MacDOWELL
Fireside Tales, Op. 61

Edited by Maurice Hinson

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Foreword

Among American composers, Edward MacDowell (1860–1908)[1] occupies a historically important place as the first American whose works were accepted as comparable in quality and style to those of the representative German Romantic composers of his time. Almost all of his works have titles borrowed from nature, literature or painting. MacDowell lived in Germany during his formative years, and German musical culture was decisive in shaping his musical development.

He was the best-known American composer before the 20th century and one of the first to receive international recognition.

MacDowell was essentially a miniaturist, and his most successful works are the smaller lyric and characteristic pieces such as the *Fireside Tales*. Most of his titles denote a source, a setting, an atmosphere. His music, however, rarely attempts a literal representation of the subject in the title; MacDowell's miniatures are not musical depictions but rather musical evocations of the moods and atmospheres suggested by his titles.

This edition is dedicated to Margaret Tolson with admiration and appreciation.

Maurice Hinson

1. Arnold T. Schwab, "Edward MacDowell's Birthdate: A Correction," *Musical Quarterly* LXI (1975):233-39.

About the Composer

Edward MacDowell was born in New York City on December 18, 1860. His father was a Scotch-Irish tradesman, and his artistically inclined mother, of English heritage, encouraged his musical studies. His first piano teacher was a Colombian, Juan Buitrago; Buitrago's friend, the renowned Venezuelan pianist Teresa Carreño, also encouraged MacDowell and gave him occasional lessons.

MacDowell traveled to Europe with his mother in 1876 and enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire in February 1877. Disappointed with his progress, he withdrew from the conservatory in September 1878 and went to Germany for further study. He enrolled at the Hoch Conservatory in Frankfurt and studied composition with the director of the school, Joachim Raff. During this time MacDowell met Franz Liszt, who visited the school. MacDowell visited Liszt two years later and played for him his own First Piano Concerto. Liszt responded positively to MacDowell's work and recommended him to the publishers Breitkopf and Härtel. This German firm published some of MacDowell's early works. MacDowell was given a teaching position at the Darmstadt Conservatory. He also taught privately, and one of his students was Marian Nevins of Connecticut; they were married on July 9, 1884.

After returning to the United States in 1888, MacDowell was successful as a concert pianist and composer. He accepted a position at Columbia University in 1896, being cited as "the greatest musical genius America has produced." He resigned the post in 1904 when he was already showing signs of mental deterioration; he eventually lapsed into total insanity. MacDowell was only 47 years old when he died.

About the Music

Fireside Tales, Op. 61, is a late set of pieces (1902) that display a slight change in MacDowell's style. A certain strange farawayness of thought and a grave tenderness are not quite like anything he had composed up to this time. This set shows a kind of serious and even somber aspect, while the writing is more masterly than in any of the earlier short pieces.

These delightful pieces appear exactly as MacDowell left them in the first edition.

No. 1 *An Old Love Story*.....*5*

Mrs. MacDowell had the following to say about this piece:

> I remember distinctly when this composition was written that MacDowell had been fascinated by a book of short stories by Mary Wilkins. In it were two charming love stories of fine and simple country people. How often deep feeling is so difficult to express! There was hesitation between prudence and the quick impulse to throw such feeling aside where two people loved each other, even though the thought of a mutual home meant so much to them.
>
> These stories by Mary Wilkins are invaluable as pictures of a kind of life and people who have almost vanished from New England. They were deeply colored by a strong and somewhat fanatical religious feeling, and represented a period when the average person thought more deeply and was less inclined to depend so much on the minds of others for decisions.[2]

This piece opens with a flowing melody, but the succeeding section in D-flat major, marked ***ppp***, is characterized by a new and earnest expressiveness. The opening theme returns and the piece ends tenderly, subdued and wistful.

No. 2 *Of Br'er Rabbit*.....*8*

> Many people in the South have told me they were amazed at how curiously well MacDowell caught the spirit of that little creature called "Br'er Rabbit." The music really seems to touch on his many adventures.
>
> MacDowell loved the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris, and his lively imagination regarding animals made it easy for him to sympathize with Br'er Rabbit in his escapades and escapes. In this piece one can hardly help imagining the mischievous antics of Br'er Rabbit, his tiptoe approach to danger, his scurry to freedom, and his final defiant flip of farewell as he achieves safety from his enemies.[3]

This bright composition opens with a roguish and catching tune that is brilliantly worked out with variety, droll humor and consummate skill. The piece has an affinity with *From Uncle Remus* (*Woodland Sketches*, Op. 51), since Br'er Rabbit is Uncle Remus's main hero; but the maturity and masterly handling of the material in *Of Br'er Rabbit* is much finer than anything in the earlier piece.

