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Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Preserving Nineteenth-Century Parlor Music and Hymnody

Emma K. Liu
eliu26@hotchkiss.org

ABSTRACT

Emily Dickinson's poetry is frequently described as lyrical for its musical phrasing, timbre, and rhythmic meter; scholars frequently acknowledge this musicality but overlook its roots in her firsthand engagement with music. This paper argues that Dickinson's poetic voice was profoundly shaped by her training as a pianist and her immersion in the domestic and sacred music culture of her time. Drawing on historical evidence from Dickinson's education at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, contemporary domestic music practices, and her family's sheet-music collection and letters, this study reconstructs the musical environment that informed her work. Close analysis of "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" shows how Dickinson adapts familiar hymn meters and parlor music conventions into her poetry. The paper further traces how these inherent musical qualities have invited later musical reinterpretation, focusing on Aaron Copland's 1950 art-song setting, *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, as an example of how Dickinson's poetry continues to generate new musical meaning. By integrating historical, literary, and music theory analysis, this study positions Dickinson's poetry as a literary reflection that preserves the broader culture of parlor music and hymnody in nineteenth-century America. Examining her work alongside these musical influences also reveals how much can enrich literary meaning, underscoring the value of interdisciplinary approaches in revealing new understanding.

INTRODUCTION

The poetry of Emily Dickinson has long been celebrated for its song-like qualities, a characteristic that has led many to categorize her poems as "lyrics." While literary critics frequently note the rhythm, timbre, phrasing, and other musical qualities of Dickinson's poetry, they often overlook her background as a musician. As a pianist in the 19th-century, Dickinson was deeply immersed in the culture of American hymns and parlor music, a genre of simple songs written for amateur performance in the home.[1] Her lived experience as a musician, from formal training at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary to her personal collection of musical scores, profoundly informed the musicality of her poetic voice, which we know is evident from the 1,600 musical settings of her work.[2] By reflecting both the music and practices with which she engaged, Dickinson's work serves as a literary analogue that preserves the broader culture of parlor music and hymnody in nineteenth-century America.

[1] Arthur Minton, "Parlor Music," 255.
[2] Georg Predota, "The Music of Poetry: Aaron Copland: 12 Poems of Emily Dickinson," Interlude.hk.

Reconstructing The Musical World of Nineteenth-Century America

To see Dickinson's poetry in this light, we first need to reconstruct the musical world she lived in. For much of the nineteenth-century, the parlor was the primary place of musical life in middle-class homes, giving rise to the term "parlor music." Because this genre was deliberately designed to be performed in the home rather than on a formal stage, pieces featured singable melodies and repetitive phrases that allowed amateur musicians, especially family members, to participate. Hymns and other religious music, with very recognizable rhythmic patterns, were also commonly performed in the home, in addition to their regular use in church services, Sunday schools, and community gatherings. This presence of hymnody alongside secular parlor music in the home created a widespread familiarity with rhythm and phrasing, characteristics of nineteenth-century domestic music culture that would later appear in Dickinson's poetry.

One of the most striking differences between Dickinson's world and our own is the degree to which musical knowledge operated as a form of shared culture. While musical literacy—the physical skills of performance and cognitive knowledge of musical patterns and structures—is far from universal in contemporary society, it was not considered specialized knowledge in the nineteenth-century. Even individuals with limited formal training developed a practical familiarity with musical conventions simply through repeated exposure in domestic and religious settings. In Dickinson's time, hymn meters or the strophic design (repetitive and simple song structure) of a parlor ballad were common knowledge. These musical features later appear in Dickinson's poetry precisely because they were widely known and easily recognizable to her audience.

Sheet music functioned as both a practical resource and a measure of cultural status. Many households maintained bound collections of favorite songs, hymns, and piano arrangements with detailed title illustrations; these collections were typically personalized as cherished family heirlooms, as seen in Figure 1. These books contained the repertoire that circulated in both parlor and church settings. Because the same songs were encountered repeatedly in social and domestic life, their melodic shapes and phrase structures became shared cultural resources to be easily referenced in conversation, writing, and poetry.

