



uOttawa

Christina Rossetti in Music: Musical Settings of "A Birthday"

Sarah Pennington, Mary Arseneau, Roxanne Lafleur



Introduction

Musical settings of works by Victorian poet Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) constitute a significant body of work that has never been fully surveyed, gathered, catalogued or studied. During her lifetime, Rossetti corresponded with composers, regularly gave permission to composers to set her texts, and enabled the production of new creative works inspired by her poems, commenting, "The more of my things get set to music the better pleased I am" (*Letters* 1: 211). Today, audiences very often encounter Rossetti mediated through song. Every musical setting is a response to and interpretation of Rossetti's work, and analyzing these musical interpretations is an unexplored gateway to greater understanding of Rossetti's poetry and its reception. Compiling a complete catalogue of musical settings is an essential step in developing this field of Rossetti studies. Drawing on existing partial catalogues (Gooch and Thatcher, Ives, Ezust) as well as a variety of other sources, the *Christina Rossetti in Music* archive aims to compile the first complete catalogue of musical settings of Rossetti's poetry, to make scores available for research and study whenever possible, and to facilitate the analysis of a previously unstudied body of work.

Methodology

1. Researched and identified settings of "A Birthday" and, when possible, located scores.
2. Managed in Shared Shelf.
3. Mapped to Dublin Core.



4. To be published in *Christina Rossetti in Music*, a site powered by Omeka and hosted by the University of Ottawa library.



Banner created by Roxanne Lafleur

Results

Thumbnail	SSD	Filename	Composer	Created By	Thumbnail	SSD	Filename	Composer	Created By	Thumbnail	SSD	Filename	Composer	Created By	Thumbnail	SSD	Filename	Composer	Created By					
	1819415		Adams, Ad.	Pennington...		1917827	QM-birthda...	Baker, Eugene	Pennington...		1819417	QM-birthda...	Cover, Fred	Pennington...		1824811		Gilson, Vera	Pennington...		1819419		Lambert, Carl	Pennington...
	1917841		Bach-Goldwin	Pennington...		1819423	QM-birthda...	Burkhardt, R.	Pennington...		1819424		English, Ger.	Pennington...		1733384		Gudimov, N.	Pennington...		1819430		Lidke, Sam	Pennington...
	1733385		Birked, Ger.	Pennington...		1819422		Cuthbertson	Pennington...		1824820		Faith, Richard	Pennington...		1819428		Gay, Ann (B.)	Pennington...		1819431		Lozier, Wilhel	Pennington...
	1917829	QM-birthda...	Blanch, Peter	Pennington...		1917825	QM-birthda...	Chilcott, Bob	Pennington...		1819425		Frackkopf, ...	Pennington...		1917828	QM-birthda...	Hill, Edw	Pennington...		1819432		Lorange, Fred	Pennington...
	1819421		Brown, Irene	Pennington...		1819423		Colledge Tim	Pennington...		1917827		Gibbons, Jack	Pennington...		1917842	QM-birthda...	Hopkins, Jan	Pennington...		1819432	QM-birthda...	Luckstone, Th	Pennington...
	1819419	QM-birthda...	Burleigh, Wes	Pennington...		1824829	QM-birthda...	Coatland, J.	Pennington...		1819426		Gibb, C. Ann	Pennington...		1819423	QM-birthda...	Karlas, Peter	Pennington...		1741700	QM-birthda...	MacKenzie, A	Pennington...

