

DAVID AVSHALOMOV: EMILY DICKINSON SONGS
(Note by the Composer)

I wrote these songs in 2000 at the start of an intensive (and continuing) artistic period devoted largely to writing vocal music. Their style, and particularly their vocal qualities, are a direct response to an implied challenge from my elder son Jesse (a promising operatic basso) to write songs that were “singer’s pieces”—meaning both grateful for the voice and a joy to sing (and to hear). I hope I have succeeded in meeting it. They were certainly a joy to write, and I always enjoy singing them myself. The choice of low voice—bass/baritone, my own range—was made partly selfishly, partly because the poems represent, not Emily’s persona as a woman, but her poetic voice and message, which though personal in origin is often universal in impact.

The cycle comprises two four-song sets. The poems which I selected from Ms. Dickinson’s huge output include many of her themes and motifs: snakes, nature, the sea, horses, trains, bells love, sex, sublimation, hope, fear, insanity, pain, God, fear of death—and its acceptance. I found both her morbid melodrama and her hopeful enthusiasm contagious. Like her poems, most of the settings are short, and they have little repetition or development, and only rare brief interludes. The focus is on the beauty and evocative allusions of the vocal melody and the text. I tend to preserve the natural rhythm and prosody of her verses as much as possible; this is strophic, metric, rhymed poetry, and to my ear that is a value to be preserved and respected rather than distorted or ignored. In short, I set the whole poem, not just the images or the mood. And I never use the poem as a mere coat hanger for my own unrelated expression and musical ideas.

In the original version, the piano accompanist has an active role in all of the settings. I am often told by my listeners that my richly-colored and widely varied piano accompaniments continually suggest orchestration. In 2003, at the insistence of my old friend (and USAF Band colleague) Phil Gaskill, I undertook to translate those suggestions into a functional orchestration of the accompaniment, for a premiere performance in New York where I would sing them with his Musica Bella orchestra under his baton. These are orchestrations, not orchestral pieces per se, and of necessity they are sometimes obvious in their derivation from the pianistic figurations of the original. But scoring them did allow me to create some interesting effects of my own (and to echo others from the great masters of orchestration). I had particular fun with “The Train”; the ocean of the “Wild Nights”; the Chopin, Mahler, and Tchaikovsky quotes of “I Felt a Funeral”—and, of course, the café orchestra of the “Tango”.

Some observations on the individual songs:

1. **A NARROW FELLOW IN THE GRASS:** This poem imprinted on me as a teen. I do not like snakes. The setting uses a simple little wiggling motif, first in the clarinet, later in various instruments, to suggest the elusive movement and nervous energy of the snake. The voice line begins almost conversationally, then waxes lyrical. The mood switches from slightly anxious to warm and back, snapping to with the instant surge of fright on “zero at the bone”—to simulate the jolt of adrenaline and cold fear that nearly everyone has had on being startled by a too-near snake.
2. **THE RAILWAY TRAIN:** Like Emily, I love trains—riding, hearing, watching them, even making and running model trains as a boy. Many composers of our machine age have tried their hand at depictive train music, Honegger, Ibert, and Reich just three examples (and I again in my Trotzky’s Train piano sextet). I had fun trying to evoke her hulking, virile giant at rest, hissing steam, starting slow and low and building up to a

