Emily Dickinson, Jenny Lind, and Rural Nineteenth-Century Fandom

Gerard Holmes

Abstract: Although Emily Dickinson’s papers were preserved because of her place in literary history, not her musical knowledge, her engagement with music provides an opportunity to consider pre-twentieth-century fandom. New technologies and established social networks enabled fandom for a young rural woman. For this population more than male and urban audiences, fandom carried social danger, involving not only enthusiasm but discernment and even skepticism. The marketing of Jenny Lind’s mid-nineteenth-century tour depended on crafting a public image of the singer as virtuous and philanthropic. Dickinson’s letter describing a Lind concert in Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1851 critiques this image, transmitted into rural settings by local newspapers. Instead of the enthusiasm of indiscriminate audiences, Dickinson articulates a rurally inflected, judicious, self-selecting “Yankee” fandom.

Keywords: Emily, Dickinson, rural, women, fandom

Emily Dickinson was a music fan. Since Dickinson was born in 1830, this designation may seem anachronistic. However, as Daniel Cavicchi has pointed out, fanlike behavior preceded the term fan. Such behavior can seem familiar to twenty-first-century
audiences: concert-going, identification with performers, nostalgic attachment to public figures, and identity formation through collecting, for example. Yet fans are not indiscriminate: they select, discern, and distinguish between degrees of quality, sincerity, or authenticity. For example, if I am a fan of Emily Dickinson, it does not necessarily follow that I am also a fan of William Cullen Bryant or Helen Hunt Jackson. Dickinson’s practice of fandom shows that this was as true in the nineteenth century as it is today.

Historical fan studies such as Cavicchi’s have focused on urban and largely male audiences, studying cultures of fandom through journals and other personal accounts of concertgoing. There are good reasons for this. Historical evidence of fandom is more likely to be found in cities, where performers were more likely to reside or visit. Journals and letters documenting the experiences of urban readers and listeners are more likely to have found their way into archives. Moreover, women’s papers were less likely than men’s to be collected and preserved by archives.

If this makes a study of rural female fandom challenging, that challenge might be addressed by looking to a figure such as Dickinson. Although she lived almost her entire life in rural Amherst, Massachusetts, and kept no known journals or datebooks, the material record provides insight into her collecting, concert-going, and other forms of participation in the musical culture of her time and place. Her musical engagement is discussed both in her own letters and in the recollections of friends and family. Her youthful sheet music collection survives in a binder’s volume. These materials were preserved because they belonged to Dickinson the writer, but they offer insight into what, and how, she heard. By better understanding Emily Dickinson’s listening self, we gain access to a well-preserved, reasonably well-documented example of rural, female fandom.

For Dickinson scholars, doing so adds nuance to existing criticism that situates Dickinson as an engaged and discerning participant in her culture. Critics long ago set aside the notion of Dickinson the recluse, tragically separated from her society. Recent popular representations such as the 2019 film *Wild Nights with Emily* indicate that the public, too, is willing to imagine Dickinson actively engaged with her culture, listening to and performing music, tending personal connections with prominent writers and editors, and building an extended social network. Still, Dickinson’s tendency to stay home during a time of increasing mobility continues to trouble this understanding of her as culturally engaged. Establishing that Dickinson, a rural New England woman, had meaningful access to cultural experiences commonly associated with urban audiences can more firmly situate her within the cultural mainstream.

Understanding Dickinson as an engaged member of her society matters for our reading of her poems, since their initial reception was inflected by the
impression, introduced by her first editors Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, of artistic brilliancy in reclusion, perhaps owing to a mental or emotional disability. Readers in those early years might have read the poems differently if they had seen the note she wrote to her niece in May, 1873, describing a performance by the Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein as “an exchange of awe!” or another to a friend in May, 1874, about her excitement at the coming to town of the circus and the way “the Procession from Algiers will pass the Chamber-Window.”

