

Poet to Poet

Series Editor: Ivy Schweitzer

A woman's voice floats along with flute and cello, singing the words of Dickinson's poems. If you attended the 2024 EDIS annual gathering in Amherst, you will recall the evening performance of "Emily Sings," an eleven-movement chamber work for soprano, flutes, cello, and piano performed by The Dickinson Ensemble. This group is the brainchild of Don Skoog, who directs and composes for it, as he told me, "music I couldn't seem to stop myself from writing." Don is also a writer, teacher, percussionist and multi-media artist who performs with the Chicago Arabic Music Ensemble and Raices Gitanas Flamenco Ensemble. He is the author of Batá Drumming; The Instruments, the Rhythms, and the People Who Play Them and Adventures in the RhythmVerse. Volume One: Sing, Dance, Drum, a poetry chapbook, published by CMP Press, as well as journal and magazine articles in English, Spanish, and Arabic. He brings these many skills to his co-chairing of the EDIS Arts Committee. Currently, the Ensemble is recording four compositions called Fascicles No.1-4, that include multiple poems in one piece or multiple musical treatments of a single poem. Don has also created new videos of various Dickinson Soundbaths to go along with them. In the works is an opera called "The War Between the Houses," scheduled for premiere in the summer of 2027.

When Words Become Birds: An Essay on Vision as Tone

By Don Skoog

I was shocked to realize that Dickinson died only seventy years before I was born – just one lifetime ago. We think of her historically, but when I was young, I could have met people who actually knew her. Just as I knew an old man who had sat in the lap of a Civil War veteran when he was a kid, I could have talked to people who remembered Dickinson's face and voice because they actually touched her. That's not history, that's a living continuum. I feel like it was just beyond my ability to reach out and touch her myself.

I've also been in her space. I've walked the same floorboards. I've seen the lock of her hair at Amherst College. She was real, and I just missed her. This connection brings her home to me. When I read her words, I want to bridge that small but uncrossable gap, and I think that my music could be such a bridge. Crazy, right? The melopoets don't write about things like this. They're too objective. But the creation, or conflation, of art is not objective, that is, if it's any good.

Since 1989, the term "melopoetics" has come to rename and redefine the field of Words and Music studies. The Greek word for song is *melos*, and poetics stands for itself. This neologism is not only a nifty turn of phrase, it also points out a fundamental aspect of Dickinson's poetry, and of my amalgamation of sounds and meanings needed to put it to music.

As a composer I often work with lyrics, a task that brings new levels of possibility to the writing of music. Words have their own meter. Consonants and vowels lie differently in the human voice and need to be taken into account both in time and tone. As the melopoetic journals I've accumulated attest, there is a lot to talk about, both in music theory and history. The challenges and practices inherent in composing for different languages, in different genres, for different voices, at different times in history, and in different places have engendered enough interest to guarantee grant funding and tenure for a few lucky academics for some time to come.

But none of that really reaches to the core of my practice as a composer. Academic scrutiny makes the discussion more objective, at least in theory, but my relationship with words and music is completely subjective, at least in its creative phase. Dickinson's poetry, as I've learned, is anything but objective.

I'd like to describe this subjective (and possibly incomprehensible) creative space that I inhabit when I try to forge a bond between her words and my notes.

In reading melopoetical journals I see "interdisciplinary" used a lot, and it's understandable why. They are two different art forms, right? I write music. I write poetry. But somehow when

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I'm working on the two together, an inexplicable alchemy manifests itself. My mind conflates them in a profound, existential synesthesia.

Where do words end and music begin? They're both sound, at least when spoken. Is that a clue? Do words resonate differently in the mind than in the ear? Do they change their nature when heard internally? Am I overthinking this? Clearly, words and music are two different things, yet they become one, but only when I'm holding both in my imagination at the same time. If I write words, that's one thing. If I write notes, that's another. Yet when the melodies of Dickinson's poetry blend with the poetry of my melodies, they become...something else.

As Dickinson wrote in a letter to Mrs. Holland, "my business is to sing." Clearly, the queen of the metaphor saw her words as songs. Her poems, in hymn tune meter, literally sing. My inner ear first buzzes, then hums in answer to the vibrations of her call. It sounds silly when I write it down, but I can't think of any other way to describe the sensation.

And there is also a chemistry at a deeper level. Music connects me to worlds within: memories of childhood, visions of my past futures, feelings that I thought I had buried resurface within my spirit, invoked more powerfully by music than even poetry can do. Yet poetry evokes images from my inner universe that expand its compass, and those images stay with me long after the poem fades.

These inroads into my spirit dig deeper than my neurological responses would explain. They open up two realms within me: what I call "the blank" – which I think of as [] – and the "High Country of the mind."

