they are receptive mirror images. Though the direction and frequency of these imitations vary, two particularly lively instances occur between measures 49-51 and measure 68, where the hands are responding to each other repeatedly in the second and third eighths of the bars (Example 35). The symmetrical mechanics of these rhythmic interactions invites us to hear the piano part as a kind of unstoppable, perpetual creative force that works quickly and resists explanation.

Example 36: "The Tyger," mm. 81-90
Opposite pitches frame each line, highlighting the symmetrical tension of the lines' questions about creation.

The one stanza where Britten alters the affect of the piano part is in the fifth, where, after the intense climax at the end of the fourth stanza, the rhythmic machine breaks down as the song pauses in an aside to reflect on the unknown cosmic source of the tiger's existence.[59] The explicit

[59] From my poem, "The Blackbird":

con Ped. marking over the active figuration blurs the independent activity of the two hands, creating broader downward and upward gestural sweeps that focus the listener's attention on the overarching linguistic and musical symmetry of the rhyming lines. These resonant sweeps, like the opening and closing gestures in "A Poison Tree," create tonal confusion using the chromatic aggregate before landing on a defined pitch ground marked with a pedal lift. The clarity of each end rhyme contains the volatile, chromatic uncertainty of the gesture that precedes it, the music upsetting the neatness of the rhymes by positing the unsettled energy that lurks within them. For example, "spheres" in measure 77 forms a perceptible musical symmetry with "tears" in measure 81 because of the similarity in their falling gestures; however, a dynamic tension still exists within that symmetry because of the difference in the pitch change from B-flat to C-flat. Likewise, the following upward gestures leading to the questions on "see" and "thee" syntactically rhyme but also hold the present linguistic rhyme in a semantic ambiguity through the tonal transformation from B-flat to B natural (Example 36).

Example 37: "The Tyger," mm. 103-107
The formally asymmetrical setting of "Dare" highlights the marked impact of that word compared to "Could" in the first stanza.

The stars lock
You into an experiment
Where each one is something
The others are not –
[…]

The final stanza returns to the opening rhythmic mechanics and melody, nearly creating a formal symmetrical rhyme with the first stanza except for Britten's unique setting of the word "Dare" as an unexpected descending melisma above a chord that takes up 4 beats, the longest duration in the song (Example 37). Blake's conspicuous substitution of "Dare" for "Could" in this final stanza thus attains the significance of a final, intensified warning against the possibility of unpacking the origin of the tiger. After the poem has ended, the imitative rhythmic activity recedes into the ethereal distance of a quadruple *piano* in measure 119, leaving the song's dynamically symmetrical properties suspended in the air. We might recall the dynamism of Blake's original plate, where the final electrified "y"s of "symmetry" charge the word with a musical energy that hangs in the liminal space between the text and the illustration.

"A Poison Tree" and "The Tyger" are two highly contrasting settings from the *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* that showcase Britten's remarkable literary sensitivity to each poem's unique phrasing and imaging. These two iconic symbols in Blake's oeuvre come to startling life in the slow, twisted motion of fugal passages and the fleet, rumbling motion of a harmonic and rhythmic symmetry, the music providing an aural interpretation that compellingly visualizes the activity of each poem. Furthermore, Britten's setting of Blake's proverbs as these sparse, unraveling canvases that intertextually link such varied song settings during the course of the cycle disrupts the notion of the isolated, complete poetic text by emphasizing the uncertain potential of the creative blank between the end of one poem and the beginning of the next.

Chapter 4: The Cycling of Song III – Benjamin T. Martin/Alexandre Tchaykov's *I See and Unsee: Five Memory Songs*

And now you've come to that part
Where the heart leaps
From metaphor and begins
To beat on its own accord.

– Alexandre Tchaykov

Inception

As a capstone to the interdisciplinary dialogue this study has opened, I now turn to a contemporary work that directly involves me as an author, collaborator, and performer: a new song cycle for piano and medium voice that sets some of my own poems to music by Benjamin T. Martin. Below, I offer a mixture of critical remarks about the work's final shape and personal insights about the collaborative creative process between Benjamin and me. In the spirit of the previous chapters' analytical framework, each close reading of a song begins by considering the particular features of its poem as the foundation on which the musical setting interprets and builds. What excites me most about seeing the synergy between the art forms come to life is the ways in which the music rhetorically follows and/or strays from the implications of the poems, thus creating the space to unlock new understanding and awareness of their language.