Dickinson loved riddles. She drew cartoons and made collages. Sometimes she did accents or dialect. The poems, this article proposes, can be read as doing cultural work like a Rubinstein improvisation or a circus procession–playful, boundary-breaking bids for the exchange of awe. Because the opportunities for public engagement in fanlike behavior were limited, however, Dickinson’s cultural work in semi-public or private epistolary forms stands out. She wrote her jokes to friends, rather than telling them in person, and experienced her culture through other means besides the concert hall and museum gallery. (Her circle of correspondents grew, and included more public figures, in the years after her youthful travel and concert-going were mostly over.) Dickinson’s capacity to build a life that was both rural and interconnected was enabled by the technology of her time, in ways familiar to fans and scholars of fandom today: relatively unbounded by geography and local social networks, more distant, self-selecting, and volitional–more fanlike.

This article touches on her fanlike behavior in a range of settings but primarily focuses on an 1851 letter, well known to Dickinson scholars but less so outside Dickinson studies, in which she describes her experience attending a concert by the Swedish coloratura soprano Jenny Lind, then in the midst of an extended U.S. tour of unprecedented popularity. Dickinson’s ability to participate in that event, however fleetingly, without traveling far from home shows the accessibility of the kind of cultural experience that drew ardent fans in the mid-nineteenth-century U.S. and her involvement in discourses of fandom, even in rural Amherst. Yet Dickinson did more than participate: she actively assessed the experience. In responding to Lind, she makes ironically hyperbolic use of the rhetoric of indiscriminate enthusiasm to object to such enthusiasm and proposes instead a more judicious “Yankee” discernment.

Emily Dickinson and Rural Fandom

In the 1840s and 1850s, as musical performance in the U.S. became increasingly secularized and professionalized, new technologies permitted even a young middle-class rural woman like Emily Dickinson to be a fan. In his 2014 essay, “Fandom Before Fan: Shaping the History of Enthusiastic
Audiences,” Cavicchi describes fandom as “an extraordinary form of audiencing that includes everything from emotional attachment to performers to obsessive collecting.” As Cavicchi points out, cultural enthusiasm of earlier eras may comprise practices no longer recognizable as fandom. He has written elsewhere that “the basic practices associated with fandom—idealized connection with a star, strong feelings of memory and nostalgia, use of collecting to develop a sense of self, for example—precede the development of electronic ‘mass communication’ technologies.” Critics accustomed to identifying fandom with contemporary sites of affiliation such as television, the Internet, and cosplay gatherings may overlook fanlike behaviors of the nineteenth century. But “electronic ‘mass communication’ technologies” do not necessarily equate to twentieth- and twenty-first-century technologies. For nineteenth-century audiences, newspapers, magazines, novels, and sheet music were mass media, quickly and cheaply distributing information across great distances, and nascent electronic technologies made that distribution possible. The expansion of telegraph lines was crucial to the development of fanlike affiliation, especially for those outside major cities. By the 1840s, and especially after the placement of transatlantic and transcontinental telegraph lines by the 1860s, information moved across great distances almost instantaneously. As a result, even rural newspapers could quickly reprint news from large, distant cities. The Springfield Republican, to which Dickinson’s family subscribed, regularly reprinted political, economic, and music news from larger American and European cities. As Joan Shelley Rubin has pointed out, in the nineteenth century newspapers, and even book printing, were both “transatlantic and cosmopolitan,” printing and reprinting European news and texts, and “intensely local and rural.”

Fans also reacted to objects of admiration in ways we would find familiar today, seeking opportunities to personally, and sometimes creatively, interact with them or their material representations. For example, the death of Charlotte Temple, the title character of Susanna Rowson’s 1791 sentimental novel, inspired readers, well into the nineteenth century, to seek out a real gravestone with that name in the cemetery of Trinity Church in Lower Manhattan. Uncle Tom’s Cabin inspired fanfiction-like responses in print and on stage, from both admirers and detractors. James McPherson cites “at least fifteen” proslavery parodies “within two years,” and the introductory materials, annotations, and reproduced advertisements and sheet music in The Annotated Uncle Tom’s Cabin provide evidence of fanlike engagement with the novel, lasting into the twentieth century.

