



Robertson-Kirkland, B. (2018) Music-making: a fundamental or a vain accomplishment? *Women's History*, 2(10), pp. 30-34.

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Deposited on: 06 April 2018

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Music-making: a fundamental or a vain accomplishment?

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In the 1805 conduct book *Evenings at Home*, a mother explains to her daughter the reason she cannot attend music lessons is that: ‘all things are not equally necessary to everyone but some that are very fit for one are scarcely proper at all for others.’¹ Music education was not fundamental, and yet it belonged to the ‘ornamental accomplishments’; areas of education considered ‘highly proper’ for a girl to cultivate.² A young woman and her family could be harshly judged by her peers if she was known to be musically educated but did not support music-making activities appropriately.

Then again, music education was expensive. It required the hiring of a master, or paying a higher fee for music tuition at boarding schools, hiring or purchasing an instrument, buying books, and manuscript paper. Presumably, families of meagre disposable income simply could not afford such an expense. However, social pressures, further emphasised by upper-class parents who ‘opted for a daughter’s musical education often without regard to apparent ability or interest, and despite warnings of potential financial waste’, created a dichotomy.³ Their choice was either to cultivate a daughter’s musical education in the hopes of keeping up appearances or maintain the family bank account but sacrifice the potential for social elevation.

Georgian novels such as those written by Jane Austen⁴ and Sarah Elizabeth Real-Villa Gooch included detailed discussions of concerts, theatres, dancing and even domestic music-making.⁶ This combined with the growing numbers of published education manuals specifically designed to teach the ornamental subjects, and affirm the link between music education and a young woman’s social worth. The growing apprehension concerning

finances, social expectations and a girls' education, particularly in the ornamental accomplishments, was therefore not just an issue of expense but social image, an idea that is key in understanding the advice provided by various conduct books of the period. This article will highlight these financial and social concerns voiced in various educational literatures which include conduct books and novels. This will provide a much more nuanced picture surrounding the expectations of educating young women in music, class status and the difference between music and the other ornamental accomplishments.

Music & Talent: 'the most agreeable art of pleasing ... rendered tasteless and insipid'

To educate or not to educate? The dichotomy was an underlying question concerning female education throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Middle and upper class girls considered intellectually inferior were also the primary care-giver and educator of their young children once they became wives and mothers. The domestic virtues consisting of sewing, embroidery, spinning and housewifery were essential skills to ensure the efficient running of a household.⁷ The ornamental accomplishments (dancing, drawing, languages and music) were adornments to a woman's basic education, and were useful for securing a lucrative marriage particularly for keen social climbers. A musical woman could both entertain and fill the idle hours of her day practicing her instrument in addition to the advantage of teaching basic musical instruction to her children. However, a balance had to be maintained. She could be skilled but not too skilled for a learned woman was considered unfeminine.⁸

Cultivating musical skill may have been useful in the matrimonial market but it could also be a costly gamble both in terms of time and money. Music education required a dedicated number of practice hours in addition to the cost. Even dedication did not guarantee natural aptitude. John Burton, who produced the positively received 1793 essay *Lectures on*

Female Education, which were principally published for use in female boarding schools, noted that music was ‘considered one of the most agreeable arts of pleasing practiced by the fair sex’ but without a ‘mind and an ear for harmony’ it rendered the art ‘tasteless and insipid’.⁹ To Burton, music was an art to which a person either had an inherent ability or did not. While he noted that those who had the time to devote to practice were more likely to excel, musical ability was directly linked to talent rather than the time dedicated to learning.

The Lounger’s Common-Place Book from 1799 written by Jeremiah Whitaker

Newman even more harshly stated:

If the majority of our young women of scanty expectations, would not fix their eyes so steadily as for the most part they do, on the more elevated and wealthy classes of society, whom they vainly and ruinously attempt to imitate; if in their views, their education, their habits, their dress, and their manners, they could happily prevailed on to attend more to domestic duty, and less so to trifling amusement, and ornamental accomplishment; if they could be convinced that to make a pudding or a shirt, or even their own gowns, is a species of knowledge rather more useful than dancing a minuet, talking bad French, or spoiling a piano forte.¹⁰

Newman was clearly aiming his advice at a specific class of woman who could only imitate her polite society peers, but did not have the financial stability or the time to join them. He was critical of the avid social climber who could only superficially foster skills in the ornamental accomplishments, which ultimately distracted from cultivating necessary domestic duties.