The first stage of the process involved selecting the poems that would form the cycle. After meeting Benjamin at the New Music on the Point festival in June 2024 and premiering his remarkable work for piano 4-hands, *Excise*, I asked if he would like to work on a set of songs and received an enthusiastic yes. In fact, I found out that writing for voice and setting text lies at the center of his compositional practice, making him an ideal collaborator for this project. I then sent Benjamin a file with an unpublished collection of poems titled *Con Moto* and the

instructions to find what speaks to him: rather than impose a structure, I wanted to see what aspects of the poetry would naturally interest him on first reading.

The title of my collection is an Italian descriptor of tempo: literally, "with motion," indicating to a musical performer that the flow of the following piece should not drag. As a pianist who has spent countless hours trying to bring inscribed musical ideas to life, I continue to be amazed at the sensation of physically and intellectually moving in relation to a score. Needless to say, the idea of a poem as being ephemerally in motion, based in an evolving linguistic musicality, has fascinated me since 2017 when I had just assembled the collection:

> Ultimately, I think this collection is more concerned with poetry as a kind of active listening rather than a kind of speaking; instead of trying to pinpoint an omnipresent "speaker" or "voice" in these poems, readers should try to telescope their way through them, zooming in or out of the scene as the musical picture develops.[60]

The collection opens with a series of twenty-four "preludes" and closes with a series of eight "sonatas" (sonnets in disguise), both experiments in trying to imagine what shape these musical forms might take in verse. In between these pillars are poems of all shapes, sizes, and themes, unified in their musical propensity and intensity. After a few calls, during which I gave Benjamin insights about a few of the poems he selected from this middle section while he offered ideas about potential tempos, sequencing, and textures, we mutually settled on five poems that would be set.

Form and Commentary

Benjamin's conceptual map of the work's five movements, completed before he started any actual composition, is a revealing document that showcases a spectrum of free-floating artistic responses to the poems, including colorful illustrations, notated musical gestures, and evocative kinetic language. It's as if the essence of each poem has been refracted into three parts,

[60] From my "Chapbook Reflections" in 2017 when I first reflected on the organization of the collection.

each level of the map providing a different manifestation of Benjamin's interpretation. Furthermore, the design indicates that the songs exist like interconnected elements in an ecosystem:

Figure 6: Conceptual Map of *I See and Unsee: Five Memory Songs*

The work takes on a unique cyclical shape. The first movement surveys the compositional world from afar as through a telescope and hints at its composite elements, while each remaining movement explores one of those elements in greater detail, gradually accumulating a full picture of the environment's contour. Along the way, subtle motivic links in each movement foreshadow and recall other movements, creating an intertextual permeability. The work flows ecologically, not teleologically; the progression of the movements is a relational process of discovery rather than a linear narrative from beginning to end.

In the space below, I offer comments on the language of each poem in isolation, the musical language of each movement in the cycle, and the resultant dialogue that emerges between the two.

Going Back

What is lost
Seems scattered in detail
I only now begin to feel –
This field layers light
Like sun fabrics, threads
In which I see
And unsee. I sew
Memory on a web
And watch it fly.

"Going Back" navigates the tenuous divide between a past event and the present reconstruction of that event. The past has already happened, but it is simultaneously still always happening in the way we interpret its patterns and proceed. The opening line is a sharp affirmation of the cold, hard fact of loss, but as soon as the enjambment of the second line arrives on "seems," the poem unfolds and softens into a kind of reverie in which the patterning of the language reflects the process of trying to make the fragments of the past cohere. "Detail" and "feel" maintain a connection through an ending slant rhyme, but then "field" in the following line combines the sounds of the words to suddenly reveal a new expanse. "Light" echoes "I" at opposite ends of their respective lines and transforms into "Like" at the beginning of the next. Seeing is counterbalanced by unseeing and subtly revised by sewing. The poem is like a spider web: a meticulously charted world blowing by in the breeze.