Cavicchi quotes from the personal journals by nineteenth century concertgoers in New York and Boston to make his case. These examples, and those in his full-length study, Listening and Longing: Music Lovers in the Age of Barnum, are centered on fandom in urban settings. Yet the U.S. was
primarily a rural country during the nineteenth century, with most people living outside of cities and their suburbs. In rural America there were few concert halls, symphony orchestras, pleasure gardens, and other settings like those Cavicchi’s concertgoers wrote of in their letters and journals. Rural fans had fewer opportunities to experience emergent popular culture in person, and the reminiscences of those physically and socially distant from archiving institutions were less likely to be preserved. Rural fans could instead participate in urban manias from a distance, thanks to the speedier movement of information via telegraph, and the reprinting of news in local papers. Improved railroad networks also facilitated rural fandom, allowing the movement of performers and carrying the books and sheet music associated with them. Some of these railroad networks passed through Amherst, in part because they were a priority of Dickinson’s father, Edward, who served several terms in the Massachusetts legislature, and a single term in the U.S. House of Representatives, during periods of railroad expansion.

Cavicchi writes of the difficulty that middle-class men faced in “reconciling ‘manly’ responsibility in the public sphere with a love for music.” Yet to be a female fan in a rural setting carried even greater social risks. For small-town, middle-class women, the danger was not in expressing love for music but in getting carried away with that enthusiasm in public. Public listening was potentially dangerous, because professions of enthusiasm changed both lives and reputations. Dickinson knew this, having seen waves of religious fervor move through Amherst. Her unwillingness or inability to be “saved” when friends and family professed religion affected her friendships. Public expressions of religious zeal were generally smiled upon, but to affiliate too ardently with a secular stage performer, or to be seen as “artful,” could put a young woman in real social jeopardy. The challenge was to reconcile enthusiasm with traditionally feminine means of consumption and distribution. Dickinson pointed to the danger of social “lava” that might result from a misstep:

Volcanoes be in Sicily
And South America
I judge from my Geography
Volcano nearer here
A Lava step at any time
Am I inclined to climb
A Crater I may contemplate
Vesuvius at Home

One way to safely express enthusiasm, then, was to keep away from recognized torrid zones and remain a “Vesuvius at home,” where one might “contemplate” reception.
one’s pathway, and watch one’s step, through the local “Geography.” Rather than attend concerts or perform in public, a woman might perform for trusted friends or invite them to perform for her. Rather than accede to the competitive world of print, one might share writing among friends, family members, and even trusted public figures, retaining autonomy by situating literary and musical performances within the socially acceptable gift economy.

My study of Emily Dickinson’s fandom, then, builds on Cavicchi’s definition and proposes some ways to identify sites and behaviors that constitute rural and female fandom in the nineteenth-century U.S. These include collecting sheet music, writing letters expressing admiration or seeking advice, imitating recognized styles or admired authors or musicians in performance among friends and family, submitting one’s own creations to admired writers or to the newspapers and magazines with which they were associated, reading literary or music news in newspapers and magazines, and playfully identifying with fictional subjects or their authors in letters or other writing.

Dickinson’s example shows that it was possible to be a fan in rural nineteenth-century New England. A listener could attend performances by internationally recognized musical performers and orators in and near small towns such as Amherst thanks to newly developed transportation systems, including improved roads and expanded railroad networks. These made it possible for the soprano Jenny Lind to perform in Northampton, Massachusetts, during the second year of her 1850–1852 U.S. tour, a performance Dickinson and most of her family attended. Newspapers and journals reprinted reports of musical events from U.S. and European cities, a practice exploited by P. T. Barnum, the sponsor and manager of Lind’s tour during its first year, to create excitement for upcoming performances. Finally, illustrated sheet music featured images strategically designed to manage audience perceptions of performers: the Hutchinson Family Singers, rural abolitionists and temperance advocates, dressed plainly and faced the viewer directly at full length, while Lind, dubbed the Swedish Nightingale, might appear in three-quarter profile or with filigree or bird illustrations. Such visual cues enabled antebellum rural music collectors to engage and identify with popular performers without migrating or even traveling to cities, though Dickinson did the latter on occasion, visiting nearby Springfield, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and possibly New York during her lifetime.

