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"Invisible, as Music –": What the Earliest Musical
Settings of Emily Dickinson's Poems, Including Two
Previously Unknown, Tell Us about Dickinson's Musicality

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GERARD HOLMES

*“Invisible, as Music –”:
What the Earliest Musical Settings of Emily Dickinson’s
Poems, Including Two Previously Unknown, Tell Us
about Dickinson’s Musicality*

In 1890, four years after Emily Dickinson’s death, Roberts Brothers issued *Poems*, the first collection of her work, edited by Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd. The book was an immediate, surprising success, and not long after, composers began setting her poems to music. Carlton Lowenberg’s 1992 *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere* identifies 1896 as the earliest date for a Dickinson poem to be set to music and issued in print, Etta (or Willetta) Parker’s “Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?” Lowenberg says little of Parker’s musical setting beyond, “Emily Dickinson’s words were used by permission of Lavinia Dickinson, her sister” (80). Scored for voice and piano, the song was published in Boston by C.W. Thompson, and again the same year, by Miles and Thompson (these seem to be the same company), as one of a set of *Three Songs* by Parker.

Parker was performing the song by December 1894, more than a year earlier than its 1896 publication date. She was an 1884 graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music and a working musician and composer, albeit one who, it seems, never achieved a fully fledged professional musical career. Also in 1894, a German composer long resident in England named Jacques (or Jacob) Blumenthal published a two-volume set called *Two Books of Song*, which contains musical settings of two Dickinson poems, “My river runs to thee –” (Fr219) (the song was titled “My River,”) and “I hide myself within my flower” (Fr80) (called “With a Flower”), which are not listed in *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*.

Parker was a young and relatively obscure composer when she set Dickinson to music. She received some notice within New England for her performances and compositions, appearing regularly in the *Musical Review* and in Boston newspapers for her performances of contemporary music. By contrast, Blumenthal was older, financially successful, well reviewed, and well connected in English and European music circles. Though one was American, the other German-British, one little known, the other well known, both composers and their work are now largely forgotten. Large gaps in the material record make it difficult to know basic details about Parker's life, and about how Blumenthal came to set Dickinson's poems to music. Still, looking at what we know about these composers, the first to adapt Dickinson poems into musical settings, only four years after the publication of *Poems*, can tell us a good deal about how Dickinson, accused by early reviewers of clumsy, unmusical prosody, was heard differently by musically oriented ears in the first decade of her publication. Following recent feminist, postcolonial, and African-American critical practices, this essay points to, rather than turning away from, the gaps in the archives. For example, the archivist and literary critic Marlene Manoff suggests that critics

write women back into the historical record—to fill the gaps and correct the omissions in the archive. [. . .] postcolonial studies is highly suspicious of the colonial record and could be defined, in part, as an attempt to locate the voices of the silenced native within the literature produced by colonial powers. In both fields, scholars focus on the absences and the distortions of the archive, as well as new contributions by contemporary women and postcolonial writers. (15)

Looking at the gaps and omissions provides critics with opportunities to consider what is recorded, what is discarded, and, ultimately, whose voices are heard when we listen to the past. As Sarah Nuttall points out, imperial power depends on the assumption that archives are "whole" and authoritative, while in fact they are always "a miscellany, fragmentary, and full of gaps" (295 n54). Anjali Arondeka points to the ways postcolonial scholars find that "the impossibility of recovery is articulated [in] the desire to add, to fill in the gaps," warning, however, that "the seduction of gaps in the record" may prompt critics to speak, out of turn, on behalf of their incompletely archived subjects (14). Similarly, in his recent *Epistrophies*, Brent Edwards points to the absences in archival documentation of the African-American cultures in New Orleans that fostered jazz in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and his use of informal and vernacular sources, such as community newsletters, from within those cultures. This article resists the

seduction of filling in the gaps on behalf of Parker and Blumenthal, instead simply pointing to them as meaningful absences.

The myth of Dickinson the recluse was reinforced by the notion that readers of her own time heard her as unmusical. The idea of Dickinson as rough-hewn and difficult was set by Thomas Wentworth Higginson in the Preface to the 1890 *Poems*. He wrote that while the poet seemed “curiously indifferent to all conventional rules” (i), the poems displayed “extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable” (vi). For Higginson, the strange power of Dickinson’s poems derived in part from their seeming contrast with her life in a small, rural town, where she was “a gracious hostess” (iv) at Amherst College receptions, but otherwise, “a recluse by temperament and habit” (iii). The *Boston Post* review, from November 27, 1890, is characteristic in taking up this perspective, describing her as, “a voluntary recluse, controlling in a rare degree her environment both personal and material, living in obedience to her sentiments, her emotions and her tastes; valuing the dignity of self and seclusion, courting the simple influences of nature” (Buckingham 39). The same month, the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* described the poems as, “the expression, and, perhaps, solace, of her intense individuality” (Buckingham 37).

