

Toward Eternity

for soprano and piano

(2019)



Benjamin Gabbay (b. 1995)

Text by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

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Duration: 3"15"

What elements can a musical setting contribute to a text? In many ways, its capabilities for expression are at par with that of poetry, only more in the realm of the abstract—and still, to the imaginative listener, it may conjure impressions more vivid and nuanced than any words could. In a work so rich with imagery as Emily Dickinson's haunting #479 ("Because I could not stop for Death..."), the matter becomes a question of what a musical setting can bring to such a text without impudently vying for attention over the words it is meant to uphold. To me, the answer was *pace* and *time*. The narrator in Dickinson's poem is on a journey whose end and beginning both seem obscure, even while the direction is eventually surmised. It was in this vein that I sought to portray the trundling of that cold "Carriage" in the rolling accompaniment that underpins the work—changing, like seasons, with the world that passes by, while never quite abandoning its fateful momentum. Though we are told that the vehicle comes to pause at the buried "house," perhaps where most earthly journeys end, a point of arrival for the narrator is never clear; it is as though the carriage still rolls on, the passenger only aware of the trajectory toward that mysterious Eternity.

*Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.*

*We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –*

*We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –*

*Or rather – He passed us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –*

*We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –*

*Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –*

- Emily Dickinson, no. 479
(1830 - 1886)

*Written for, and premiered by, soprano Claire Latosinsky
at the Faculty of Music, University of Toronto, December 2019*