The [] is that place in my creative soul where the ideas that I'm looking for are hiding, in a white receding space, waiting for me to finally recognize them. They are there, yet they're not, until I can manifest them. They aren't until they are. This place is within me, so these ideas, or melodies, or images, are in what I think of as "the unknown me." This is disconcerting, to say the least. I get that they are the children of what I've read and heard and seen before. Yet the apprehension that they dwell within me, unrecognized, or worse, unmanifested, fills me with an awe, realizing that the inadequate, limited me I find so constraining could possibly be almost infinite. Understanding that the creations which flow from my mind have no limits (except those that I impose upon them) gives me creative vertigo. Imagination expands out from me (and out from you), extending in all directions infinitely. We're just too busy, most of the time, to notice.

The High Country opens up for me when something drives away my emails and deadlines, setting me free to wander where time has no meaning (momentarily, anyway). What can ignite this state? What lets me climb out of the trench of routine life to stroll freely on a hill where only original ideas wander like sheep on its slopes?

It is in the melopoetics that the [] and the High Country most easily open up for me.

While I'm hesitant to put my adolescent reminiscences into print anywhere near Dickinson's monumental metaphors, I think the juxtaposition might shed some light on the possibilities inherent in this melopoetical process.

Dickinson first:

Better—than Music!
For I—who heard it—
I was used—to the birds—before—
This—was different—"Twas translation—
Of all the tunes I knew—and more—

"Twasn't contained—like other stanza—
No one could play it—the second time—
But the Composer—perfect Mozart—
Perish with him—that keyless Rhyme!

Children—so—told how Brooks in Eden—
Bubbled a better—melody—
Quaintly infer—Eve's great surrender—
Urging the feet—that would—not—fly—

Children—matured—are wiser—mostly—
Eden—a legend—dimly told—
Eve—and the anguish—Grandame's story—
But—I was telling a tune—I heard—

Not such a strain—the Church—baptizes—
When the last Saint—goes up the Aisles—
Not such a stanza splits the silence—
When the Redemption strikes her Bells—

Let me not spill—its smallest cadence—
Humming—for promise—when alone—
Humming—until my faint Rehearsal—
Drop into tune—around the Throne—

(J503)

This poem is music as metaphor, a portal to a place on no map. What Dickinson heard transcends music. Shrinking her vision

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Photo from the website of The Contemporary Music Project:



I fought to keep myself awake
by staring at the numbers on
a test I knew I'd fail.

I smelled the onions grilling
on lilac breeze that said
burgers-and-fries for lunch there'd be
if only I could tough it out
until the bell was rung.

This Tune kept calling—playing out
to pick up sticks, to beat the head
to let equations eat my dust
and find a proof that's real
leaving theorems for the Greeks.

The singer called me to rise up
the guitarist bashed me with a hook
the drummer hammering fours to death
my heart burst out my shirt and
through the window to greet the sun.

I heard This Tune—some years ago
across the street in a Greasy Spoon
that sang to set me free and then
to flee an empty, fading school
for sunlight, lilacs, burgers-and-fries.

I heard This Tune—again today
rekindling a tamped out fire
to change a working man into
the boy who longed to play the drum
and stand beneath the lilac sun
eating burgers-and-fries to the groove.

to something understandable, like music, is a reduction in scope. I would love to know what she was hearing, but I never will, even though her goal was to guide us to it through the poem. It was her world, her sonic vision, that she could explain only by reducing its span to reveal her [] to us. Her words remind me of the Music of the Spheres, a sound so grand that it is beyond our ability to hear it. Dickinson is using the idea of music to make visible a world that only she can apprehend, until she shares it with us. By metaphorizing music with something greater, she's approaching the process from a different direction than I am. I metaphorize the words by bonding them to meanings that can only be understood through music. If words augment the music's meaning, then might music enrich the words' meaning, as well? Do they both alchemically transmute? If so, into what?

My poem is about music in memory, and about how it can transport my mind back to a place that is no more, except inside me. It still exists, but only I can go there (just as no one can hear Dickinson's cosmic strains) until I manifest it for you.

I heard This Tune—some years ago
across the street in a Greasy Spoon
drifting on the midmorn breeze
through an open, shadowed window
in math class on a warm spring day.

Semester's turn was almost done
just waiting for the bell

This poem sings for me. I'm back in that classroom, and I want to take you there with me to share a young boy's yearnings on a long-ago day. Through the poem, that day is still here and helps me to see who I am by remembering who I was.

Music connects me fundamentally to that greater presence which can only be described, inadequately, in words. I respond to it viscerally in the sound's power over my neurology, but I can only describe that feeling to you through the limited scope of words. I can manifest the music through Dickinson's verses, and I can touch that greater presence in her verses through the music I have manifested for them. But the two together bring into my mind a power that enriches my spirit in ways neither could achieve alone. That's the alchemy. That's how her words and my music become melopoetry.