Availability of time was a primary consideration and discussions continued to appear in nineteenth-century novels. In the 1836 novel, *Ellen, the Teacher*, the protagonist Ellen tells

her student Maria that she will not allow her to pursue the study of music since she could not 'give it the time necessary for proficiency, without losing those things which are more essential'.¹¹ The whole novel centres on practical advice for teaching young women. In this scene, Maria's natural aptitude for music is never tested but her lack of ability in fundamental subjects such as needlework, deemed a much more important skill for a young woman of her station, denies her a musical education. This idea is repeated in the conversation between a mother and her daughter from *Evenings at home*. The mother makes it very clear that some women would have the time to learn music, drawing and even languages but her child should focus her attention on needlework, domestic accounts and history, with some extra time devoted to reading.¹²

However, while music education equipped a young woman with abilities to understand, read and play music it also allowed her to speak the musical language, further developing her conversation at social events. Opera houses and assembly rooms were the home of music and culture, but were also important venues of social interaction. Several diarists during the period including Gooch and Richard Edgcumbe made this clear.¹³ The social significance of these venues is further highlighted in popular Georgian novels that used the assembly room or opera house as significant centres for social interaction.¹⁴ Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is just one such example: Catherine is frequently in attendance at various events at the Assembly Rooms in Bath. In conversation with Mr Tilney, he enquires if she attended the theatre, the play and the concert, to which Catherine happily replies she attended each on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday respectfully.¹⁵ Austen's writing was likely inspired by her visits to the Assembly Rooms when she was resident in Bath from 1801-1805, and the conversation between her characters implied a social expectation to be in attendance at most events.¹⁶

While Austen drew inspiration from her surroundings and experience, some Georgian novelists would have their characters discuss real professional performers thereby providing a more tangible social commentary. In the 1794 novel, *A Visit for a Week*, written by Lucy Peacock (fl. 1785–1816), two characters gossiped about the musically talented Maria Wilmot, who is scrutinised when she does not subscribe to a concert given by Gertrud Mara (1749-1833). The well-known, real-life opera singer performed regularly in the London theatres, concert halls and at the Assembly Rooms in Bath. Her popularity was at its peak in the mid-1790s with most of her performances including benefit and subscription concerts attracting much public support.¹⁷ The dialogue between Charlotte and Miss Shirley at first chastises Wilmot for not parting with money, but Charlotte quickly moves on to question Wilmot's musical abilities:

I declare I would not have let myself down so, had it been the last five guineas I had in the world; and what makes it worse, it seems to pretend to be fond of music, and, they say she plays fondly on the harp; not that I believe everything of this sort that I hear.¹⁸

Charlotte automatically assumes that Wilmot should support Mara since she was one of the most popular and fashionable sopranos of the day. Wilmot's lack of subscription may have been nothing more than a personal dislike of Mara's performances, but her non-conformity results in a questioning of her musical abilities and critical judgement. Peacock's narrative is a pointed social commentary on expectations of appropriate behaviour particularly of a young woman who was known to be musically trained. Her musical ability and judgement could be suspected if her interaction and discussion of music did not align with fashion.¹⁹

Society, fashion, judgement and the impact on music education

The expectation that amateur musicians would publically discuss, perform and, more often than not, conform to accepted fashions had a direct impact on the music education of the day. While conforming to fashion, symptomatic of the period, suggests a lack of critical judgement, it required an awareness of the ever-changing fashion movements, and an ability to comment and engage and this did not just relate to the performances of others. It required an ability to critically reflect on one's own musical skill particularly when it came to performance. This was a serious topic of discussion for Hannah More who stated:

Music, dancing, and languages, gratify those who teach them, by perceptible and almost immediate effects; and when there happens to be no imbecility in the pupil, nor deficiency in the master, every superficial observer can, in some measure, judge of the progress. The effects of most of these accomplishments address themselves to the senses; and there are more who can see and hear, than there are who can judge and reflect.²⁰

Certain music treatises encouraged a development of critical awareness, promoting an ability to judge one's own musical aptitude. Venanzio Rauzzini (1746-1810), who after retiring as the leading man at The King's Theatre, capitalised on the Georgian fascination with musical entertainment and domestic music-making, becoming a prominent music master in Bath where he taught several amateur vocalists. In his treatise *Twelve Solfeggi or Exercises for the Voice* (1808) he endorsed self-reflection and recognition of musical ability stating:

The Singers who have acquired the greatest celebrity in the profession, are those who properly appreciated their own talent, who knew the extent of their own abilities and sought not to soar beyond them, adopting a method suited to

the powers of their voice, and never attempting a passage which they could not execute with the greatest neatness and in the most correct and finished style.²¹

There is evidence that one of his amateur students, Elizabeth Saville (c.1811), thought critically about her vocal abilities, even to the point of questioning the sincerity of the praise offered by her audience:²²

Yes it is over -- the trying evening is over; and more happily than I could hope, or expect. I am all gratitude to my audience for their indulgence. O! my dearest father, did I once think the time could ever come when I should dare to stand up with the presumption of attempting to entertain three hundred strangers with my poor voice? [W]ith so little science to guide me, and with small reliance, except on my ear, to protect me from absurd and ridiculous errors? ... My hand, indeed, trembled so, that Miss Cantelo kindly rose and helped me to hold my song; but my voice did not falter very much ... I performed better than I myself expected, yet most well do I know that I could not deserve those indulgent testimonies of satisfaction from my audience. They were twice repeated on the close of my strain; and when the concert was over, several elegant ladies, whose names I do not know, came and spoke to me with so much kindness in their eyes!²³

In this letter, which was written to her father after she gave a performance at the Bath Assembly Rooms, it is difficult to know by what standard Saville was judging her performance. Despite noting a positive outcome from the experience, she maintains a sense of modesty by pointing out her deficiencies. Saville's reserved attitude is not the only example.

Several conduct books, particularly those written by women, in discussion of music education make a point of remarking on their inadequacy to teach the subject. Despite Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) recommending that all ‘young ladies of rank should have their education superintended by a ... well-bred woman’ she also noted:

I could not judge of their music, their dancing; and if I pretended to correct their air, they might be tempted to smile at my own; for I myself remarkably deficient in gracefulness of person.²⁴

Anne Murray in her 1778 conduct book *Mentoria or the young ladies instructor* was equally quick to judge her own abilities in teaching music, despite going on to write in depth about the basics of music theory, which was just as detailed as most music treatises written by prominent music masters.²⁵ Both these women felt it necessary to state their incapacities in teaching the subject; however, in doing so, they demonstrated that they had a level of musical knowledge which allowed them to assess their own aptitude. Of course, one must question if these female authors felt it necessary to add these qualifiers in order to maintain a sense of modesty. Yet, both singled out music as a subject that required a higher level of expertise to effectively teach, thereby implying that it was unavoidable to employ a music master.

This theme appeared in the 1815 novel *Zeluca*. The character Marianne is ridiculed for not having received music lessons from a master by her friend Jane who stated, ‘suppose Marianne ... that you have become a proficient [in music], what would it have availed you, when you could not name a *first rate master*?’²⁶ The reason for the discussion in the first place is that Marianne is downhearted when her friend, Zeluca, decides to stop giving her music lessons after an ill-placed comment from Jane. Zeluca, who had been proficient in music for many years, is keen to teach Marianne the piano, after she expresses interest to learn. Zeluca diligently provided Marianne with lessons each morning for an unspecified

amount of time, until Jane observed that Marianne was equal in her performance to Zeluca. The comment, which was perhaps intended as a compliment to Zeluca's teaching, only highlighted that she had taught Marianne everything she knew. After this episode, Zeluca immediately put an end to the lessons, leaving Marianne quite distraught. The scene is a significant turning point in the relationship of these two characters whose friendship is tested by societal obligation throughout the novel. In a similar manner to most Georgian novels, the fiction intertwined with a real message: women were not only quick to judge their own skill but also the musical talent of others.²⁷

Music masters also came under scrutiny, especially if he was thought to be flattering a student with praise instead of correcting errors. Mary Fairfax Greig Somerville (1780-1872) noted her frustrations when being taught piano:

I rose early, and played four or five hours, as usual, on the piano, and had lessons from Corri, an Italian, who taught carelessly, and did not correct a habit I had of thumping so as to break the strings ... Afterwards I got over my bad habit and played the music then in vogue: pieces by Pleyel, Clementi, Steibelt, Mozart, and Beethoven, the last being my favourite to this day. I was sometimes accompanied on the violin by Mr. Thomson, the friend of Burns; more frequently by Stabilini; but I was always too shy to play before people, and invariably played badly when obliged to do so, which vexed me.²⁸