Willis J. Buckingham, editor of a compilation of the reviews of Dickinson’s 1890 volumes, wrote that early readers “delighted in her ‘strangeness’ [. . .] She was published at the moment when the nineteenth century could feel, and take pleasure in, the alien force of her voice” (xii). The pleasure was not universal, as when an anonymous 1891 *Scribner’s Monthly* critic scolded, “Neglect of form involves the sacrifice of an element of positive attractiveness as well as offending positively by perverseness and eccentricity” (120). Another anonymous 1891 writer in *Critic* asserted, “There is too much of the same thing in them – morbid feeling, jerky and disjointed writing, and occasional faults of grammar” (276). In *Book News*, Nathan Haskell Dole noted that a variety of modern poetry could be pleasingly set to music, but concluded, “Emily Dickinson just missed that quality of music” (222). Even an enthusiast, William Dean Howells, wrote, in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, “Occasionally the outside of the poem, so to speak, is left so rough, so rude, that the art seems to have faltered. But there is apparent to reflection the fact that the artist meant just this harsh exterior to remain, and that no grace of smoothness could have imparted her intention as it does” (77). Thomas Bailey Aldrich “could find no excuse for her ‘impossible rhyme, involved significance, and incoherence and shapelessness,’” and set about rewriting stanzas

to suit his taste (Wells 254). As late as 1913, an otherwise laudatory article in the *Atlantic Monthly* called Dickinson's work "cryptic in thought and unmelodious in expression" (Shackford). In reviewing Dickinson's early reception, Marietta Messmer pointed to the January 1891 response of the British critic Andrew Lang, written even before *Poems* was commercially available in England, "There are no words that can say how bad poetry may be when it is divorced from meaning, from music, from grammar, from rhyme; in brief, from articulate and intelligible speech" (378). Messmer sees Lang as representative of a late-nineteenth-century critical apparatus that was skeptical of literary innovation. In short, while there were exceptions, literary critics of the 1890s primarily heard Dickinson's prosody as problematic, infelicitous, unmusical.

Carlton Lowenberg's *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere* provides useful historical context about Dickinson's musical life, the musical culture of Western Massachusetts during her lifetime, and music-related publications found in the Dickinson household. But its focus is on twentieth-century adaptations of Dickinson's poems, so it passes quickly over early musical settings, providing little detail. Lowenberg writes that "Clarence Dickinson set six poems, and what had been a trickle of Dickinson settings throughout the 1920s became a stream in the 1930s and 1940s . . ." (xxvi),¹ with settings by esteemed composers such as Arthur Farwell, Ernst Bacon, Elliott Carter, Ned Rorem, and, pivotally, Aaron Copland. Copland's iconic 1950 settings play the same role in music as Thomas Johnson's 1955 variorum does in bibliography. Both are treated as watershed events in a reevaluation of Dickinson's cultural importance set in motion by modernist poets and critics. Because Copland's settings were themselves musically challenging, his adaptations may have reinforced the idea that Dickinson's "music" was alien to her own time. If Dickinson was misunderstood by readers and listeners in the late nineteenth century, so the thinking goes, then perhaps the barbed settings of Copland and subsequent composers were needed to accommodate Dickinson's strangeness. Yet the notion of Dickinson as a writer set apart from a nineteenth century that could not understand her has, in other respects, long been superseded by a recognition of her informal interconnections with a range of people and cultures. This essay accords with other recent attempts to *hear* Dickinson as a member of her own musical culture, and to reconsider how she was heard by it.² It purposely stays in the nineteenth century, and is not meant to address the musical importance of Parker's or Blumenthal's settings beyond their connection to Dickinson, or how Dickinson was heard over the long period between their settings and Copland's. Instead, it is concerned with what these very earliest

composers heard in the poet when her work was fresh, before critical consensus about Dickinson had been established. Early and varied adaptations of her poems into musical settings constitute a powerful counterargument to the idea that Dickinson was a musical misfit. In fact, composers of music may have been the first to hear and appreciate her distinctive musical qualities.

Unlike Etta Parker, who had some, however distant or passing, personal connection with Emily Dickinson or her family, it is unlikely that Blumenthal knew anyone from the Dickinson family. *Two Books of Song* was submitted for copyright to the Library of Congress. Its publisher, Novello, Ewer and Co., had offices in New York as well as London, so it was likely issued in the U.S. as well as in England. Yet it appears the set did not sell well in either place, and was never reprinted. This may explain why this print adaptation, the earliest yet found, was not discussed by Lowenberg. The fact that these adaptations were written by a well-known composer, with ties to British royalty, and yet have remained hidden from notice for more than a century, raises the possibility that other early musical settings might be hiding just out of view. Blumenthal, a professional composer physically and socially distant from the Dickinson family, saw the poems as “musical” on their own terms at a time when reviewers, and even Dickinson’s own first editors, were criticizing her as unmusical.

“...AN EXQUISITE ADAPTATION...”: ETTA PARKER AND
“HAVE YOU GOT A BROOK IN YOUR LITTLE HEART?”

It is possible to read in Carlton Lowenberg’s brief description an implicit critique of the very existence of Parker’s setting of “Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?” Calling attention to Lavinia’s granting of permission, referring to the composer as “Miss Etta Parker” and reproducing the florid cover page of *Three Songs*, while saying nothing more about the composer or the song, leaves the impression that the composition was not worthy of critical attention, and held little interest for potential readers or listeners. Knowing that Parker had been publicly performing the song for well over a year before its publication, with critics and enthusiastic audiences in attendance, complicates any such critique.

An unsigned review in the December 11, 1894 *Boston Daily Globe* (see Fig. 1) of a concert in Boston’s Chickering Hall the previous afternoon draws particular attention to Etta Parker’s performance of “Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?” calling it “an exquisite adaptation” and “the gem of the trio” of original songs performed by Parker. (Chickering Hall was a roughly 500-seat venue above

the showroom of Chickering & Sons, then the nation's leading manufacturer of pianos.) The review also points to the quality of Parker's vocal skills, and her discreet musicality.