The musical setting is a sparse, yet intricate opening to the cycle that closely follows the poem's tonal shifts, both parts subtly influencing each other's lines in a "spacious harmonic *field*." Initially, Benjamin had planned to include explicit motivic references to the other movements in this one, but pivoted to a diaphanous, skeletal soundscape that still provides a

sense of overview and matches the poem's slimness well. The transparency of the texture enables one to perceive the slightest changes and interactions. Notice in measures 3-5, for instance, how the vocal line moving from F-sharp to G on "seems" is augmented in the right hand of the piano part a measure later and how the tenuto D on the downbeat of measure 4, the highpoint in the phrase, is echoed by the piano at the start of a new line two octaves higher on the second beat of measure 5 (Example 38). On the word "feel," which is also a D and the longest rhythmic value thus far in the vocal part, the harmonic progression become richer and deeper with 5-6 voices sounding in the piano part's chords (Example 39). All this time, the bass line is gradually descending from its starting C4, eventually leading to the climax of the movement in measure 19 as a C2 in the bass sounds with the vocal line's high E on the "mem" of "memory" (Example 40). In the poem itself, the phrase "I sew / Memory on a web" is the focal point to which the previous lines rhythmically and sonically lead. The music fittingly seems to unfurl, suggesting new "layers [of] light" to consider as the poem's inquiry about the past becomes more searching and indefinite.

Example 38: "Going Back," mm. 1-5
Blue markings illustrate the "scattered" pitches between the parts.

Example 39: "Going Back," mm. 6-11
Blue circle shows the new harmonic and registral expanse.

Example 40: "Going Back," mm. 17-20
Blue circle highlights the climax of the movement.

Lines

After so many miles of babbling green
Who could have guessed – firs, in near perfect rows,
Uneven enough for notice, and untouched!
It was decided: here I would stop
To watch them steer the hours.

Perhaps light, or the impact of a jay –
Something would spool the xylem that quick,
Before you knew what was being directed,
And then there's only the splendor
Of gathering. Selecting a row,
You stick a hand in rootage or declare
Futility; you enter or observe
A shadow's width on a whim,
The faint, lovely hum of a moment.

This sonnet moves with a keen vitality through its scene, turning the perspective from macroscopic to microscopic at the stanza break. The trees "steer the hours" in that they are this larger canvas of temporal potential on which the details of "light," "jay," and "xylem" interact. The title draws a connection between the image of tree rows in a forest and the literal rows of the poem's lines, which musically "steer" the reading experience and invite curiosity about their dimensions. In either case, the "splendor / Of gathering" is a celebration of locating meaning – an unending dialogue between natural forces beyond human control and our conscious/unconscious existence within those forces.

The musical setting is generally bubbling and propulsive, creating the sense that we are always on the edge of some new revelation as the song progresses. Within the framework of the jaunty tempo, Benjamin throws perceptive musical curveballs that highlight the impact of certain words, images, and sounds in the poem. For example, consider how the word "firs" is approached via an unexpected, wind-swept hemiola that momentarily disrupts the piano's galloping rhythm, enlivening the em-dash preceding this word in the poem (Example 41). This hemiola figure becomes a consistent gesture throughout the song, reorienting the metrical and harmonic perspective as the observer's mind wanders in the landscape. In another example, the bristling, syncopated, syllabic texture during "uneven enough for notice" turns the corner into a wondrous, legato melisma on "untouched!", suddenly lifted by rich, sustained harmonies in a new key area (Example 42). The decision to repeat the final line of the first stanza emphasizes the expansive sound and semantic potential of the word "steer," which is significantly elongated in the repetition and navigates a higher melodic contour (Example 43).

Formally, the long movement divides into four distinct sections, coinciding with the syntactic structure of the poem's four sentences. The first section acts as an energetic entryway into the natural landscape; the second, severed from the first by a fermata, is a wondrous change of key that transforms the piano's initially spiky rhythm into long, sweeping legato lines. The third, separated from the second by a piano interlude that functions as a kind of stanza break, is an exciting crescendo that "gathers" energy towards the bright climax on "splendor of gathering." The fourth reads as a musical "shadow" of the previous three, featuring previously heard motives hovering in a slower tempo that creates a sense of mystery as the poem invokes the uncertain aftermath of the previous observational excitement. The piano postlude restores the former rhythmic drive but quickly evaporates into a *pianississimo*, quietly hinting that there is still more "gathering" to be done.

Example 41: "Lines," mm. 11-19
The disruptive hemiola functions like the poem's punctuated em-dash before "firs."

Example 42: "Lines," mm. 32-37
On the "un" of "untouched," the harmony modulates to an F-sharp center and becomes suddenly sustained.

Example 43: "Lines," mm. 60-74
The glorious, winding melisma on the second iteration of "steer."

Graven Images

The entire day was spent
Somewhat oddly in the company of graves,
Their stones like jagged sea relics
Projecting into dark purple currents,
Quite impermeable to sound.