Thumbnail	SSD	Filename	Composer	Created By	Thumbnail	SSD	Filename	Composer	Created By	Thumbnail	SSD	Filename	Composer	Created By	Thumbnail	SSD	Filename	Composer	Created By
	1819413		Ballou, Ch.	Pennington...		1819427		Paik, Paul An	Pennington...		1819440			Pennington...		1819440		Willing, Jeff	Pennington...
	1819424		Baron, Will	Pennington...		1917828		Raabe, Elton	Pennington...		1819428		Schubert, M.	Pennington...		1917842	QM-birthda...	Willecks, Th	Pennington...
	1742782	QM-birthda...	Baron, The	Pennington...		1819432		Rosen, Neil L.	Pennington...		1819431	QM-birthda...	Sparks, Chas	Pennington...		1819441	QM-birthda...	Williamson, H.	Pennington...
	1819425		Beck, Don	Pennington...		1917829		Salmans, Sean	Pennington...		1733746		Townsh, A. L.	Pennington...		1819442		Wood, Robin	Pennington...
	1742781		Beckwith, Mel	Pennington...		1733745		Schubert, M.	Pennington...		1917844		Vinay, Phyll	Pennington...		1819443	QM-birthda...	Woodman, R.	Pennington...
	1819426	QM-birthda...	Blair, C. H. H.	Pennington...		1819430	QM-birthda...	Scott, Carl (B.)	Pennington...		1824813	QM-birthda...	Wass, Stef	Pennington...		1819444		Young, Karl L.	Pennington...

Samples of scores. Left to right: Marzials, Woodman, Hill, Butler, Chilcott, Smart, Scott, Weiss, Willecks