Figure 1. Lithograph cover for "The Celebrated Melodies" of the Rainer Family from the Princeton

University Music Collection.[3]

Pianos were also widely familiar objects in nineteenth-century households and functioned like a household entertainment system for informal concerts with family and friends, as demonstrated in Figure 2. An 1874 newspaper advertisement for a Horace Waters & Son piano claimed, "In point of finish, style, durability, and quality of tone, [these pianos] are fully up to the standard so long sought for by our most eminent **Professional** and **Amateur** Pianists, and desirable alike for the requirements of the parlor."[4] The ad highlights that these instruments were specifically designed for domestic spaces, using their suitability for the home to persuade buyers; this emphasizes the piano's central and valued role in nineteenth-century domestic life.

[3] Caroline Moseley, "Music in a Nineteenth-Century Parlor," 235.
[4] Horace Waters & Son, *Piano Advertisement*, *Calhoun Weekly Times*, August 19, 1874, Digital Library of Georgia, Georgia.

Figure 2. Photograph of family gathered around a parlor piano in 1895.[5]

Because the parlor was considered an extension of the domestic sphere, women were often expected to be the primary performers of the household. Music in the nineteenth-century home was, if not exclusively, preeminently the responsibility of young women, and a woman's musical ability was seen as a measure of her refinement, education, and social value. Mastery of the piano or proficiency in singing could enhance a young woman's reputation within her family and community, as well as her marriage prospects. As Caroline Moseley notes, one contemporary described the ideal wife and someone who "must love and cherish *music* above all other arts and sciences . . . and when she sings her music must be such as will excite joy and grief, give pleasure and pain, and compose my disturbed thoughts, after being out all night."[6]

The Musical Foundations of Dickinson's Poetry

Emily Dickinson's own musical education reflects these broader cultural expectations. From a young age, she received formal instruction at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where music was an integral part of the curriculum for young women. There, she would have studied piano technique, sight-reading, and possibly vocal performance, gaining both technical skill and an intuitive sense of phrasing and rhythm.

[5] Charles Milo Williams, *Family at Piano in Parlor*, 1895, photograph, The Historic New Orleans Collection, https://hnoc.org/publishing/first-draft/parlor-music-player-pianos-and-music-boxes-unusual-size-home-entertainment

[6] Moseley, "Music in a Nineteenth-Century Parlor," 232.

Beyond formal instruction, Dickinson's family environment nurtured her engagement with music. They were active members of the Congregational Church, where hymnody was a consistent part of their religious practices, and their household kept its own curated book of sheet music.[7] The Dickinson family also often attended public concerts; in a letter to her older brother, William Austin Dickinson, she describes one such outing with her parents and her younger sister, Lavinia:

> All of us went — just four — add an absent individual and that will make full five. [...] we walked in silence to the old Edwards church and took our seats in the same — how Jennie came out like a child and sang and sang again — how bouquets fell in showers, and the roof was rent with applause — how it thundered outside, and inside with the thunder of God and of men — judge ye which was the loudest; how we all loved Jennie Lind, but not accustomed oft to her manner of singing didn't fancy that so well as we did her. No doubt it was very fine, but take some notes from her Echo, the bird sounds from the Bird Song, and some of her curious trills, and I'd rather have a Yankee."[8]

This account of famous Swedish opera singer Jennie Lind's concert demonstrates that Dickinson possessed both a sophisticated ear and the ability to critically analyze music. She notes technical aspects of the performance, such as Lind's trills and attempts to imitate bird song, but also situates these elements within her personal musical preferences that she'd "rather have a Yankee" (an American singer). The "bird sounds" reference Wilhelm Taubert's *Bird Song*, a piece Dickinson would have known from her family's sheet-music collection.[9] This demonstrates how she actively applied her musical knowledge to interpret and evaluate performances.