No. 3 *From a German Forest*.....*12*

> When we lived in Germany just after our marriage our little home was near one of the great forests then called "royal" forests. To wander among the enormous trees with their lovely vistas was one of our real joys.
>
> Another pleasure and amusement was ours on holidays when picnic parties toiled up the hill with their heavy baskets, to eat their lunches at the tables provided within the forest. Later in the day, well fed and happy, they would sing together the folk songs that had come down to them through generations, the sound floating pleasantly down to us a quarter of a mile away.
>
> These were the sights and sounds that must have been in MacDowell's mind when he wrote *From a German Forest*. In the music you may find a fragment of a German folk song, and a passage that calls to mind the galloping horses as riders passed down the stately aisles between the trees.[4]

2. MacDowell, Marian. *Random Notes on Edward MacDowell and His Music* (Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1950), p. 21.

3. MacDowell, pp. 21–22.

4. MacDowell, p. 22.

This piece contains lovely tunes, chromatic figuration and effective changing meters (3/4, 6/8, 9/8). A contrasting middle section prepares for the return of the opening section and the piece concludes ***pppp***.

No. 4 *Of Salamanders*.....*15*

> Night after night we used to sit by the open fire in the Hillcrest music room watching, as so many thousands have watched, with fascination the flames as they rushed up the chimney. More than once MacDowell laughingly referred to the sparks as salamanders, those imaginary little animals who are supposed to make their home in the flames, and it was this sudden, quick motion of the sparks that was in his mind as he wrote the composition.[5]

This is a fanciful, intricate piece and very delicate in effect. It requires an absolute control of finger work. It was one of MacDowell's favorites.

No. 5 *A Haunted House*.....*18*

> The first summer we spent in Peterborough was in 1892. We found a simple farm house, four rooms and a kitchen, immaculately clean and fairly well furnished. It seems to me that everything we did in those early days was something of an adventure. We paid $50.00 for the season, which was considered rather a large price, but we had more happiness in that first New England summer than can possibly be estimated. One of the things we loved was walking over the hills surrounding Peterborough, on roads long unused, for the men who built them had many years since disappeared into the west looking for richer farm lands. Their homes often stood unoccupied, for there was no one left who needed them. For instance, one nearby township had fifteen hundred inhabitants a hundred years ago; now it has only fifty or sixty.
>
> In wandering over the hill-tops—for in early days the settlers were apt to build their homes where they could keep a lookout for approaching Indians—we often came upon the site of an abandoned farm. Many times there would be nothing more than a cellar hole surrounded by enormous clumps of lilac bushes, a dream of beauty in early June. Sometimes we stopped and went inside one of the tottering houses.
>
> There was one in particular that impressed itself on MacDowell's memory. Usually the empty houses were silent and dead, but as we went through the creaking door we could hear what sounded like footsteps in an adjoining room. We stopped for a second and seemed to hear the swishing of skirts. We ventured in and saw what had given us this strange feeling of there being people in the old deserted house. At once the ghostly spirits vanished and the mystery was solved, for what we had heard was the rustling of strips of wallpaper hanging loose from the walls, swaying in the wind that came through the broken windows. What sounded like footsteps was caused by the branches of bushes knocking against a window pane. While we were in the room we saw only the sturdy branches and tattered strips of paper, but the moment we left we again heard the footsteps and swishing skirts. This unnatural sensation of invisible people surrounding us certainly startled, even frightened, us.
>
> Years later we returned to this old farm, but the house was no longer standing. It had tumbled down, falling into the cellar hole, guarded by a glorious wealth of lilac bushes. We were fortunate enough to find them in full bloom, a sight not to be forgotten.[6]

This is one of MacDowell's most imaginative and realistic pieces. It opens "*very dark and sombre*" and develops into a wild and eerie fortissimo. The middle section requires fast fingers to suggest the nervous expectancy aroused by the preceding mysteriousness. The ghostly effect returns, then gradually recedes back into impenetrable gloom.