Dickinson’s fandom crossed boundaries of artistic discipline: she was a fan of writers as well as music-makers. She owned a copy of the (already rare) 1846 Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, the first, pseudonymous publication of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë.12 About 1860, five years after Charlotte Brontë’s death, Dickinson wrote “All overgrown by cunning moss,” signaling her insider knowledge of Brontë’s former masculine pen name and West

GERARD HOLMES

43
Yorkshire locale with the lines “‘Currer Bell’ / In quiet ‘Haworth’ laid.”

Dickinson sometimes engaged in a sort of epistolary, gender-transcending cosplay, as when, in a letter to Susan Dickinson, she took on the persona of the narrator of the bestselling *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1850), writing, “as you and I would walk and have such pleasant musings, if you were only here—perhaps we would have ‘ Reverie’ after the form of ‘Ik Marvel’ . . . only you and I would try to make a little destiny to have for our own.” She also sought opportunities to connect with writers she admired, especially during the war years and after. An avid reader of the *Atlantic Monthly*, she wrote to its regular contributor Thomas Wentworth Higginson after reading his “Letter to a Young Contributor” in April, 1862, sending a set of poems under the guise of seeking advice. They remained in contact until Dickinson’s death, after which Higginson became an editor of the first posthumous collection of her poems. Her relationships with Higginson and other influential public literary figures, including Helen Hunt Jackson, Samuel Bowles, and Josiah Holland, remained within a self-delimited network of friendship and gift exchange. As a result, her fanlike engagement with writers helped to develop—perhaps intentionally, perhaps not—an informal network of fans of her own work. Within that network, Dickinson developed a semi-public persona among influential literati in New England and beyond. For example, Higginson wrote of a group of friends presenting to him, as a birthday gift, a letter they had written parodying the style of “my partially cracked poetess.” Jackson wrote to Dickinson in 1875 that she had in her possession “a little manuscript volume with a few of your verses in it” and had “spent a day” with a mutual friend, “and we talked about you. So threads cross, even on the outermost edges of the web.”

Thus, even as Dickinson refused opportunities to print her work, and her public presence diminished even in Amherst, awareness of her and her work grew, first through a personal network of family and friends, then later through a diversifying network of correspondents and their social networks, all with minimal physical travel or in-person encounters beyond her rural New England community. It was there, in the tiny town of Northampton, Massachusetts, that she wrote her most extended report of attendance of a musical performance, which provides a useful illustration of the way Dickinson experienced, and documented, the workings of rural fandom.

**Dickinson, Celebrity, and Jenny Lind**

Emily Dickinson’s encounter with the operatic soprano Jenny Lind in Northampton, near Amherst, took place on Thursday, July 3, 1851. Dickinson wrote about the experience in a letter to her brother, Austin, three days later.
The letter begins with a description of a church service she attended earlier that morning, and toward its close she updates Austin on the local news. Contrasting Dickinson’s ironic response with the more conventionally enthusiastic report of a local newspaper reveals how a rural but musically sophisticated listener made sense of an encounter with a genuine midcentury celebrity. Dickinson’s enthusiasm is inflected with the skepticism, the selective discrimination of the music fan.

Lind’s performance in Northampton took place about midway through a tour that lasted approximately eighteen months. The first half was managed by P. T. Barnum, who sought her out and contracted with her, never having heard her sing. “I risked it on your reputation,” he told her. Lind had made that reputation, not in the traditional centers of opera such as Paris and Milan, but in Stockholm, becoming “the prima donna and favorite” by performing leading roles in Weber’s Der Frieschütz and Meyerbeer’s Robert le Diable.19 Performances in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, and especially London increased her fame to the point that, at her arrival in New York, “a crowd of some twenty thousand people surrounded the Irving House,” where she was staying.”20 For Lind’s first concert in the U.S. at Castle Garden at the foot of Manhattan, tickets with a face value of $6 were auctioned for as much as $225 each. Such auctions were also held in Boston, when Lind moved on to that city, and the ticket prices and resulting, unprecedented concert income became headline news repeated locally as she traveled across the U.S. and Cuba.21

Lind’s generosity was also a significant component in her reputation. Along her tour, she gave to fire companies, charitable organizations, single parents and families with sick children, and seemingly any Swedish person who asked. Bluford Adams writes that, with Lind’s tacit complicity, Barnum situated her “as the foremost domestic ‘angel’” in the United States before Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Little Eva. Her listeners heard in her performances the ideals of sentimental mid-century expression: she was “artless, spontaneous, and unconscious.” Yet, in the end, Lind was “caught between domesticity and celebrity.”22 Those who could not afford to attend resented high ticket prices. Crowds gathered outside concert halls, sometimes leading to violence. Lind was parodied as affected and even greedy (See Figure 1.) She and Barnum split, apparently amicably, as of June 9, 1851, and Lind continued touring under her own management.23 Her tour continued until May, 1852, concluding at New York’s Castle Garden, where it had begun. The July 3, 1851, concert in Northampton, then, took place less than a month after Lind and Barnum publicly parted ways and slightly less than halfway through the tour.