The mannerisms, the over-wrought vocalisms and even the show pieces, which are the distressing features of most debuts, were pleasantly missed. Instead of [sic] a woman with a rich, dramatic voice appeared and sang naturally some simple airs to her own accompaniment with such an abandonment that those who heard her were fairly spell-bound.

The reviewer inexplicably refers to Parker as an "amateur." The review describes a concert performed for a paying audience. Also, if this was her debut, what had Parker been doing during the ten years since graduating from the Conservatory? (This is just one of many temporal gaps in the narrative.) A writer named Gertrude Smith (a pseudonym for Jane Nelson) "read selections from her own book, 'The Rousing of Mrs. Potter and Other Stories.'" The reviewer wrote that the two were considering "making a tour of the west in entertainments of the same character."

SANG HER OWN SONGS
Miss Etta Parker and Miss Gertrude Smith in Chickering Hall.
"Stories and songs" was the way the program styled the entertainment which introduced two very talented young women, Miss Etta Parker and Miss Gertrude Smith, to the public in Chickering hall yesterday afternoon.
Miss Parker was a delightful surprise to those who are familiar with the efforts of amateur singers. The mannerisms, the over-wrought vocalisms and even the show pieces, which are the distressing features of most debuts, were pleasantly missed.
Instead of a woman with a rich, dramatic voice appeared and sang naturally some simple airs to her own accompaniment with such an abandonment that those who heard her were fairly spell-bound.
The entertainment opened with Schubert's "Who is Sylvia?" in which Miss Parker displayed much delicacy of rendering. The mezzo notes were unusually clear, but the contralto tones were more true, and though rated as a mezzo, the singer enjoys her lower range better.
There was a melody by Dvorak given with fine feeling and calling forth unlooked-for technique.
Three songs of her own composition were the best things on the program. One of these was "The Song My Paddy Sings," which has been published with considerable success. The gem of the trio, however, was a transcription of Emily Dickinson's "Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?" The melody—Miss Parker's own—was an exquisite adaptation, and displayed some remarkably sweet lower notes.
Miss Parker is a pupil of Clara Fischer and Abthorp. She contemplates making a tour of the west in entertainments of the same character, in company with Miss Smith.
The latter read selections from her own book, "The Rousing of Mrs Potter and Other Stories."

Figure 1. "Sang Her Own Songs." *Boston Daily Globe*, December 11, 1894, p. 8.

Because it has not been reproduced elsewhere, to my knowledge, I reproduce it here. Parker began to appear in brief notices in Boston-based music magazines a decade earlier, performing contemporary music. For example, she appears in the May 1884 *Musical Herald* (Figure 2) as the leading performer in a concert “in Union Hall on Wednesday evening, April 9,” which was “much enjoyed by all who attended.” The July issue discusses what appears to be a “graduating programme” of graduate recitals of New England Conservatory students in which Parker performed works by J.S. Bach, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Christoph von Gluck, Felix Mendelssohn, Richard Wagner (adapted for piano by Louis Brassin), and Anton Rubinstein. The Brassin adaptation of a song from Wagner’s *Valkyrie* and Rubinstein’s “Valse Caprice” were each published only in the 1870s (“Musical Mention”).

<p>THE graduating programme of Miss Etta W. Parker (pupil of Miss S. C. Fisher) and Miss A. E. Fordyce (pupil of J. C. D. Parker), assisted by Miss Fisher and Mr. R. F. G. Lindsay, consisted, in part, of the following works: —</p>	
Prelude and Fugue in G major, op. 15,	J. S. Bach
{ a. Recitative and Canzonetta from “Dinorah,”	Meyerbeer
{ b. Cavatine,	Ch. von Gluck
{ c. The Traveller’s Song,	Mendelssohn
{ a. Fire Charm,	Wagner-Brassin
{ b. Valse Caprice,	Rubinstein
<p>The ladies were well received, and performed the numbers very successfully.</p>	

Figure 2. “Musical Mention. Boston and Vicinity.” *Musical Herald*, July 1884, p. 175.

The August issue describes Parker as part of a group of Conservatory students, singing two songs by Camille Saint-Saens, one from the opera *Samson and Delilah*, which was written in 1877 and had not yet premiered in the U.S. The December 1894 Chickering Hall concert featured, alongside “Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?” a “melody by Antonin Dvorak.” Dvorak’s now-canonical works were then brand-new: his signature “New World Symphony” had premiered only that year, and Dvorak himself was based in New York, where he taught at the National Conservatory of Music of America.

It may not be possible to know how or why Parker came to set “Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?” to music. Lowenberg notes that it was published with Lavinia Dickinson’s permission, and the sheet music affirms this. Whether it was done at Lavinia’s suggestion is unclear, and likely to remain so. The text in Parker’s score (Figure 4) differs from Dickinson’s manuscript, of course, but it is faithful to the 1890 *Poems* (Figure 3).³

Figure 4. Parker, Willetta. "Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?" *Three Songs*. C.W. Thompson, 1894.

Poem used by permission of
Miss Lavinia Dickinson.

3

To ROSE IVES.

Have You got a Brook in Your Little Heart?

Words by EMILY DICKINSON.

Music by ETTA PARKER

Andante con moto.