- faster, thrumming steady rhythm of the wheels on the rails. Then I threaded my halting vocal melodies over this unstoppable momentum, adding small coloristic orchestral outbursts and sliding key changes to illuminate the water stop, mountains, shanties, and quarry, climaxing on the “horrid hooting” of the whistle. (Here the wind players must “bend” their notes like a freight train passing in the night.) The momentum slows under “star,” and settles back to a huge but quiet, ominous chord of the hulking, steaming beast.
3. **WILD NIGHTS:** For me this song is about dreams of abandon to wild open-hearted lovemaking, borne by sea metaphors—frankly X-rated. High, splashing pentatonic swirls in the winds and ringing percussion establish water and waves, over long low tones giving depth to the sea. The voice line leaps in, excited, high. The motion slows to imply a rocking, docked rowboat, then picks up again to depict the see-saw rhythm of rowing, and at last the swirling texture expands and rises to an ecstatic pitch under “tonight, in thee!”, climaxing on a drenching, orgasmic high cluster chord.
 4. **HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS:** When I revisited this famous poem, I heard inwardly a sort of Irish-ballad-sounding lyrical melody. I decided that was an honest way to set it. The accompaniment is simple, warm, slow chords in the strings. At the start and end I added a few solemn, thrummed harp chords under a few slow notes in the flute for a gilt edge on the musical page.
 5. **IT WAS NOT DEATH:** This poem transfixed me, as it would anyone else who has ever experienced periodic episodes of staggering, gasping fear of death with no evident cause, even in broad daylight—*timor mortis canturbat me*. I set a ritualistic mood with descending bell tones that build open fifths down from top to bottom of the string orchestra. As the voice spins out a formal, elegant, tragic melody, the slow ostinato continues, changing harmony infrequently—under “all the bells,” “frost,” and “fire”. At “everything that ticked” all motion stops, “space stares all around” with eerie slow horn chords, and “chaos” sits on top of slowly alternating atonal woodwind chords. “Despair” brings back two final rounds of the bell tone ostinato pattern, now built on desolate tritones.
 6. **THE HEART ASKS PLEASURE FIRST:** In this hospice lyric I saw a loved one slowly dying in hospital, in great pain, and thus the blessing of the final “liberty to die”. (I added a repeat using an earlier version she wrote of that line, “privilege to die.”) Outlined by solo clarinet and solo violin or viola, and sustained in strings, a slow-rocking steady-eighth-note accompaniment pattern, bottom to top and back, continues throughout under the slow vocal line, suggesting a gentle last waltz, the harmonies shifting from sweet under “pleasure” to bitter under “pain” to neutral under “deaden suffering” to purple under “sleep”. Winds and horns join to build intensity under “liberty to die”. The second “die” is sung on a note so low it precludes expression (like a flatline on a pulse monitor). But over it the final harmony is one of sweet release.
 7. **I FELT A FUNERAL:** Things become grimmer. Some say that in this poem she imagined the horror of witnessing her own funeral; others say it was about fear of losing her mind. You decide. Occasionally I quote the greats in my music: The death-march opening in low brass and basses suggests Chopin, as does the voice. The “service like a drum” continues to steal from my hero Mahler’s own morbid vocabulary, but as the poet’s perception shifts to the tolling of huge bells in space, my own style re-emerges (I made my own cosmic bells here). This texture snaps off at “a plank in reason broke”, the vocal melody loses tonal focus, and “finished knowing” returns us to the absolute gloom

of the start, with an ending that blends the deepest depression of Mahler and Tchaikovsky.

8. TIE THE STRINGS TO MY LIFE: A brave song asking God for just a last glance and kiss of the hills and then she is “ready to go.” This setting starts with an almost incongruously cheerful galloping motif, and a brave English-sounding melody in the voice (stiff upper lip). Proud horses, a quick orchestral surge of an ocean wave, and a climactic high note on “my own choice and Thee” lead us down to a soft gentle humming under the last good-byes. Kissing the hills “just once” the singer poises over a rich, jazz flavored chord, then launches bravely into “ready to go” with an almost stock operatic ending, triumphant in brave acceptance of the fate of us all.
9. BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH. [NOTE: This note and the text of this song should not be printed in programs when the entire set is sung and this number is used as an “encore.”] As usual, when I write a piece in a well-known style and form, I didn’t study any models for the occasion, trusting to old memory and gathered impressions. The result is a poor man’s tango, established mostly by allusion (an anti-Habanera, Hernando’s Hideaway bass lick, a square snare drum dance beat), but the arch, artificial politesse of the poem is well supported by the ersatz ballroom-dance-of-doom style. The accompaniment sound is almost like an Argentine café orchestra, the mood mock-solemn, the melody and harmony sentimental, almost trite. And yet at the end, on “towards Eternity,” you may note a moistening eye.