

## **Reading in the Dark: A Performer's Encounter with Emily Dickinson and her American Musical Interpreters**

The work of the American poet Emily Dickinson is notoriously musical. In shaping her prosody Dickinson drew heavily on musical form and rudiment. Her use of specific reference represents a highly self-conscious use of musical device, both as a source of imagery and as a strategy for shaping her terse, condensed poetic line. Music is the ground on which the superstructure of her poetic thought was built, and a condition of being towards which it aspired.

At first glance it may appear that the lyric qualities of Emily Dickinson's poetry are more amenable to musical treatment than the complex, sometimes hidden, narratives which underpin her work. Whilst the rendition of singular states of feeling is a hallmark of many of the musical interpretations of Dickinson's work, many of these also track a complex relationship to the evolving narratives within the texts themselves. Settings which appear to diverge from the surface meaning of the texts often do so in an attempt to express deeper emotional and psychological dramas, embedded at a layer of experience to which words may not provide adequate access.

Drawing on critical theories by renowned scholars such as Cooley (2002), and Buonanduci (2009), this paper will examine the contrary responses which this insistent musical sensibility elicits from two distinct groups of American art song composers:

- Composers who embrace the musical imperatives encoded in Dickinson's verse
- Composers who consciously work against these encoded musical imperatives

By observing the diverse representation of compositional techniques employed it is then possible to devise a somatic map, derived from the performer's response, that becomes a compelling and cohesive vehicle for Dickinson's work. This paper investigates models of textual, vocal and pianistic practice that provide the performer with a unique creative vehicle to access the varied nuances of her ground-breaking texts. In particular, it will focus on Dickinson's assumption of the role of musician, composer and performer; the way in which the interaction between these 'players' in her drama of self is reflected and expressed in musical terms and how composer, performer and, ultimately, audience are inspired to practise "reading in the dark".

**Format:** Paper presentation

**Required resources:** piano, music stand, projection screen, audio/visual equipment (Apple)

**Select audio examples:** <https://soundcloud.com/nicole-panizza8/sets/eparm-submission-13-1-19>

- 1) **Selections from *Emergence: Emily Dickinson* (2019, Stone Records)**  
Nadine Benjamin - soprano, Nicole Panizza - piano

*This Little Rose* - Ella Jarman Pinto (2010)

*Black Cake* - Sylvia Glickman (1976)

*Lightly Stepped the Yellow Star* - Juliana Hall (2014)

- 2) **Selections from *Nature* (2014, Phosphor Records)**  
Jane Sheldon - soprano, Nicole Panizza - piano

*Nature, the Gentlest Mother* - Aaron Copland (1950)

All texts by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)



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Nicole Panizza is an acclaimed vocal accompanist, coach and scholar, a DMus alumnus of the RCM (London), and a recipient of an International Fulbright Award (Harvard University, Manhattan School of Music). Nicole has worked for Opera Australia, and as Education Manager for The Royal Opera, Covent Garden. Her teachers include Roger Vignoles and Malcolm Martineau.

Current research includes an album with soprano Nadine Benjamin, a performance project based on Dickinson's fragment manuscripts; a digital archive showcasing musical settings of Dickinson's poetry and letters, and an art song project featuring critical examples of American war and memoriam. Recent awards include positions at the RAI and Faculty of Music (University of Oxford), and Research Summit Fellow, The

Orpheus Instituut (Belgium).

She currently holds the positions of Assistant Professor in Music (Coventry University) Research Associate (Oxford Song Network), and Visiting Research Associate, TORCH (University of Oxford). Further information can be found at [www.nicolepanizza.com](http://www.nicolepanizza.com).