Have you got a brook in your lit - tle heart, where bash - ful flow - ers
blow, Where blush-ing birds go down to drink, and
shad - ows trem - ble so? And no - bod - y

Legato.

Copyright 1898, by Miles & Thompson.

M. & T. 647-3

4

knows, so still it flows, that an - - y

The first system of the musical score is in 6/8 time, key of B-flat major. It features a vocal melody line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are "knows, so still it flows, that an - - y".

brook is there; And yet your lit - - le

The second system continues the melody and accompaniment. The lyrics are "brook is there; And yet your lit - - le".

draught of life is dai - - ly drunk - en there. Then look

The third system continues the melody and accompaniment. The lyrics are "draught of life is dai - - ly drunk - en there. Then look".

out for the lit - - le brook in March, When the riv - ers o - - ver

The fourth system concludes the melody and accompaniment. The lyrics are "out for the lit - - le brook in March, When the riv - ers o - - ver".

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flow, and the snows come hur-ry-ing from the hills, and the bridge-es of-ten

go. And lat-er too, in Au-gust, it may-be, when the mead-ows parch-ing

lie, Be-ware, be-ware, lest this lit-tle brook of

life, may some burn-ing noon go dry!

M. & T. 647-3

IX.

HAVE you got a brook in your little heart,
Where bashful flowers blow,
And blushing birds go down to drink,
And shadows tremble so?

And nobody knows, so still it flows,
That any brook is there ;
And yet your little draught of life
Is daily drunken there.

Then look out for the little brook in March,
When the rivers overflow,
And the snows come hurrying from the hills,
And the bridges often go.

And later, in August it may be,
When the meadows parching lie,
Beware, lest this little brook of life
Some burning noon go dry !

Figure 3. Emily Dickinson. "Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?" *Poems*. Roberts Bros, 1890.

Even a non-musician might see why the *Globe* critic thought this an effective song. Like the argument of the poem, the vocal melody builds as it proceeds. Rhythmic variations, such as the long notes that end phrases at stanza breaks as the song proceeds, accord with the intensity of the stream as it moves from hidden to flowing to overflowing, and is finally threatened by a parching heat. The song changes time signatures twice. It begins in 4/4, with the direction "Andante con Moto" (slow, but with motion), something like a slow march, ballad, or hymn. After the first stanza, it switches to 3/4, waltz time, with the direction, "Legato" (flowing), and then (three words into the third stanza, in which "the rivers overflow, / And the snows come hurrying from the hills, / and the bridges often go") it changes again to 6/8, speeding up during its second half. The vocal line contrasts with the piano melody, the accompaniment varies throughout, at times spare and consistent, later busier, more flowing and harmonically rich. The "remarkably sweet lower notes" in the vocal line culminate in a long and low final vocal note, accompanied by a quickly rising right hand and ascending chords in the left.

Parker was a musically adventurous musician, educated to perform professionally, and a composer who published her work at a time when there were few woman composers. All of the composers named to this point in this essay, other than Parker herself, are men. To the extent Parker's name has survived at all, it has been as the first to set Dickinson's poem to music. Feminist literary criticism challenged gender bias in literary canons and critical assessments of nineteenth-century writing, returning critical attention to, and fruitfully reevaluating, writers such as Sara Josepha Hale, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, and Julia Ward Howe, and resituating Dickinson's work within the literary culture of her time. Feminist musicologists such as Judith Tick similarly drew critical attention to composers such as Marion Dix Sullivan, Augusta Brown, Faustina Hasse Hodges, Jane Sloman, and Susan (aka Mrs. E.A.) Parkhurst.⁴ Such reassessments, however, are dependent on the ability to have a career in the first place. Parker worked in relative obscurity, perhaps at least in part because there was little or no place in the musical establishment for women composers. In the 1890s, the pioneering American composer Amy Beach was building a more lasting reputation, though her works have largely fallen out of the mainstream canon as well. Beach was a piano prodigy like Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann. She enjoyed material circumstances permitting her to devote attention to composing works such as the *Mass in E-Flat Major*, first performed only in 1892 (six years after

she began work on it) (Block 64, 70), and her *Gaelic Symphony* – the first by an American woman – performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1896 (Block 99–100). Despite greater social acceptance of woman composers as the nineteenth century proceeded, and in the U.S. especially after Beach's groundbreaking career, few works by nineteenth-century women composers are performed with any frequency today. Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Beach are among those few.

Parker is not. She never reached Beach's level of renown. Few basic biographical details survive. She does not appear in the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, references to her performances are few and scattered, pointing to a challenging life for a working performer, and few copies of sheet music of her songs are extant in archives. An October 1884 report from the Perkins Institution for the Blind notes that she donated 15 tickets to a concert (*Fifty-Third* 84). An 1886 report from the Boston Young Men's Christian Union shows her performing music at their Thanksgiving and Christmas Vesper Services (*Report* 64). During the 1880s and 1890s, she is mentioned in numerous issues of the *Boston Herald*, *Worcester Spy*, and *Boston Evening Journal* as a musical performer in small-scale religious, charitable, and informal social settings. At some point, she must have given up performing. A passing reference in the December 5, 1905 *Musical News* shows that she was in London then, but otherwise the composer's life is largely a mystery. A 1922 *Catalogue of Copyright Entries* shows that Willetta Parker of Malvern, England, "as the author," renewed for another 28 years the copyright of "The Song My Paddle Sings," the song mentioned in the *Globe* review as having been "published with considerable success." So we know Parker was alive and residing in England for at least part of the first quarter of the twentieth century (1067). On what basis can we judge the quality of a corpus so scattershot and, one has to assume, halted by life circumstances?