At the sight or lack of light, they rise
Without an invocation spell,
Fine-featured to the point of loss,
Sheer abandoned statuettes.

You can see where edges and ears
Were chiseled, chipped off in spite
By careful instruments of life;
Where heads now soaked in vegetative stun
Leapt from the mausoleum glass
And became nameless as elements
Repositioned in skeletal silence.

This poem casts an air of stillness and enigma around a cemetery: the dead keep their many secrets, while the living attempt to memorialize them in idolized, representative statues and tombs. Graves are a kind of final artwork standing in for life, but even they are not permanent monuments, just as all created art is subject to weathering and ambiguity. Time is the ultimate artist here, erasing particularity – "edges," "ears," "heads" – and dissolving each life into elastic "elements" and "silence."

In the musical setting the voice is a wandering living soul in counterpoint with a choir of the dead in the piano. The opening delicate, half-stepping gesture in the piano mirrors that of "Going Back," but the voice then takes that same half step and descends into a stark, dark recitative (Example 44). The piano's "distant, ghostly hymn" enters in measure 7 and alternates with the vocal line, restarting two more times in measures 9 and 11 before the full scope of the line emerges and seems to overflow. In measure 17 during the break between the first and second stanzas, a common tone modulation changes the harmonic direction from sharps to flats, perhaps aligning with a physical change in the wanderer's path (Example 45). The final stanza is split

into two distinct musical textures: one from measure 34 to 41 where the suddenly active, conflicting rhythms in the piano create an eerie kind of erosion by the "careful instruments of life," and another from measure 42 to the end where the vocal line's chant-like intonation on an F-sharp at a whispery *pppp* dynamic invokes the bare, subliminal "skeletal silence" that hangs over the scene (Example 46).

Example 44: "Graven Images," mm. 1-8
The opening motif from the first movement gives way to a chilly vocal recitative and is echoed by the graveyard choir in measure 7.

Example 45: "Graven Images," mm. 13-20
The circled enharmonic chords indicate the change of tonal direction from sharps to flats, mirroring the change from the first to the second stanza.

Example 46: “Graven Images,” mm. 37-44
The artisanal rhythmic busyness in measures 37-39 contrasts with the hushed, chanted “skeletal silence” starting in measure 42.

Fragment

I wondered how long
A bird could stay
Enclosed in airy speech
And diminished day.

As I go through life, I find myself collecting and storing resonant images that eventually find their way into future poems. “Fragment” is a rare example of a poem that I wrote in the moment, right as I was observing from an upstairs window this bird perched on a basketball hoop and slowly fading from view as the sun was setting. I didn’t want to capture or cage the moment, but rather coexist alongside it, swirling like the air and dwindling like the light. Writing

the poem felt like an act of reaching out, the dynamics of the language somehow touching and intertwining with the dynamics of the surrounding scene.

This movement opens with an ethereal, rhythmically free piano solo in which pieces of chromatic, bird-like figuration (among them trills, grace notes, and repeated notes) are scattered between the hands in the upper registers of the instrument. The first measure echoes measure 19 in “Lines” but goes down a new luminous, cadenza-like trail, similar to the third movement’s dark revision of the first (Example 47). One can almost make out a bird suspended in these figures, but its shape is fleeting and hazy. The singer enters in a state of awe, the slow melodic lines gradually fragmenting the text and floating amidst the piano’s continual flight (Example 48). Benjamin’s text setting here has a profound effect on the way a reader experiences the poem’s enjambments: when read on the page, one might breeze through the syntactic breaks between the lines in search of the end, but carving music into the poem’s white spaces invigorates the sonic and semantic resonance of each individual line. Following the last word is a cyclical wink from the piano, echoing the last pitch in the vocal part three octaves higher, which is also precisely where the song began (Example 49).

Example 47: "Fragment," mm. 1-5
The quote from the second movement morphs into the bird-like cadenza.

Example 48: "Fragment," mm. 11-19
The vocal line enters intermittently, as if gradually observing and processing.

Example 49: "Fragment," mm. 25-28
The piano part winks at the vocal line to close the movement.

This Spring

We watch each other
Like two accustomed to what
The season entails – bloom
Of identity, as it slips,
Pistol to pistil.

These fragmentary hours
Have chilled the eye
And made me wish to speak
What I can never know,
To roll and strum this breath –

Lifelike, in a cell, or gusted
Round the eve, we sing
In fleeting counterpoint.