Her father, Edward Dickinson, was also well acquainted with music. He wrote her a letter that read, "Tell Uncle William that I want a Piano when he can buy good ones, at a fair price. I hope he and Mr. Leland will go to Boston, this week, & find two good ones. I prefer Rosewood—3 pedals—& a stool. I want all together."[10] His ability to specify the type of wood and the pedal configuration demonstrates his thorough understanding of and familiarity with pianos, despite not being a professional musician but a lawyer and politician. This level of knowledge indicates that parlor music was an ordinary part of daily life in the Dickinson household. Moreover, his sharing these details with Emily Dickinson highlights her own engagement with music and suggests that musical practice was a subject of conversation and mutual understanding between father and daughter.

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[7] "Emily Dickinson and the Church," *Emily Dickinson Museum*, accessed December 7, 2025, https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/emily-dickinson/biography/special-topics/emily-dickinson-and-the-church/
[8] Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958)
[9] George Boziwick, *Emily Dickinson's Music Book and the Musical Life of an American Poet*, Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022, page 169.
[10] Edward Dickinson, *letter to Emily Dickinson*, 1850s, Lavinia Norcross Dickinson Papers, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Amherst, MA.

Dickinson's writings and personal records also indicate a consistent appreciation for music. In a letter to her "affectionate friend," Dickinson writes:

> "How do you like taking music lessons? I presume you are delighted with it. I am taking lessons this term of Aunt S——, who is spending the summer with us. I never enjoyed myself more than I have this summer; for we have had such a delightful school and such pleasant teachers, and besides I have had a piano of my own. Why can't you come? If you will, you can come and practise on my piano as much as you wish to. I have been learning several beautiful pieces lately. The 'Grave of Bonaparte' is one, 'Lancer's Quickstep,' and 'Maiden, weep no more,' which is a sweet little song. I wish much to see you and hear you play. I hope you will come to A. before long."[11]

This letter demonstrates not only Dickinson's enjoyment of music but also her active participation in musical practice. She describes taking lessons, having her own piano, and learning specific pieces, indicating that music was a valued part of her life. The mention of particular compositions—like "Grave of Bonaparte" (a well-known folk song), "Lancer's Quickstep" (a popular nineteenth-century military-themed piano composition), and "Maiden, weep no more" (a hymn)—suggests her familiarity with popular parlor repertoire, hymns, and piano literature, reflecting the kinds of music that circulated in middle-class American homes during her time.

We can also observe how music shaped Dickinson as a person. In a letter to her older brother, William Austin Dickinson, she poetically describes the rain:

> "Something seems to whisper 'He is thinking of home this evening,' perhaps because it rains, perhaps because it's evening and the orchestra of winds perform their strange, sad music."[12]

This excerpt exemplifies how music informed Dickinson's perception of the world and shaped her poetic voice. By describing the wind as an "orchestra" performing "strange, sad music," she interprets experiences through music. Such sensitivity developed from her formal music education as well as her ongoing involvement with parlor and sacred repertoire.

While influences of musical culture on Emily Dickinson are a defining characteristic of her poetry, they are not unique to her work alone. Other writers of the nineteenth-century, including Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edith Wharton, were shaped by the same domestic and sacred music. Literary works are inevitably imprinted with the cultures of their authors, because art, by its nature, is a record of lived experience. In this sense, Dickinson's poetry preserves the musical structures and conventions of her time, as they were embedded in her daily life. Dickinson's poetry thus illustrates a broader truth about art: it functions as a representation of the individual, and in doing so, inevitably preserves the culture that shaped them.