"I HIDE MYSELF . . .": TWO NEWLY FOUND MUSICAL SETTINGS FROM 1894

By 1894, Jacques Blumenthal was already a wealthy, well established composer and musician, a member of the Royal Philharmonic Society (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Jacob Blumenthal, *National Portrait Gallery, United Kingdom*. <<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp99617/jacques-jacob-blumenthal>>

Born in 1829 in Hamburg, Blumenthal studied in Vienna and Paris, and was working in London by 1848. Between that time and his death, in 1908, he seems to have been a consistent presence in middlebrow English music for decades. The 1910 *Grove Dictionary of Music* says he was “pianist to Queen Victoria, and a very fashionable teacher. As a composer he is known for a large number of brilliant, effective, and pretty pianoforte pieces” (343). His name appeared dozens of times in the English publication *Musical World* during 1866, often reporting on concerts that featured his popular songs “The Message” and “The Days That Are No More.” For example, the June 23, 1866 issue reviews “Herr Jacques Blumenthal’s Grand Matinee Musicale,” “an annual affair,” by noting, with ironic awe, the “array of beauty and rank as is seldom found together,” and the presence on the subscription list of “Five duchesses, four marchionesses, nine countesses, three

viscountesses, thirteen 'Ladys,' two Honorables, two baronesses, and one simple 'Mrs.'" This "antiphlogistic" — stuffy, dull — audience nonetheless heard what reads like really promising music including "two songs by Madame [Giulia] Grisi, [a favorite soprano of Walt Whitman], who shone in the Halls of Downshire resplendently" (P.M. 395).

There is no indication that Blumenthal ever visited the U.S., but he may have been well known to music fans here. *The Musical World's* pieces were often reprinted in American music magazines. His *Two Books of Song* were divided by general theme: Volume 1 is subtitled "In the Shadow," while Volume 2, which includes Dickinson's poems, is subtitled "In the Sunshine."⁵ The Library of Congress also holds sheet music of a number of his compositions, issued by respectable music publishers such as G. Schirmer and Oliver Ditson. Ditson was one of several publishers that anthologized songs by Blumenthal alongside works by internationally esteemed composers such as Josef Haydn, Franz Schubert, Richard Wagner, and Charles Gounod (Blumenthal *Christ the Pilgrim*). The publisher Henry Shepherd issued a collection of twenty-one songs with music by Blumenthal and words by F.E. Weatherly. (Weatherly is best remembered today for writing the words to "Danny Boy," and for "The Holy City.") Boosey & Co. published Blumenthal's *Album of Twenty Songs* in 1893. His work survived well into the era of commercial recording. On the Library of Congress's website, one may listen to a 1919 recording of his "Venetian Boat Song."⁶ Blumenthal was prolific, ambitious, and successful, yet he too is largely forgotten.

Two Books of Song sets "My River" and "With a Flower" amidst a wide range of German, French, and English language texts, including poems by Heinrich Heine and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Blumenthal clearly had international ambitions for the collection. Both volumes contain the same Preface, in which Blumenthal writes,

The collective title given to these songs does not quite express the idea which the composer had in view in writing them. But it was impossible to find an exact equivalent in English to the French *Chansons Intimes* or to the German *Intime Liedchen*. In these short songs the composer has tried to give expression to some of our deeper feelings or questionings — such songs as one might sing to oneself, when in the mood, or to some intimate friends.

Blumenthal's Preface, together with the list of song titles in the Table of Contents (see Figure 6), imply that these are songs of quiet but intense emotion, fin de siècle pieces that foreground sensation and intimacy: literally mood music.

TWO BOOKS OF SONG

COMPOSED BY

JACQUES BLUMENTHAL.

(Op. 101.)

VOL. II.

IN THE SUNSHINE

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY H.R.H. THE PRINCESS LOUISE,
MARCHIONESS OF LORNE.

LONDON & NEW YORK
NOVELLO, EWER AND CO.

Copyright, 1894, by Novello, Ewer and Co.

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Figure 6. "Contents." *Two Books of Song, Volume 2: In the Sunshine.* London: Novello & Ewer, 1894.

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25. Kein Wort (Resignation)	Max Hauschofer	66
26. Compensation	Stephen Campbell	70
27. All earthly joy returns in pain	Dunbar (1460-1520)	74
28. Lebewohl (A Farewell)	Ida von Düringsfeld	78
29. Wie kannst du ruhig schlafen? (How can't thou sleep in comfort?) H. Heine		81
30. Shadowland	George MacDonald	86

Figure 7. "Contents." *Two Books of Song, Volume 1: In the Shadow*. London: Novello & Ewer, 1894.

Blumenthal then thanks his patron: "The composer is indebted to H.R.H. The Princess Louise (Marchioness of Lorne) for the drawings representing respectively Shadow and Sunshine, graciously designed for these two Volumes by Her Royal Highness." Princess Louise was the sixth child of Queen Victoria. A painter and sculptor, and a supporter of indigent women and suffragists, Louise also spent five years in Canada, where her husband had been appointed Governor General

in 1878. In 1882, she briefly visited the U.S. Her frontispieces are expressionistic representations of rural scenes that exemplify the themes of the collection: that of Volume 1 shows a winding, rural path through overhanging trees, with a brighter opening in the distance, while that of Volume 2 shows an open, marshy landscape with a pond in the near distance and low cliffs beyond.