As Páraic Finnerty points out, Lind’s fame continued throughout the tour’s second half, and even after her retirement in 1852. Finnerty writes, “The account shows Dickinson’s participation in her community’s brush with fame and
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presents it as communal worship, akin to religious experience,” an experience that, he argues, Dickinson sought to replicate by creating a community of enthusiasts for her writing by withholding her public self. “Dickinson does not disallow fame but rather delays it.” The audience’s response to Lind’s performance, in Dickinson’s recounting, does read like a religious experience, an impression reinforced by its proximity to her report on the religious service she has just left. Yet her depiction is satirical. This can be seen by contrasting her description of the concert with one that appeared in a weekly local newspaper, the Hampshire and Franklin Express. In celebrating Lind’s movement into more rural settings, the Express contrasted her perceived humility and sincerity with the purported insatiable greed of her former manager: “Where the great manager, Barnum, thought he could not obtain money enough to fill his avaricious pockets, sufficiently, Jenny herself, finds retirement, full houses and an enthusiasm unsurpassed in the largest cities.” With abundant hometown spirit, the Express declared the performance, in Northampton’s “Old Church,” “her greatest concert in America.” The “Old Church” was locally associated with Jonathan Edwards, the preacher whose evangelically fervent sermons had sparked the Great Awakening. Lind performed there in the midst of a new wave of religious enthusiasm, the Second Great Awakening. Perhaps this association explains why there had been “strenuous efforts in certain quarters to prevent” Lind’s performance there, according to the Express. Perhaps Lind was perceived by some in the community as less virtuous, and more socially suspect, than the Express cared to acknowledge. Yet the concert was a success. “Notwithstanding [that] the rain poured in torrents most of the evening, . . . from every town in the immediate vicinity the people turned out in great numbers,” wrote the anonymous Express reporter. “Numerous boquets [sic], many of them large and beautiful, were showered on the stage during the performance.” In other columns on the same page, the Express also partook in the popular narrative about Lind as a virtuous philanthropist. She “was repeatedly cheered by the members of fire companies and others as the procession passed” and had refused to sing for the King of Sweden at the palace on a Sunday despite being “commanded” to do so. “There is a higher King, Sire, to whom I owe my first allegiance,” she was said to have responded. As evidence of her continued popularity, the Express described Lind’s escape from her Hartford concert “at the time of the mob . . . by a back window.”

Dickinson writes of the same event, and even uses some of the same language, but more skeptically. (Another musically inclined poet, Walt Whitman, also responded skeptically to Lind. By contrast, he remembered with pleasure, decades later, the performances of his favorite, Marietta Alboni.) Clearly excited by the event, Dickinson also seems to comment on the enthusiasm surrounding her. She sets the scene, as the Express had,
by describing the most mundane of details, the weather, but does so with ironic overstatement. The “perils starting” on the journey to Northampton by carriage, with her father, mother, and sister, included “a kicking horse, an inexperienced driver, a number of Jove’s thunderbolts, and a very terrible rain.” To make matters worse, the horse begins “kicking and plunging,” indifferent to both “whips and moral suasion” of “the gentleman who drove” (Letters, L46).29

We might miss, though Dickinson and her brother would have both recognized, the importance of the phrase “moral suasion” here, in a preamble to the Lind concert. As a purported “domestic angel,” and especially through her well-publicized charitable donations and visits to sick children, Lind was associated with moral suasion, the feminine power to influence others to do right, deriving from the performance of proper morality. In the parable of Lind’s encounter with the King of Sweden, she employs moral suasion to remind him that he is only an earthly, not a heavenly king, who should himself respect the Sabbath. Dickinson sustains a tone of irreverence to such righteousness. She writes to Austin on a Sunday, parodying pious rhetoric: “the concert commenced at eight, but knowing the world was hollow we thought we’d start at six” (Letters, L46). Her pairing (in the same letter) of moral suasion with whips and their collective failure to convince even a beast of burden to do its duty signal a breakdown in the expected moral order.