[11] Martha Dickinson Bianchi, *The Life and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924).
[12] Dickinson, Letters of Emily Dickinson

Preserving 19th-Century Parlor Music and Hymnody

*"*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain" offers a particularly clear example of how Dickinson translates her immersion in domestic music culture into poetic form, simultaneously preserving the musical practices of her time:

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -[13]

The poem's unsettling depiction of the speaker's descent into madness is intensified through its musical structure. When read both silently and aloud, the poem reveals a clear rhythmic structure. Specifically, it employs Common Meter, in which each quatrain alternates lines of eight and six syllables, set in iambic rhythm (unstressed-stressed syllables). This 8–6–8–6 pattern produces a steady, march-like pulse that mirrors the image of a funeral procession introduced in the opening line. Common Meter was widely used in hymns, including "When I Can Read My Title Clear" by famous hymn writer Isaac Watts.[14] Its persistent, regular beat conveys both solemnity and momentum, fitting for the dark color and mood of the poem. The alternating long-short syllabic pattern reflects the structure of strophic hymns, where melodic

[13] Emily Dickinson, *"I Felt a Funeral in My Brain,"* in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955), 210.
[14] Victoria N. Morgan, Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture (New York: Routledge, 2002), 83.

motifs reoccur with different verses of text, creating a sense of forward motion that heightens the poem's psychological intensity as the narrator plunges into insanity.

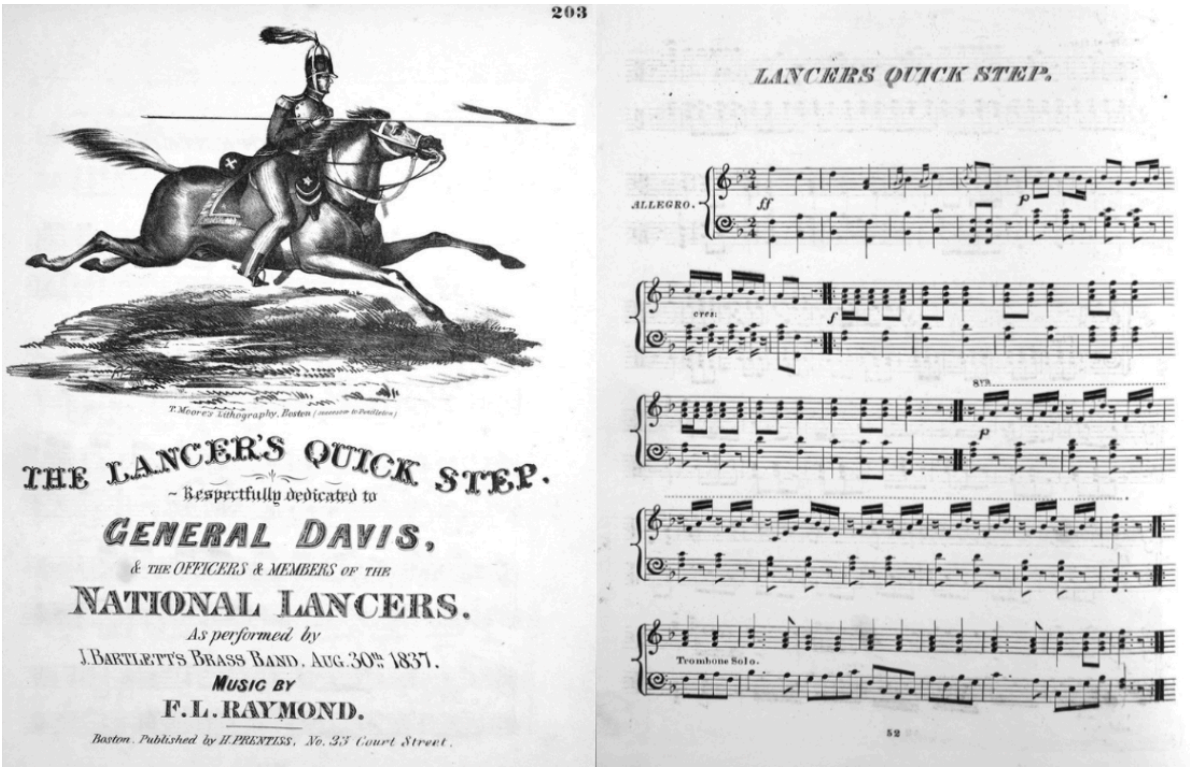

Figure 3. Sheet music of "Lancer's Quick Step."[15]