Why is Dickinson in such an unlikely setting? She certainly stands out. Few other women are represented, and nearly all of the texts are by British or German writers.⁷ Dickinson is the only American. She was not well known in England at this time. *Poems* was issued there in 1891, by the firm of Osgood, McIlvaine, but it sold only 500 copies (Buckingham 159, 558). It was reviewed by several English publications, but was generally dismissed. Perhaps Blumenthal or someone close to him owned a copy. It is possible that Princess Louise, who was popular in Canada and maintained strong ties there after returning to England in 1883, owned a copy of the British or American edition, and suggested that Blumenthal set Dickinson to music. He may simply have heard of the excitement over Dickinson's poems being published. Blumenthal was socially well connected, and both he and Louise were surrounded by writers and artists. Perhaps Blumenthal's publishers, including Boosey and Company as well as Novello, Ewer and Co., which had offices in the U.S., provided him with the texts. As is the case with Parker, Blumenthal may have set the poems to music well before they were published. Collectively, the publications contain 55 songs. Were those in Volume 2 necessarily composed last? Here we bump up against a similar lacuna, due not to the obscurity of the composer but of the work. Are Blumenthal's papers moldering in some archive in England or Germany? Would they provide a clue if they were?

Critics generally ignore the 1890s editions of Dickinson's poems, except when theorizing their early reception, or considering the roles of Higginson and Todd in altering Dickinson's manuscripts for print. Looking at these early musical adaptations offers an opportunity to read them as presented. The 1890 *Poems* is divided into four "Books," and both Dickinson poems adapted by Blumenthal are drawn from the second, "Love" (as is "Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?"). All three employ metaphors of the natural to describe feelings of separation and the desire for intimate connection. Blumenthal left the text of "With a Flower" as he found it, but he took some liberties with the text of "The Outlet." In addition to changing the title (which, of course, was an invention of Higginson and Todd), Blumenthal alters the words of the poem (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Emily Dickinson. "The Outlet." *Poems*. Roberts Bros, 1890.

The opening lines of both the manuscript and the printed text in the 1890 *Poems* are "My river runs to thee: / Blue sea, wilt welcome me?" (though *Poems* changes Dickinson's manuscript punctuation).

Blumenthal's song begins, "My river runs to the sea / Blue sea, wilt welcome me" (Figure 9).⁸

82

XXIV.
MY RIVER.

Emily Dickinson.

Jacques Blumenthal, Op.101.

Allegro vivace. $\text{♩} = 100$.

f brillante

My riv - er runs to the sea

Ped.

f

9878

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Figure 9. "My River." *Two Books of Song, Volume 2: In the Shadow*. London: Novello & Ewer, 1894.

83

Blue sea, wilt welcome me

brillante

Ped. sempre

P
My riv - er

a - waits re - ply

dim. molto

9878

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Oh, sea, _____ oh, sea, _____ oh, sea, look

p *murmurando* *p*

* Ped. * Ped. *

gra - ciously *mf* I'll fetch the brooks,

f

* Ped. * Ped. *

From spot - ted nooks Oh,

p

* Ped. * Ped. *

sea, take me!

* Ped. *

85

mf
oh, sea, take

Ped. * *Ped.*

me, take me,

calando

poco rit. *pp*
oh, take me!

poco rit. *p a tempo*
* *Ped.*

dim. *pp* *morendo* *pp*

* *Ped.*

9878

The replacement of “thee: / Blue sea” with “the sea” alters the meter, but more importantly it effaces the object of address. Instead of “My river runs to you,” that is, to an object of affection as grand, all-encompassing, and welcoming as the sea, the opening becomes simple reportage: one quasi-animate river, the possession of the speaker, runs to the sea. The removal of the question mark removes the plea, turning line two into an assertion: the sea will of course welcome the river, because that’s what seas do. Blumenthal’s river “awaits” rather than “waits” reply, a pedantic grammatical correction that again, and ironically, given 1890s criticism of Dickinson’s alleged crimes against rhythm, disrupts the meter. “Oh sea” repeats three times, presumably for dramatic effect. “I’ll fetch thee brooks” becomes “I’ll fetch the brooks,” again effacing the object of address, and particularizing Dickinson’s whimsical promise. Instead of, “I’ll go so far as to gather all of the brooks and bring them to you,” the statement becomes, “Oh, by the way, the brooks are coming, too.” Dickinson’s hopeful, colloquial “Say, sea, take me!” (in Todd and Higginson’s version) is changed to the more mournful, “Oh sea, take me!” followed by “oh, sea, take me, take me, oh, take me!” The merging of river and sea is more implicitly sensual, yet the effacement of the river’s direct address to the sea – their depersonifying – earlier in the song makes the metaphorical consummation perhaps a little overheated. Blumenthal seems to recognize the intensity of feeling in the poem, but (perhaps thanks in part to Todd and Higginson’s earlier changes to Dickinson’s punctuation) he misses some of the playfulness, and muddies the sense of one-to-one communication between a personalized river yearning for consummation with an equally personalized sea.

A review of the collection in the March 1, 1895 issue of *The Musical Times and Singing Class* said that “My River” “has a smooth part for the voice, and a very light, flowing, and graceful accompaniment.” Blumenthal himself “possesses the art of simplicity, and so far reminds one of Schubert.” About the collection of songs as a whole, the reviewer wrote, “They show deeper thought, greater refinement, and offer more points of interest in the workmanship than former works from the same pen” (169).

