

**Review: *Emily Jane Brontë and Her Music* by John Hennessy, York: York Publishing Services, 2018, viii-491 pages, £18.95 (paperback), ISBN 978999683603**

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When ‘One day, in the autumn of 1845,’ Charlotte Brontë ‘accidentally alighted’ on her sister Emily’s volume of poetic verse, she described how, to her ear, the poems ‘had [...] a peculiar music – wild, melancholy, elevating’.<sup>1</sup> Aptly, since the mid-nineteenth century, numerous scholars and biographers have commented on Emily’s musicality. As early as 1846, for instance, Sydney Dobell — writing anonymously in the *Athenaeum* — celebrated ‘How musical’ Ellis Bell’s poems were, ‘how lightly and how easily the music falls from his heart and pen’.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, writing for *Blackwood’s Magazine* a few years later, E.S. Dallas reflected on ‘Ellis’s’ ‘music of expression which Currer [Bell, aka Charlotte Brontë], with all her wonderful felicity of diction, never attained’.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Stevie Davies described *Wuthering Heights* (1847) as ‘a musician’s novel’, and asserted that Emily ‘thought musically’; her prose, Davies stated, revealed ‘a musical ear attuned to phrasings and cadences of an expressive but restrained reverie’.<sup>4</sup> Despite these cursory observations,

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Brontë, ‘Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell’, in *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Pauline Nestor (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. xxxvi-xlii, p. xxxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Sydney Dobell, ‘Poetry of the Milton’, *Athenaeum*, 4 July 1846, p. 682;

<sup>3</sup> E.S. Dallas, ‘From an unsigned Review’, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, July 1857, reprinted in Miriam Allott (ed.), *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1974), pp. 358-362, p. 358.

<sup>4</sup> Stevie Davies, *Emily Bronte (Writers and Their Work)*, Devon: Northcote, 2006, p. 44.

though, there had not been any sustained analysis of Emily's relationship to music. Aptly, therefore, in Emily's bicentenary year, John Hennessey—pianist, harpsichordist, Beethoven expert, and the man responsible for the Brontë Parsonage Piano Maintenance Fund, a scheme to ensure the piano's ongoing preservation—puts this scholarly omission to rights in his considered and comprehensive title, *Emily Jane Brontë and Her Music* (2018).

Hennessey's book provides invaluable insight into the role that music played in the life of the second youngest Brontë sibling. Specifically, he seeks to elucidate Emily's love of music, demonstrate the part it played in her life, and consider how and in what ways 'music may have had any effect on [her] creative outputs' (p. x).

The book is structured systematically. He begins with an overview of how social and technological changes between 1750-1850 impacted the development of Western music, particularly music in England, before moving on to contextualise the musical and cultural sources that influenced and shaped the Brontës. Here Hennessey delineates Emily's musical skill; she was the most accomplished musician in the family, adept at playing a variety of classical pieces on the family's cabinet piano which the siblings received tutelage on (indeed, Emily's 'Diary Paper' from November 1834 includes the confession that she and Anne had not 'Done [their] music exercise which consists of b major').<sup>5</sup> Bringing together factual details and commentary on her musical education, Hennessey paints a picture of Emily's development as a pupil and her relationship with music. However, Hennessey also documents the myriad concerts and orchestral performances that played in Haworth and Brussels (where she spent some time as an adult) that Emily may have attended, leading him to marvel (righteously) — at one point — at the fact that 'The thought that Franz Liszt and Emily Jane

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<sup>5</sup> Emily and Anne Brontë, 'Diary Paper', 24 November 1834, in *Tales of Glass Town, Angria and Gondal*, ed. by Christine Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 487.

Brontë might just perhaps have been in the same room together is a distinctly intriguing one' (p. 51).

Impressively, Hennessey catalogues and evaluates methodically the musical scores owned by the Brontë family, including thirty-seven pieces of sheet music (now held in The Parrish Collection at Princeton University) that contains scores by Rossini and Handel among others, and the three volumes of piano music belonging to both Emily and Anne that has various visible inscriptions by the siblings. These latter arrangements for organ comprise works by Mozart and Haydn. As Hennessey notes, 'some of the scores [...] are technically very demanding, and may have been beyond Anne's capability, and consequently only played by Emily', an assertion Hennessey is well-placed to make having considered the sisters' training, but he also notes that some of the pieces were duets that the sisters could have played together or with their teacher, Abraham Sunderland, something which breathes new life into the specificity of how music informed the daily lives of the family.