The poem's sonic textures also reflect the domestic music Dickinson encountered. Its stressed syllables and repeated accents, found in lines like "treading – treading –" that utilize repetition, evoke the steady pulse of a drum, reinforced by the explicit reference in the line "Service, like a Drum." This percussive timbre was a hallmark of nineteenth-century parlor music, where piano accompaniments often imitated rhythmic instruments to provide momentum and structure.[16] These characteristics can be traced to pieces Dickinson herself studied and performed, including "Lancer's Quickstep," noted in her letters (see figure 3). In this parlor march, the pianist plays chords on every downbeat (the first and strongest best of every measure), producing a mechanical, drum-like drive that Dickinson translates into her poetic rhythm. This percussive texture deepens the poem's funeral atmosphere and reinforces a sense of impending doom of the speaker's psychological unraveling.

Many of these inherent musical qualities in Dickinson's work have long attracted composers and songwriters, illustrating how her poetry both preserves nineteenth-century musical culture and extends its influence, inspiring new works to create a "ripple effect" of cultural transmission. "I felt a Funeral, in my

[15] "Lancer's Quick Step" (Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries & University Museums), accessed December 8, 2025, https://levysheetmusic.mse.jhu.edu/collection/083/010.
[16] George Boziwick, *Emily Dickinson's Music Book*, page 47.

Brain" alone has inspired two different musical settings: famous American composer Aaron Copland's 1950 art song and a 2022 version by Andrew Bird and Phoebe Bridgers.[17] In a program note for his voice and piano work, *Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Copland wrote, "Her poetry, written in isolation, was folklike, with irregular meters and stanzas and many unconventional devices."[18] In calling her poetry "folklike" and noticing the meters and devices within her writing, Copland observed the way her lines rely on strong beats, simple yet flexible phrase shapes, and rhythmic patterns that feel spoken and sung at the same time.

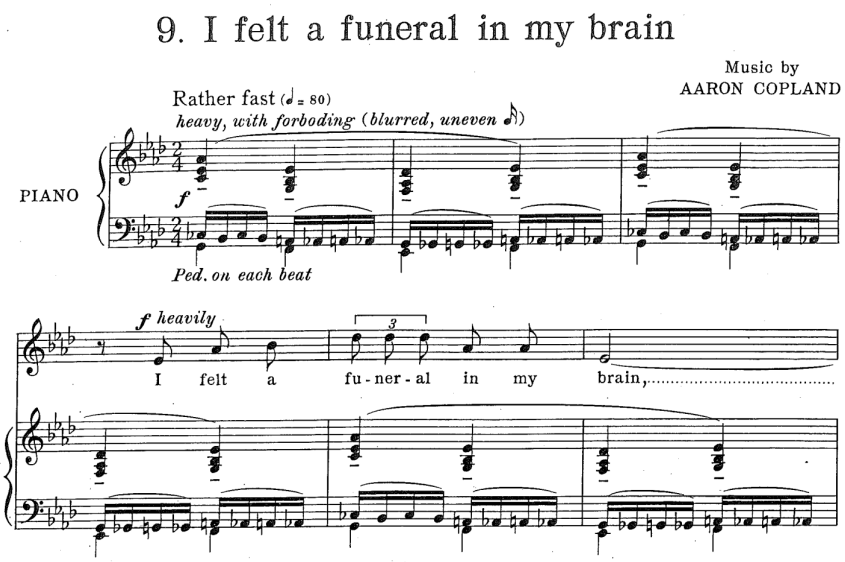

Figure 4. Excerpt from Copland's "I felt a funeral in my brain" showing the chromatic, atonal motion in the left-hand
piano part.[19]

[17] "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain," Song of America, accessed December 8, 2025, https://songofamerica.net/song/i-felt-a-funeral-in-my-brain/

[18] Aaron Copland, "Eight Poems of Emily Dickinson," Works, Aaron Copland, accessed December 8, 2025, https://www.aaroncopland.com/works/eight-poems-of-emily-dickinson

[19] Aaron Copland, I Felt a Funeral in My Brain, from Twelve Poems of Emily Dickinson (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1950), accessed December 8, 2025, https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.uoregon.edu/dist/2/11757/files/2015/09/Copland-12-Poems-of-Emily-Dickinson-1v9rmk6.pdf, page 31.

