

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Aaron Copland – Eight Poems of Emily Dickinson

Born November 14, 1900, Brooklyn, New York.

Died December 2, 1990, Peekskill, New York.

Eight Poems of Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830. She attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in South Hadley, but returned home after a year. From then on, she rarely left her house and her visitors were few. By the 1860s, Dickinson lived in almost complete isolation from the outside world, although she kept up regular correspondence and read widely. She spent much of her time with her family. Although Dickinson was extremely prolific as a poet and often sent poems in letters to friends, she was not publicly recognized during her lifetime. She died in Amherst in 1886. After her death, Dickinson's family discovered forty volumes of nearly 1,800 of her poems. The handwritten poems show a variety of the dashlike marks of different sizes and directions for which she is now known. Early editors removed the dashes and replaced them with more conventional punctuation. The first volume of her work was published posthumously in 1890 and the last in 1955.

Copland composed Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson, for voice and piano, in 1949 and 1950. They were first performed on May 18, 1950. He made orchestrations of eight of the settings between 1958 and 1970. The first performance of the Eight Poems of Emily Dickinson was given on November 14, 1970, by Gwendolyn Killebrew, with the Juilliard Orchestra conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas. The orchestra consists of flute and piccolo, oboe, two clarinets and E-flat clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, trombone, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-one minutes.

These are the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first performances of Copland's Eight Poems of Emily Dickinson.

In 1940, a year before she commissioned *Appalachian Spring*, Martha Graham introduced *Letter to the World*, a dance piece inspired by the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Although that wasn't Copland's introduction to Dickinson's work, it probably was the moment he realized he was destined to set her poems to music. Still, it was nearly a decade before he began his Dickinson songs. In March 1949, he started work on "The Chariot," perhaps the best-known of Dickinson's more than a thousand poems. "I fell in love with one song, 'The Chariot,'" Copland said, "and continued to add songs one at a time until I had twelve. The poems themselves gave me direction, one that I hoped would be appropriate to Miss Dickinson's lyrical expressive language."

Copland immersed himself in Dickinson's world, reading everything he could about her life and work, and visiting her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he stood transfixed in the room where she had worked, hour after hour. (Composing the film score for William Wyler's *The Heiress*, a screen adaptation of Henry James's *Washington Square*, just before he began the Dickinson project also helped him consider the world from a woman's point of view.) Copland made his choices, one by one, each of them carefully considered, from several volumes of Dickinson's work available at the time. (The first complete critical edition didn't appear until 1955, and, as a result, Copland was often setting corrupt editions that included wrong words, left out entire lines, and made nonsense of Dickinson's characteristic dashes.) The subjects that captured Copland's interest ranged widely—nature, the solace of love, faith and doubt, death. By March of 1950, he had a full dozen songs; he arranged their final order only after he was finished writing them all. (Copland rarely composed straight from the beginning to the end, even in larger instrumental works. "I don't compose," he once said, "I assemble materials.")

The final Twelve Songs of Emily Dickinson had such an organic quality—despite their out-of-order composition and the variety of subject matter—that Copland originally considered two working titles—*Emily's World* and *Amherst Days*—that would underline their status as a cycle. Yet every song has its own distinct personality. Copland even dedicated each one to a different composer friend, including Elliott Carter, Alberto Ginastera, and Lukas Foss—"At the time each song felt right for each person," Copland said at the time, although listeners since have often puzzled over the connections.

The twelve songs were eventually recognized as one of Copland's finest achievements. (The first performance, in 1950, was not so well received: "The reviews were so bad," he wrote to Leonard Bernstein after the premiere, "that I decided I must have written a better cycle than I had realized.") Even Stravinsky, who was not one of Copland's composer friends and whose own music had moved in a very different direction, remarked on their "distinctly American and very lovely pastoral lyricism." The vocal lines, in particular, were hailed for the way their fearless leaps, speechlike rhythms, and jagged melodies ideally

captured not only the rise and fall of Dickinson's lines, but also reflected the aphoristic Dickinson style. As Michael Tilson Thomas once said: "I think [Copland] made, for a whole generation of Americans, the cadential intent of the actual words very clear in the way he set them." The playwright Edward Albee wrote to Copland in 1959: "Several of the Dickinson songs . . . affect me profoundly, convince me that you are the first man in I-don't-know how long—since Mahler, really, I guess—who can do full justice to feelings about loss and time: Areas that I feel a need to say something about, too."

In 1958, Copland began to orchestrate selected songs from the Dickinson cycle. By 1970 he had finished eight, and with that he felt that he was done with this new set of songs for voice and orchestra.

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