In contrast to the liberties taken in “My River” with the printed text of “The Outlet,” aka “My river runs to thee,” Blumenthal retains the title and text of “With a Flower” from the 1890 *Poems*. That first print version of the poem combines two of Dickinson’s versions, in fascicle 3 (about 1859), as well as in fascicle 40 (about 1864). Dickinson clearly wrote them as complete one-stanza variants of the same poem. As usual, Higginson and Todd changed details of punctuation and linear presentation at will. More importantly, they combined the two into a single two-stanza poem in the order in which they were written. (That is, the first four lines come from the 1859 fascicle 3, and the second four lines from the 1864 fascicle 40). The effect is to create a progression of feeling, from a quiet self-assuredness in the first variation / stanza,

where the flower is worn on the “unsuspecting” beloved’s breast, to a mournful resignation in the second variation / stanza, at the “fading” of the protective flower in the vase of the now more distant, though still proximate, beloved. There is a strange compression of time here, hidden from the “unsuspecting” composer and readers of and listeners to Blumenthal’s composition. The third extant copy, unbound, “was prepared about 1863 on a leaf of embossed notepaper, as if for sending with a flower. The manuscript, which has pinholes at the top, has not been folded or addressed” (Fr80 note). Its text matches the fascicle 40 version, though it differs in lineation and, as Franklin notes, uses embossed paper (stamped “Paris” with an oval filigree). Whomever Dickinson meant to share this with, the state of their relationship at the time was less “angels know the rest” and more “almost a loneliness.” The space for a flower makes the poem almost an instruction, but there is an ambiguity: was the attached flower meant to act out the work of the poem – to fade from “your vase” – or was it meant to replace a fading flower? Such questions, and the entire temporal progression from the fascicle 3 version to its embossed and fascicle 40 variants, are present only implicitly in *Poems* (Figure 10) and *Two Books of Song* (Figure 11), in the gap between stanzas one and two.

Figure 10. Emily Dickinson. “With a Flower.” *Poems*. Roberts Bros, 1890.

III.

WITH A FLOWER.

Emily Dickinson.

Jacques Blumenthal, Op.101.

Adagio sostenuto. ♩ = 96.

p *soavissima*

I hide myself within my

p *pp legato*

Ped. **Ped.* ***

rit. *a tempo*

flow - er, That wear - ing on your breast,

cantabile *rit.* *a tempo*

mf *rit.* *ppp rit.*

You, un - sus - pect - ing, wear it too: And An - gels know the

mf *pp rit.* *rit.* *pp*

9878

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Figure 11. "With a Flower." *Two Books of Song, Volume 2: In the Shadow*. London: Novello & Ewer, 1894.

a tempo
rest. *a tempo* I hide my - self within my

p

Ped. * *Ped.* *

rit. *a tempo*
flow - er, That, fad - ing from your vase, —

pp rit. *a tempo*
You, un - sus - pect - ing, feel for me — Al - most a lone - li -

pp rit. *pp rit. molto*

mf *riten.* *pp*
- ness.

Ped. * *Ped.* *

9878 *Ped.* *

CONCLUSION: DICKINSON'S MUSICALITY

I will close by pointing again to the speed with which Dickinson's poems were adapted by composers. The critique of Dickinson as unmusical has always been puzzling. She was literally a musical poet: a musician before she was a writer, playing the piano at age two and a half, attending singing school, and continuing to sing and play piano sufficiently well that friends and family members, some of them also musically sophisticated, remembered and remarked on the fact decades later. This article considers composers from the *fin de siècle*, because that is when Dickinson's work became widely available to the public. The musical culture Dickinson knew was itself musically adventurous and polyglot. Her own collection of sheet music provides evidence of this. The hundreds of pages of sheet music collected by Dickinson and bound on her behalf range across decades and musical style from adaptations of opera arias to minstrel songs. As George Boziwick has pointed out, "Containing just over 100 pieces, Emily Dickinson's binder's volume was uncommonly large" ("My Business Is to Sing" 15), "more than twice the size of the average binder" ("Emily Dickinson's Music Book" 84).

Hearing Dickinson's work in the context of nineteenth-century music composition can contextualize her deviations from expected metric patterns. Perhaps we have fetishized her rhythmic difficulty, following the orthodox Higginson and Todd, and 1890s reviewers, in hearing her variously as indifferent to, unaware of, or rebellious against accepted rhyme and meter. The narrative is familiar: Dickinson the eccentric spinster poet, misunderstood by her peers, needing the retrospective imprimatur of male modernist poet-critics. This narrative was successfully challenged by feminist critics in many respects, but it survives in discussions of musical adaptations of Dickinson's work, and shadows our reading of her prosody. Carlton Lowenberg perhaps unintentionally reinforced this perspective by focusing primarily on twentieth-century adaptations of Dickinson's work. In any case, the "trickle" of early, obscure, unrecorded settings grew in strength after Arthur Farwell's compositions in the 1920s, and reached flood level after settings by Elliott Carter, Ned Rorem, and Aaron Copland entered the canon. Whatever the quality of the early compositions, when compared with these modern masters, it matters whether their composers heard Dickinson's work as worthy of adaptation on its own terms. If they did, then Dickinson is even less a misfit, and more a citizen of her time, however distinctive.