Dickinson acknowledges that Lind is capable of generating the kind of fervent responses documented in the Express. “Jennie came out like a child” and “sang and sang again.” The audience’s response is so fervent that “boquets [sic] fell in showers, and the roof was rent with applause.” Dickinson writes, “it thundered outside, and inside with the thunder of God and of men–judge ye not which was the loudest.” In Dickinson’s hyperbolic recounting, Lind’s performance is so impressive that the human-created applause seems to compete with heavenly thunder. Does the weather want to join in the applause? Is it the boom of what Jonathan Edwards called “an angry God,” unhappy with the adulation of human achievement in church? Dickinson doesn’t say, though she playfully remarks that “we all loved Jennie Lind, but not accustomed oft to her manner of singing did’nt [sic] fancy that so well as we did her.” Of the singing, Dickinson says, “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” (Letters, L46). Here Dickinson refers to Lind’s two best-known songs, both involving imitation of natural sounds and requiring elaborate technical skills, which made the songs highly performative. In the “Echo Song,” Lind used the movement of sound within the room to create the illusion of singing along with herself, and “The Bird Song” made ample use of birdlike vocal embellishments. Dickinson acknowledges the skill these performances require, but the judgment that “no doubt it was very fine”
is located outside individual judgment, a seemingly compulsory, collectively predetermined conclusion. The musical, and discernment of its relative “fineness,” get brushed away by the insistence that “we all loved Jennie Lind,” almost regardless of what or how she sings.

Here Dickinson seems to point to Lind’s reputation for virtuousness, essential to Barnum’s marketing of the tour and present in the stories the Express printed about her visit to Northampton. Famously attached to her homeland and humble origins, Dickinson describes a theatrically sincere “air of exile in her mild blue eyes, and a something sweet and touching in her native accent.” When she sings “Give me my lowly, thatched cottage again,” a line from “Home, Sweet Home,” Dickinson says she “grew so earnest she seemed half lost in song and for a transient time I fancied she had found it and would be seen ‘na mair’” (Letters, L46). In describing the concert, Dickinson takes on the persona of a naïve and indiscriminately accepting, even gullible fan to mock both the excess of Lind’s sentimental engagement with the material and the audience’s thunderous approval. The Swedish exile pleading in song, in her romantic foreign accent, to be returned to her humble, rural home seems to slip into an entranced, almost religious fervor, such that she almost disappears from sight, transported to the imagined country home and, perhaps implicitly, to her heavenly home. Dickinson’s “fancy” that Lind would disappear altogether is even rendered in quasi-Swedish dialect. Yet the performed desire to escape exile and to return home is feigned. Lind continued touring until mid-1852. She had broken with Barnum, and this concert and all that followed were at her own initiative.

Dickinson’s father’s response is conventionally old fashioned, appropriate for a parlor performance, but not for the kind of public performance he is attending, even in a church. Edward Dickinson politely greets the musicians with “Good evening Sir,” and as the concert ends bids them farewell with a “very well–that will do.” In this setting, where hyper-enthusiasm is the norm, his measured response is rendered absurd. Yet, while Dickinson invites Austin to laugh along at their father’s formalities, she also seems to obliquely admire them. They may be intentional, and even ironic. As she writes, “it was’nt sarcasm exactly, nor it was’nt [sic] disdain, it was infinitely funnier than either of those virtues.” He is performing a part he knows well, acting the role of “old Abraham” soberly judging the show “all very well, but a little excess of Monkey!” (Letters, L46). The association of her father with Abraham the Hebrew patriarch and law-giver is another ironic conflation by Dickinson of religious and secular musical enthusiasm. He is not Jonathan Edwards, but he is a Yankee, and perhaps not fully willing to recognize the changes that have been so enthusiastically endorsed around him, even in the Northampton church where the Great Awakening began. Edward Dickinson’s response simply assumes a

G E R A R D H O L M E S

49
formal, neighborly, rural probity in social interaction and intently ignores the frenzy. It is visible to Dickinson, however. Her warning to Austin not to “judge” whether human applause or divine thunder is louder serves only to foreground the leveling of divine and human performance and to raise the question whether the old, rural, Yankee ways represented by Edward’s now-absent, if noisy, God are losing ground against the sentimentalized, commercialized virtuousness of the earthly Lind.