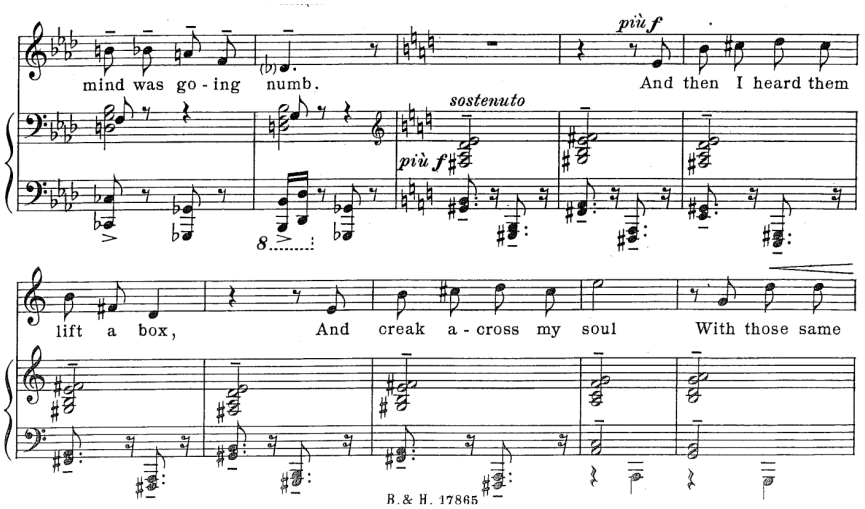

Figure 5. Excerpt from Copland's "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain "illustrating the modulation to C major at the line

"And then I heard them lift a Box."[20]

Although the song is primarily in A-flat major, the chromatic, atonal motion of the left-hand piano accompaniment obscures the key center, as shown in figure 4. This chromaticism mirrors the mental disarray and internal tension in the poem. Copland reinforces its drum-like rhythm by placing chords and accented notes on each downbeat —marked with "pedal on each beat" for greater emphasis—similar to the march-like pulse of "Lancer's Quickstep." The harmonies also track the poem's narrative progression: at the line "And then I heard them lift a Box," the music modulates to C major, a key free of accidentals (sharps and flats), which imparts a sudden lift and clarity that parallels the text's imagery of the "box being raised" (see figure 5). These elements illustrate how composers can interpret the inherent musicality of Dickinson's poetry by translating her rhythm, phrasing, timbre, and narrative into a musical setting.

CONCLUSION

Emily Dickinson's poetry cannot be fully understood without recognizing the depth of her musical education and her immersion in the domestic and sacred music culture of nineteenth-century America. The musicality of her work, as seen in "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain," demonstrates how her lived experience as a musician directly shaped her voice as a poet and gave her an intuitive command of rhythm, phrasing, and sonic texture, which she transformed into written verse. In this way, her work not only reflects her personal musicianship but also preserves the broader culture of nineteenth-century American parlor music and hymnody in written form. Her formal training, household engagement with parlor music, exposure to hymnody, and careful documentation in her personal music book provide concrete influences that can be readily traced in her poetry; while Dickinson is not the only nineteenth-century to inspire musical adaptation (other lyrical figures, like Walt Whitman, have similarly

[20] Copland, "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain," page. 32.

attracted composers), these clarity of these influences makes her poetry an ideal case for examining how literature can be musical. Ultimately, the poetry of Emily Dickinson exemplifies the inseparability of art and social context, shows how music can enrich the meaning of words, and demonstrates how interdisciplinary study can deepen understanding.

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