If winter distils and condenses, spring pluralizes and proliferates. The plural "we" in this poem is prolific, potentially referring to two people in the world of the poem, two different versions of the "I," or even the collective of poet and reader. "Identity" – the performance of oneself – becomes less categorical and more organically continuous as desire is refracted into a liminal space between "pistol" and "pistil," "eye" and "I," "cell" and "eve." The poem voices a poetics of counterpoint: to "roll," "strum," and "sing" is to exist kinetically, to move in a constant relation rather than as a contained self.

The musical setting divides the poem into its three stanzas, the first two introducing a new textural motion in the form of rapid, frolicking arpeggiation, and the last returning to the sparse openness of the first movement. These arpeggiated figures are like the prolific extensions of the individual self into the environment, the contrast between many and one emphasized by the contrast between the subtly shifting voices in the piano and the marked first vocal entrance, which occurs in measure 7 at a slower tempo than the opening and without the support of the arpeggiations (Example 50). Measure 9 features a retrospective rhythmic quotation from the fourth movement, which then leads into the return of the shimmering arpeggios, this time in dialogue with the singular voice. A poignant moment of text setting occurs in measure 21, where the sonic proximity of the words "pistol" and "pistil" comes to life in a melodic palindrome featuring the nearly imperceptible distance of a half step (Example 51). In measure 30, the lyre-like piano accelerates its strumming from 5-6 notes per beat to 8 notes per beat, intensifying the polyvocal stream as the voice articulates the desire to "roll and strum this breath" en route to the movement's climax in measure 35. The return of material from the first movement in measure 36 to close the cycle takes us out of the spring's earthiness and back into the cosmic field, zooming out in one final glance at the elemental world the cycle has traversed (Example 52). The piano echoes the B-C-sharp-D-sharp melodic contour of the vocal part from measure 32-34 in augmented whole notes, creating the sense that the human "breath" is expanding into distant, celestial space.

Example 50: "This Spring," mm. 3-12
The pluralized (piano) and singular (voice) versions of the subject are introduced separately before existing simultaneously in measure 10.

Example 51: “This Spring” mm. 19-22
The palindromic setting of “Pistol to pistil.” Blue circles indicate the half steps.

Example 52: “This Spring,” mm. 33-39
Transitioning from an earthly to a cosmic “breath.” Blue circles show the melodic pitch linkage between the two parts.

Finally, a note on the overarching title of the cycle, which comes from the end of a long chain of enjambments in the first poem, "Going Back," and was decided on after all the songs had been composed. The past is tricky and fragile. Depending on how the light hits our minds each day, we comprehend it differently: certain details are called to our attention at the expense of others, in search of what will make life cohere in the present. What seemed (im)possible long ago may no longer be so; what seemed like adequate justification for an action may no longer suffice; what seemed like the complete picture may just be a corner piece of the puzzle. Memory is the mystery of how we continually balance what we see/unsee and proceed. Each song in this cycle is a different manifestation of this ongoing question. From the obsessive litany of nature in "Lines," to the artistically elegant but flawed statues in "Graven Images," to the singular bird gone in the wink of an eye in "Fragment," to the positively gay joy and desire radiating in "This Spring," these poems are studies in what it means to remember and commemorate.

Although my comments above are by no means exhaustive, they serve to illustrate a compelling affinity between the work of a living poet and a living composer. They are made in immense gratitude for both the collaborative process of creating the cycle with Benjamin, and the collaborative process of learning and premiering the cycle at the piano with mezzo-soprano Carmen Edano. I look forward to the future of this special work, as well as future collaborations in this interdisciplinary vein.

Implications

It is my hope that this study has opened a deeper critical and creative discourse about the ways poetry functions musically and music functions poetically. Understanding *lyric* poems as linguistic musical performances that discover and unfold new meanings as they progress rather than merely as static texts which inherently hold "hidden" or ubiquitous meaning provides a

pathway towards a more perceptive and empathetic appreciation of each poem's unique expression. Likewise, observing how a musical setting engages with a poem's particular semantic, sonic, and visual dimensions enlivens the potential resonances between specific elements of musical and poetic syntax and gives listeners new ways of conceptualizing and describing the complex musical passage of time.