What comes from this detail, then, is not only a rich and original picture of how Emily engaged with music but how it may have informed her writing. Hennessey suggests that 'Emily's versification skills were complex, considerate, and closely linked to her understanding of music' (p. 100). Literary scholars will no doubt find the explanations of rhythm and meter unnecessary, but they will be useful to students writing on Emily's verse.

However, a different approach to the musical influences on Emily's writing is made through Hennessey discussion of Emily and Beethoven. As he puts it, 'the inclination to link' these two influential figures 'is irresistible' (p. 57). Undoubtedly, Emily was familiar with his music; scores held by the Parsonage Museum include her markings, and her *Musical Library* includes details of his biography. But what follows in Hennessey's text is a discussion of the parallels between their lives and works, their tragedies and traumas, a comparison of their

work ethic, and some reflection on how the movements of *Wuthering Heights* echo the operatic aspects of Beethoven's works. As Hennessey concludes 'whether or not Emily Brontë was [actually] influenced in any way by Beethoven' is something that we shall never know because there is no 'hard evidence', but it

would be convenient and exciting to think that the creator of Heathcliff and Catherine was fully aware of, and perhaps could even play, the *Appassionata* sonata, that it was running through her mind during the writing of a novel which, in the late 1840s was unique, and remains to this day a defining work in the history of English literature (p. 80).

What is to be praised about *Emily Jane Brontë and Her Music* and what Hennessey does particularly well is to delve into the detail of various the 'infuriatingly vague' claims by biographers and scholars about Emily's so-called musicality that are unsupported by evidence or archival sources and to interrogate them with precision and analytical depth. For instance, Hennessey notes that 'more than one writer' has reported that Charlotte claimed that Emily played Beethoven's 'earlier sonatas with fire and spirit', but as Hennessey indicates, such claims have yet to be substantiated by evidence (p. 105). As well as questioning the veracity of the statement, Hennessey reflects on its possible implications:

If Charlotte did make this statement, did she mean complete sonatas, or just separate movements? If the former, the inference is that her sister became acquainted with them during her time in Brussels, for no complete scores of Beethoven sonatas belonging to Emily are in the collections at Haworth or Princeton University [and unfortunately,] the Conservatoire Royal de Bruxelles has no record of any early editions [...] However, her [Charlotte's] use of the word 'earlier' is interesting in that it presupposes a comparison with 'later' sonatas and this, in turn, hints at the possibility

that Emily had access to a complete set, in opus number order, at the Pensionnat. (p. 105).

It is such attention to detail – both analytical and factual – that sets Hennessey's book apart. His knowledge of the Brontës, their music, the lives and works of various composers, and an impressive account of nineteenth-century instruments provides a rich seam of fresh insight into these subjects and opens a new understanding of the apparently aloof Brontë.

Accompanying the prose chapters are a variety of appendices including 'Notes on Playing the John Green Piano' – the cabinet piano at the Parsonage – by Ken Forrest, the expert who restored the instrument to working order, a commentary on 'Playing Emily Brontë's piano' by Isabelle Oehmichen, and Hennessey's own music settings for two of Brontë's poems: 'It is too Late to Call Thee Now' and 'No Coward Soul is Mine'. The annotations and indexes throughout situate an encyclopaedic resource alongside a scholarly commentary, and they are incredibly impressive.

Having had the pleasure of hearing Hennessey talk at this year's Brontë Society conference to mark Emily's bicentenary it is unsurprising that this book is well-documented and well-written. Hennessey is a considered scholar who is cautious and careful in the handling of sources and pointed in his analysis. If there are any criticisms to be made of the book it is, regrettably, the overall quality of the published copy. Had the book been published by a mainstream publisher then small quibbles such as issues with formatting (notes not appearing in superscript, for instance) and the size of the text (it is a thick, door-stopping 500-page volume) may have been offset by the ability to publish a larger physical copy that would have done justice to the quality of the content. This feels like a miserly observation to make, but it comes from finding such value in the material and feeling that the paperback edition undermined the content. Such picky observations aside though, *Emily Jane Brontë*

*and Her Music* is a very welcome addition to *Brontë Studies*, and it will, I hope, breathe new life into the biography and study of this important Victorian writer.