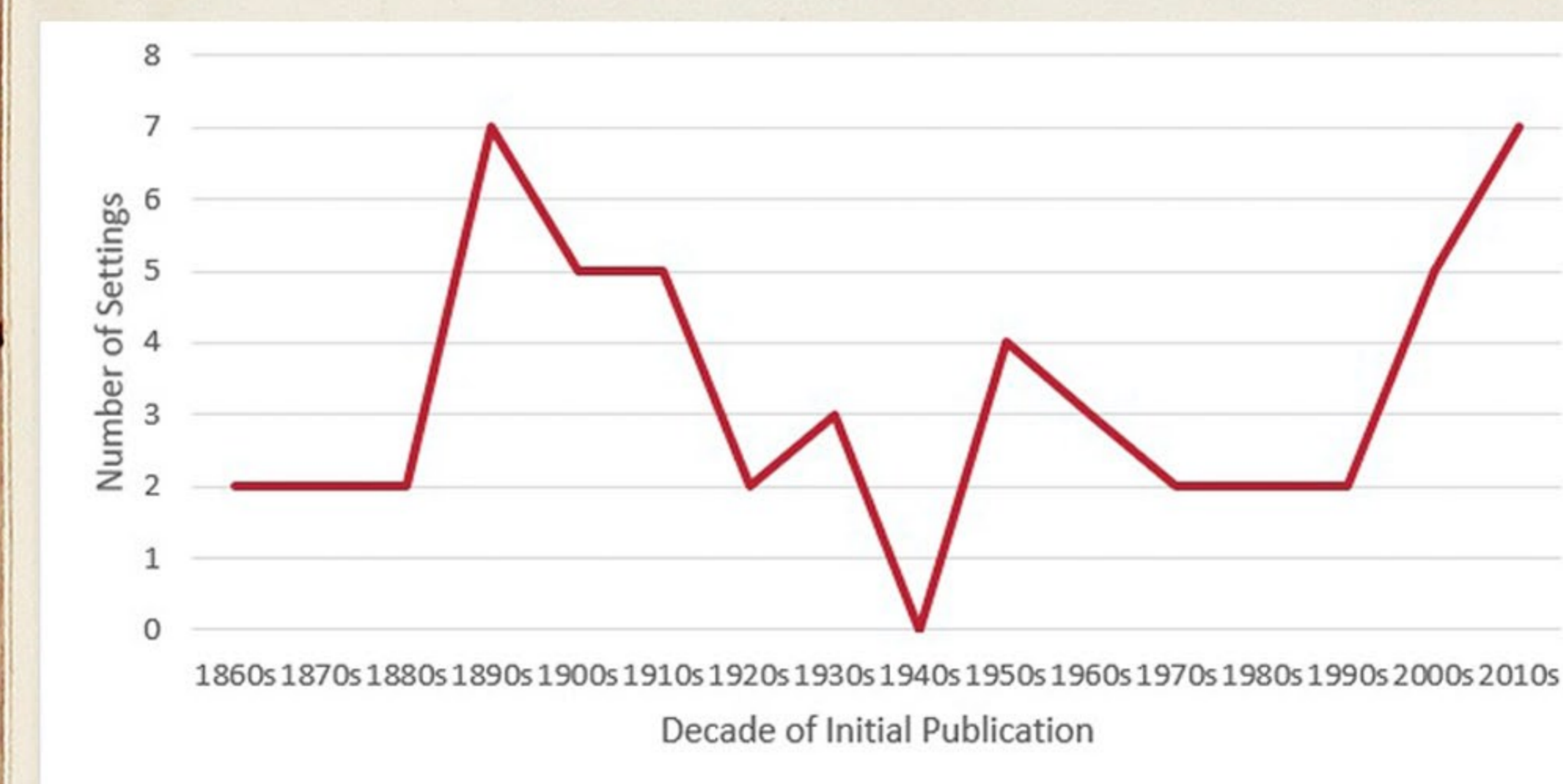


As a result of this research project, 54 musical settings of Christina Rossetti's poem "A Birthday" have been identified and catalogued. These original works are by composers in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, and composition dates range between 1866 and the present day. The project's goal is to locate and digitize as many scores as possible for inclusion in the online *Christina Rossetti in Music* online catalogue and archive; however, this has proven difficult or impossible in many instances. While nineteenth-century settings are often identifiable through published notices of their publication or performance, the scores themselves are frequently not recoverable. Meanwhile, contemporary compositions are protected by copyright. In those cases where we have been able to contact the composer to request permission, all composers have expressed enthusiasm for the project and a willingness to have their work included in the database.

Discussion

Even without changing the text of the poem, musical choices that the composer makes constitute a new version and interpretation of "A Birthday." Each composition is a re-imagining of Rossetti's original poem and conveys a specific understanding of and perspective on the text. For example, most compositions are set for a solo high voice with pianoforte, suggesting a female speaker for the poem. This is to be expected, as the poet is a woman. However, there are also some songs set for a low voice, implying a male singer. This musical choice is evidence of the composer's interpretation of the poem as being spoken by a male lover, rather than a female one. "A Birthday" has also been set as a part-song for multiple singers, as a hymn in eight-part harmony for a full SATB choir, and as the anthem for BBC International Women's Day 2015. The range of musical settings demonstrates how each composition favours a particular interpretation of the poem, and over history music has been used to effectively re-imagine and reframe the poem's original text according to a variety of possible readings: as an exuberant expression of romantic love, as a celebration of divine love, or as a rallying anthem of female empowerment.

Settings of "A Birthday" Per Decade



Note: "My Heart is Like a Singing Bird" by Charles Spross is not included in the graph as the date of publication for the setting has not been identified. For unpublished settings, the date of composition was used instead.

Conclusion

This UROP-funded catalogue of settings of "A Birthday" constitutes a significant contribution toward the goal of creating a complete inventory of all known musical settings of Rossetti's poetry. In the near future, the *Christina Rossetti in Music* site will be launched with catalogues of two Rossetti poems: "Goblin Market" and "A Birthday." Eventually, all known published settings will be listed in the archive, with digitized scores included whenever possible. The project will necessarily be ongoing and open-ended, adding new settings as more works are identified, located, or newly composed. Once the research is published, it is hoped that it will begin to attract the attention of other researchers in the field who may know of settings not yet captured by the project and whose contributions to the project will be welcomed. This growing database of information will make an important body of work accessible to scholars and facilitate the analysis of this fascinating and largely unstudied new research area.

For further information please contact me at spenn006@uottawa.ca and Professor Arseneau at arseneau@uottawa.ca

References

- Gooch, Bryan N.S. and David S. Thatcher. *Musical Settings of Early and Mid-Victorian Literature: A Catalogue*. New York: Garland, 1979.
- Ives, Maura. *Christina Rossetti: A Descriptive Bibliography*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2011.
- Ezust, Emily. *The Liedernet Archive*. <http://www.lieder.net/lieder/index.html>.
- Rossetti, Christina. *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*. 4 vols. Ed. Antony H. Harrison. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997-2004.

