

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 (now studying operatic vocal performance) to write songs that were “singer’s pieces”—meaning a joy to sing (as well as to hear) and grateful for the voice. 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 in my case—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 original is often universal in impact. (I have made treble clef versions, some as upward transpositions, of several.)

The cycle comprises two four-song sets, and to the second I added a ninth song, the “Tango/Encore”. 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, with little repetition or development, and only rare brief interludes. My focus was 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. The richly-colored and widely varied accompaniments continually suggest orchestration; the pianist has an active role in all of the settings.