Although I have necessarily focused here on a specific subset of Anglo-American song settings, the implications of this interdisciplinary mirror on the way we practice, analyze, experience, and teach these art forms at large are extensive. For instance, what happens when we place the sparse linguistic constellations of poet William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" next to the pitch constellations of composer Anton Webern's Piano Variations? How might comparing different recitations of the same poem allow us to better understand different performances of the same piece of music? When poets John Keats or Gwendolyn Brooks turn a thought on its head in a sonnet's *volta*, are the development sections of sonatas by composers Florence Price or Franz Schubert somewhere nearby? How does unpacking queer hyperpop producer SOPHIE's timbral fragmentation of identity in "Faceshopping" enhance our viewing of poet John Ashbery's winding "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror?" Such intertextual comparisons not only allow us to observe compelling artistic parallels across media, but they also allow us to challenge and reshuffle established histories and narratives associated with each medium by drawing fresh lines of thought and perspective between seemingly disparate works. The creative, scholarly, and educational possibilities are endless if poets/readers and musicians/listeners realize and investigate the technical intricacies that both distinguish and bind their respective disciplines

Postlude: A Flower Opens Up

As a parting gesture, I offer one last poem of mine below, which recently spurred a wonderful new composition by my friend Jesús Leonardo Flores (b. 1992).

Movement

A flower opens up –
Petal symmetry, misconduct,
Misnomer, memory of
Film irises you only see
The color at distance
Blended with wind
Speed, microscopic
Pollens, moistures soon
Rain motions, reminder
Love is and is caught,
A tropism, a trope when
Reflected. It is not enough
To wink, to sigh and
Expire at the thought –

One of my favorites I have ever written, this poem is like a chain reaction: the external blooming of a flower sets a series of sequential, teeming thoughts into action. The poem is subtly changing course in every line, its shape continually altered as new patterns of linguistic sound and meaning join by association. I leave the reader to tease out the semantic, sonic, and visual patterns that catch their senses.

Jesús chose this poem from the same collection that gave rise to *I See and Unsee* and wrote a piece for solo piano called *Cempasúchitl* in response. This breathtaking word, which happens to capture many of the phonetic sounds of the poem's title, originates from the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs and means "twenty-flower" literally, or "flower of many petals." Today, we know the *cempasúchitl* as the Mexican marigold, which figures prominently in *Día de los Muertos* celebrations as an adornment that decorates altars of deceased loved ones and guides their spirits in the afterlife with its vibrant scent and color. Here is Jesús' rendition of the flower's touching, mystical origins in the foreword to the score:

In Mesoamerican folklore, Xóchitl and Huitzilin were two young Mexica children who would climb the volcano Popocatépetl every day, bringing with them a bouquet of flowers as an offering to Tōnatiuh (the sun deity of the daytime sky). As time passed, Xóchitl and Huitzilin fell in love and swore to be together for all eternity. However, war broke out, forcing Huitzilin to join the fight in which he would die. In desperation, Xóchitl climbed the mountain and asked Tōnatiuh to end her suffering. Tōnatiuh, moved by her devotion, let his rays fall on Xóchitl, turning her into a flower of sweet fragrance and intense yellow and orange petals — the cempasúchitl.

Xóchitl and Huitzilin later reunited in nature as Huitzilin, who took the form of a hummingbird, followed the aroma of the cempasúchitl, eventually perching on its leaves, allowing the beautiful bright petals to open. Many believe that as long as the cempasúchitl flower exists and hummingbirds pollinate the fields, the love of Huitzilin and Xóchitl will transcend time. In Mexican culture, the cempasúchitl has thus emerged as the flower that illuminates the journey for the spirits of the deceased during Día de los Muertos.

Carrying the magical, liminal properties of this flower, the piece acts as a kind of conduit between the living and the dead, the right hand above ground offering fragmented, free-floating melodic memories on the keyboard while the left stirs the bass strings with a host of particular extended techniques that evoke the deep unknown of the afterlife. During the piece's central climax, we can hear the ecstatic reunion between the metamorphosed Xóchitl and Huitzilin as the left hand joins the right on the keys in a frenzied acceleration. Then, memory becomes shrouded as the hands are once again split into their respective worlds and time is stretched. The *cempasúchitl*, in its florescent multiplicity, its fleeting, yet eternal energy, its commemorative ornamentation, and its transitory existence between worlds is a poignantly *lyric* entity that connects my musical words and Jesús' wordless music. Once again, the meaning lies in the motion. I leave the final word to Emily Dickinson:

This World is not conclusion.
A Species stands beyond –
Invisible, as Music –
But positive, as Sound – [61]

[61] "373." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition.*

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