

December 11, 2008

MUSIC REVIEW

Reclaiming a Poet: Old Words, New Music

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

When [Aaron Copland](#) set a dozen [Emily Dickinson](#) poems, he couched them in a musical language that was identifiably his own and of his time. But Copland's settings, from 1948 to '50, also relied on a formality of expression and structure that would have seemed entirely natural to Dickinson's 19th-century sensibilities.

Michael Gordon's new multimedia work, "Lightning at Our Feet," is also built around Dickinson's poetry. But Mr. Gordon's aim was not to reach back to Dickinson, as Copland did and as most composers who set this poetry do. Instead he and his collaborators in the Ridge Theater — principally the director Bob McGrath and the dramaturge Daniel Zippi — imagined Dickinson as a 21st-century voice, spiritual and earthy in roughly equal parts.

Mr. Gordon's work, which opened at the Harvey Theater of the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) on Tuesday evening, establishes its terms starkly in the first few moments. Leah Coloff, accompanying herself on the cello — first with a pizzicato figure, then with a quick, repeating arpeggio — sings "The Soul Selects Her Own Society" with a combination of artful angularity and a rock-inflected assertiveness.

This is virtuoso chamber music of a sort, which is more typical among young players for whom distinctions between musical genres don't matter, and who are expected to move easily not only between styles but also from instrument to instrument, usually while singing. Ms. Coloff's instrumental colleagues were Courtney Orlando, who played violin and piano ably and sang in a plaintive, sometimes microtonal style, and Bora Yoon, whose soprano has an affecting clarity and who played electronic keyboard, viola, electric guitar and percussion.

The fourth member of this quartet, which together represented different aspects of Dickinson, was Jennifer Charles, the lead singer of the indie band Elysian Fields. Ms. Charles applied her alluringly rough-hewn timbre to most of the lead vocals.

At times Mr. Gordon's score moved through stretches of dreamlike, sustained textures, laconic passages redolent of the [Velvet Underground](#), hard-driven string figures and sections part sung and part recited by Ms. Charles in a pianissimo growl that suggested a connection between

Dickinson and [Leonard Cohen](#). (The musical arrangements were credited to Mr. Gordon and the four performers, as well as Ted Hearne, who was also listed as music director.)

Jim Findlay's elegant set uses movable scrims, on which Bill Morrison's films and Laurie Olinger's projections create a constant, changeable flow of images. Moving the scrims around the stage (at one point making them into a box meant to represent Dickinson's house) is another of the musicians' jobs. Mr. McGrath's direction makes this seem entirely natural, as if hauling scrims around were something Dickinson might do if she were alive.

"Lightning at Our Feet" runs through Saturday at the Harvey Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene; (718) 636-4100, bam.org.