No. 6 *By Smouldering Embers*.....*22*

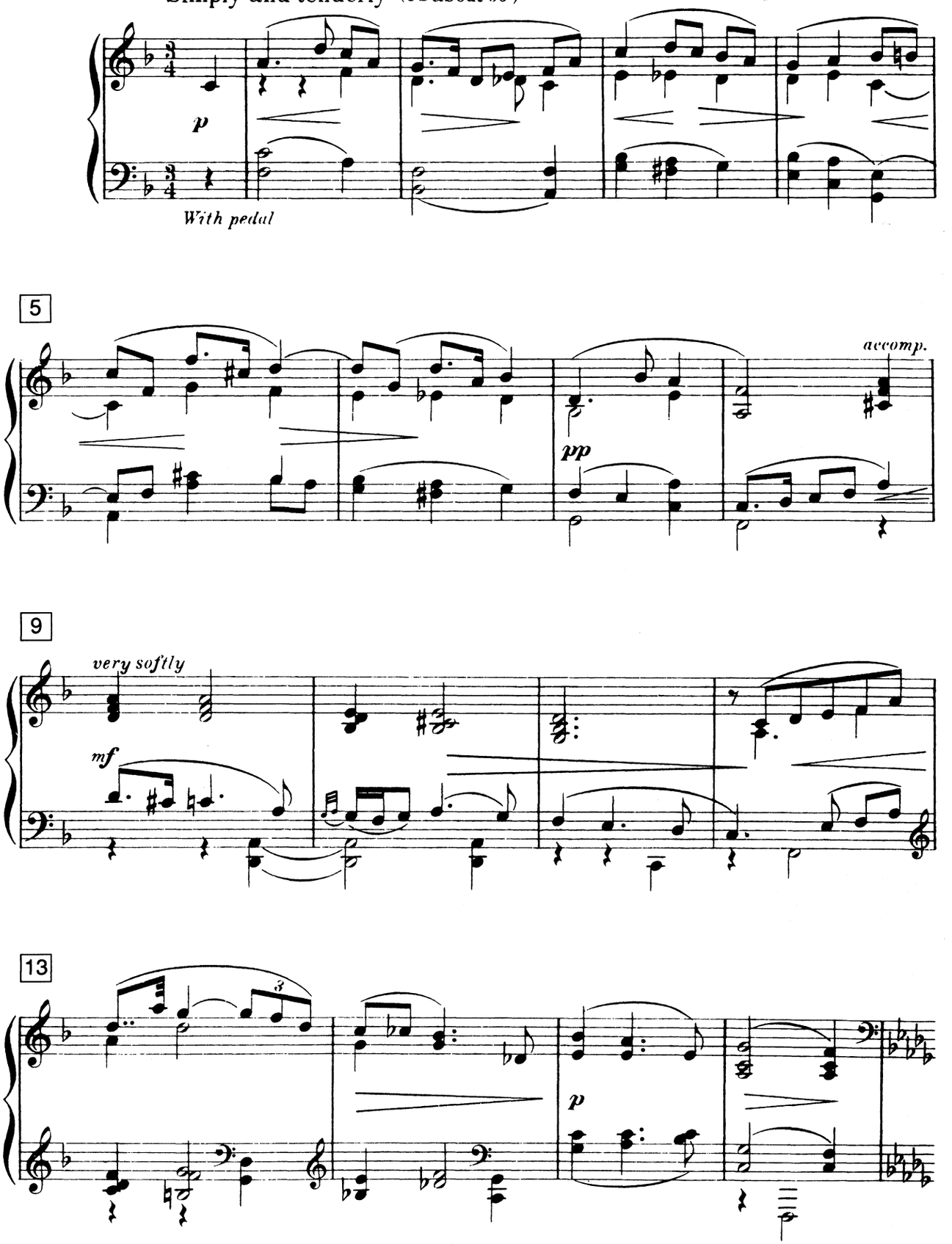
> It would be impossible to think of any one subject that might have been in MacDowell's mind when he wrote this composition. It might have been not of one fireplace but of two that he was thinking—the one in the Log Cabin, and the other in his room at Hillcrest.
>
> One might add, who has not dreamt when sitting before a fireplace and its smouldering embers?[7]

This short and quiet piece opens with a tender theme and displays a mastery of harmony and counterpoint. The concise middle section is characterized by its most passionate, but sonorous and controlled, emotion. The opening idea returns and the music becomes moving and subdued, then dies away with an effective decrescendo.

5. MacDowell, p. 22.
6. MacDowell, pp. 23–24.
7. MacDowell, p. 24.

AN OLD LOVE STORY

EDWARD MAC DOWELL
Op. 61. № 1.



OF BR'ER RABBIT

EDWARD MAC DOWELL
Op. 61. No 2.

With much spirit and humor (♩= about 84)