Conclusion

Dickinson’s description of the Northampton Lind concert is not “sarcasm exactly” or “disdain,” but something “infinitely funnier.” Dickinson, age twenty, unfazed by fame, coolly, knowingly, and self-assuredly looks and listens with a fan’s discerning eye and ear to the arrival and performance of an international singing star. Her response is to describe it with a playfully hyperbolic irony that shows both her awareness of popular music performance norms and her skepticism about uncritical affiliation with those norms. Near the end of her account, she documents the box-office earnings for the performance by Lind, popularly understood to be virtuously and ethereally unconcerned with money. “She took 4000 $ / mistake arithmetical / for tickets at Northampton aside from all expenses” (Letters, L46).

Rebecca Bechtold has summarized the effect of Jenny Lind’s American tour, particularly the way “Lind exposed and intensified the ‘cultural apparatus’ supporting celebrity culture in the United States in the nineteenth century, creating an excitement in the American public relatively rare for a female performer.”

I would extend this observation to say that excitement around Lind’s performances was unprecedented, for a female or a male performer, in the U.S. or anywhere else. As with Madonna in the 1980s, or Beyoncé today, so great was the publicity apparatus underlying the phenomenon of Jenny Lind in the early 1850s that it would have been nearly impossible not to have an opinion. But unlike these later figures, Lindmania supplanted older forms of enthusiasm, religious and patriotic. As these became increasingly fraught with sectional loyalties, popular culture and fan affiliation grew in importance. Dickinson’s letter intervenes in this moment, challenging the presumptions underlying the new secular musical virtuosity that invoked for commercial purposes a public persona of religious virtue. She also forecasts a newly vigorous female, rural critical voice, communicable across distance by letter, sending her opinion, formulated in a rural town, to the large city where Austin then resided. Yet looking back, we can also see that this voice was still delimited by circumstances beyond her control, connected to her gender and location.
Austin himself had seen Lind in Boston several weeks before, apart from his family, yet for Dickinson, attending the concert, the occasion for her written response, was still only possible enmeshed in a larger social context of family and community.

Jenny Lind was among the pioneers of a new, forward-looking form of celebrity, based on anticipation and its individual, transactional satisfaction. It was exciting, ignored traditional borders, and was unconcerned with political or large-scale social matters. (On her U.S. tour, both before and after Barnum, Lind seemed not to discriminate between Northern and Southern audiences.) This is the origin of celebrity as we know it today: open and accessible to all regardless of geography or setting, with our experiences largely prepackaged and based on reputation, a word seldom used today, though “buzz” or “influence” might be a less morally loaded equivalent for the twenty-first century. The cultural apparatus of celebrity, as enabled by Barnum, was brought to prominence by Lind, and the effect was not only to commodify performance that had previously been more local, domestic, and participatory, but also to generate an enthusiasm so powerful as, seemingly, to kill skepticism. Dickinson was a music fan, but she was not a fan of this value-free celebrity.

GERARD HOLMES is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of Maryland. His dissertation, “Discretion in the Interval: Emily Dickinson’s Musical Performances,” considers the importance of music, especially musical improvisation, for Dickinson’s writing. He is the recipient of a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Fellowship.

NOTES
3. See, for example, Barton Levi St. Armand, Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: The Soul’s Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) and the special celebrity-themed issue of Emily Dickinson Journal 26, no. 2 (2017).


12. Emily Dickinson to Thomas Niles, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, L813a, and Niles’s letter to Dickinson in response, 813b, including editor’s note to 813a about Dickinson’s ownership of the volume.


16. Emily Dickinson to Mrs. T. W. Higginson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, L481, editor’s note to this Christmas 1876 letter to Higginson’s wife Mary, née Channing.

18. Emily Dickinson to Austin Dickinson, *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, L46. Subsequent quotations from this letter will be cited parenthetically as “Letters, L46.”


21. Ware and Lockard, 20.


23. Ware and Lockard, 97.


29. It was less strange than it might seem for such a concert to take place in a church. A July 1 article in the *Hartford Courant* notes that a concert that night in Springfield, Massachusetts, would be held at “Dr. Osgood’s church” and held out hope for a Hartford concert at “the Centre church” (“Jenny Lind,” *Hartford Daily Courant*, July 1, 1851, 2).