It matters how Dickinson was heard by early composers, in part, because music has a more robust system than poetry for notating rhythm. Iambs, trochees, dactyls, anapests, and so on are useful in simplifying complex sound relationships,

but they can constrain or efface vibrant rhythmic ambiguities and complications, such as unanticipated pauses. A musician herself, Dickinson knew that successful songs, or poems, seldom follow a predictable tick-tock rhythm, and she made use of rhythmic strategies then common in music. Some of the ways the poems discussed here are musical or songlike are as follows:

1. They are easily scanned but not rhythmically predictable: that is, the rhythms vary in interesting ways. Even "With a Flower," the prosody of which is the most conventional of the three, varies from the beat in meaning-making ways. A small example is the tension between the extended "u" sound and the two stressed syllables in "You, unsuspecting." The effect is to combine hesitancy and emphasis.
2. There is a governing metaphor or thematic progression across the stanzas: hidden but sustaining brook, river to sea, flower as concealing shelter.
3. The tone in each case is one of intimacy and secret, shared knowledge. Each relies on direct address. The reader or listener can identify with the speaker, the object of affection, or both.
4. There is a powerful, easily identifiable feeling of desire, clearly expressed; the metaphors are not abstruse or allusive, and Dickinson does not jump from one metaphor to another.
5. Though the feelings are easy to relate to, there is in places a hint of mystery: what is "almost a loneliness"?

It may be that Dickinson's work was so readily set to music because the qualities that early critics, and Dickinson's own early editors found objectionable were heard not as flaws but as intriguing features by Parker, Blumenthal, and others not bound by the orthodox understanding of meter that persisted in 1890s literary criticism. Etta Parker's composing career is murky, possibly because there was still no reliable place for a woman to have a career as a composer in 1894, but we know that, as a performer, she was capable of performing works by composers as varied as Bach, Dvorak, Saint-Saens, Wagner, and Rubinstein. Given the rhythmic complexity of such pieces, it seems unlikely this flexible young composer would have heard anything strange or challenging in Dickinson's displacements of the beat.

Blumenthal, unlike Parker, was a well-established professional composer by the time he set two Dickinson poems to music. These adaptations by a composer situated far from New England, and with no personal connection to the Dickinson family, indicate that Dickinson's work was of musical interest on its own terms, and at a time when it was still most common for both European and American

composers to use European sources. Dickinson is one of only a few women whose work was adapted for his collection, and the only American. She appears alongside recognizable names in Victorian English poetry including Swinburne, Tennyson, George MacDonald, and Arthur Hugh Clough. These two earliest known musical settings, by composers of such divergent personal and professional backgrounds and circumstances, together show that Dickinson's writing was considered attractive material for adaptation into musical form during a time when even her literary champions seemed to feel compelled to apologize for her most distinctive qualities. These musical adaptations, made just four years after *Poems* was published, show Dickinson's work thriving across disciplinary boundaries almost immediately.

Notes

1. Born in 1873, Clarence Dickinson was an important composer and organist of religious music, as well as an educator. His father was William Cowper Dickinson, an Amherst graduate and important correspondent of Emily Dickinson, though a distant relative. (According to Thomas Johnson, the two shared "a common ancestor four generations back" (*Letters* 940).) Given the composer's family connections with Emily Dickinson, an examination of these compositions, including the place of these early secular pieces in what was a long and renowned musical career, might offer additional insight into how she was heard in the first decade of her publication.
2. In addition to Lowenberg, whose *Introduction to Musicians Wrestle Everywhere* provides a great deal of useful information about the musical culture around Dickinson, and her participation in that culture, beginning in the 1990s, books, articles, and dissertations by Judy Jo Small, Carlton Lowenberg, Wendy Shilton, Carolyn Lindley Cooley, and George Boziwick have shown Dickinson broadly and deeply involved, throughout her life, with the musical culture of her time.
3. This copy, from Brown University's collection, differs in several small ways from that reproduced in Lowenberg's book. First, it is published by C.M. Thompson, which Lowenberg indicates published the song as a stand-alone piece. Second, it is published under the name Willetha Parker, a variant of the name that appears in *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere*. Parker used this version of her name for other published compositions. The texts of Parker's and Blumenthal's settings, including differences between the printed scores and the 1890 *Poems*, are a significant concern of this essay, but the differences between Dickinson's manuscripts and *Poems* by its editors, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, are not a concern of this essay, because the Todd and Higginson edition is almost certainly the only version of Dickinson's work either composer knew.
4. See particularly, Chapter 7 of her *American Women Composers Before 1870*, "Five Mid-Nineteenth-Century Composers." In Dickinson studies, Victoria N. Morgan's *Emily Dickinson and Hymn Culture* unearths a culture of nineteenth-century professional women hymnodists.
5. Both volumes may be viewed at Hathitrust Digital Library, <<http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/68224771.html>>.
6. Venetian Boat Song: <<http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/6568>>.
7. Blumenthal's translator of texts from German and French was a woman, known as Gwendolen Gore. She may have been a relative. According to an obituary in the July 1908 *New Music Review and Church Music Review*, Blumenthal's wife's name was Leona Gore.

8. As with "Have You Got a Brook in Your Little Heart?" Todd and Higginson altered Dickinson's punctuation and line breaks and effaced emphatic underlines. For this article, which considers adaptations of the *printed* texts of Dickinson's poems, I accept their versions as presented.

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