Domenico Corri (1746-1825) had moved to Edinburgh with his family in 1771 to take up the position as director of the Edinburgh Music Society concerts, and marketed himself as a reputable music master, which included publishing his ambitious four volume collection *A Select Collection of the Most Admired Songs, Duett* in 1779.²⁹ Though he had published *The Art of Fingering* in 1785, which specifically examined fingering technique when playing the

piano, his attentions tended to be focussed on vocal performance. Furthermore, Domenico had left Edinburgh for London by 1790, though his brother, Natale (1765-1822), whose attentions were much more focussed on keyboard playing, continued the live and work in Edinburgh as a musician, including running the Corri publishing house, setting up his own professional concert series and opening The Corri's Rooms.³⁰ With this in mind, it is much more likely that Somerville was taught by Natale, whose fame and reputation, particularly as a music master of note, has not survived the test of time in the same manner as his brother. While Somerville may have criticised his teaching practice, she does not appear to have immediately dismissed him as a music master. Another music master was not so lucky. In an anecdote that appeared in the *Memoirs of Her late Royal Highness Charlotte Augusta, Princess of Wales* (1817) stated that the Princess dismissed her unnamed, foreign music master after a performance she gave to a large party of guests. Though her master praised her performance stating that it was 'delightful', she assessed it to be subpar. Her music master's praise was not taken as encouragement but a sign of his dishonesty and perhaps worse, a lack of critical awareness.

Instilling a sense of critical-reflection of one's own ability may have encouraged independence, where the student would one day no longer require the tuition of master to effectively sing or play, but it had the potential to place him in a precarious position where his authority was questioned. Persistently correcting a student's errors may have helped to maintain confidence in his teaching, but this could also be detrimental to the learning of the student, infusing boredom rather than a sense of achievement. This was the reason behind Anne Gunn née Young's invention of a musical game in 1801, as she sought to find a new method of teaching the elementary parts of music instruction that avoided repetitious correction.³¹

While it was considered more appropriate for a woman to be instructed by a professional music master than a female instructress, the end goal was that eventually she would develop enough knowledge, aptitude, and awareness of her abilities to no longer require professional music instruction. The encouragement of critical reflection was not necessarily confined to self-criticism but allowed a young woman to be conversant about music practice more generally.

Music education: An investment in a woman's future

Music, more so than any other subject, posed a problem. It was a popular activity, therefore musical knowledge was useful for functioning in polite society. Naturally then, a wealthy family who wanted their daughter to have the best education wished her to cultivate musical skill. However, instruction took time, and time cost money especially if a child progressed slowly. Maria Child in 1830 highlighted the music education problem once again, but suggested a much more practical solution. While she recognised that mothers' desired to give their daughters a wide-ranging education, she noted the issue was not the wealth of the family, nor the desire for education but rather the 'selfish use of knowledge', which was frequently used as a means of social elevation. Yet, without a desire to learn the subject, most daughters would take no 'pleasure in their employment'.³² That being said, if a daughter demonstrated a specific desire to learn, this could have more significant value in her life. A keen interest would encourage continuous development and, in turn, this knowledge would allow her to teach her children. If the family found they were financially insecure, a young woman could make a profession from music teaching to gain financial stability.³³

While it was rare to read such practical advice, particularly in conduct books aimed at wealthy mothers, scenarios written about affluent women who suddenly faced financial hardship were a recurrent theme. The 1823 novel *The School for Sisters* discussed the

daughter of a wealthy marquis who, after fleeing France during the terror, found employment in England teaching the harp.³⁴ Similarly, the lead character of Frances Burney's novel *The Wanderer* (1814) was able to mingle with polite society by teaching music to several wealthy female students all the while disguising her true identity.³⁵ These fictional accounts were based on real-life situations. Several women of note throughout the eighteenth century, including the famed soprano Anastasia Robinson (c. 1692-1755), utilised their education in the 'ornaments' to ensure financial security.³⁶

Conclusion

Conduct books and novels may have encouraged a family to critically reflect on their daughters' musical aptitude, interest and even financial circumstance before engaging her in music education. However, this advice jarred with the social expectations of the period. If a young girl demonstrated little interest to learn music, but her family insisted she attend regular lessons, her progress would most likely be slow, revealing that the motivation for her tuition was a demonstration of wealth, an attitude that reeked of social ambition rather than social stability.

However, many wealthy families felt obligated to equip their daughter with such skills to ensure a lucrative marriage. It gave her another branch of conversation allowing a woman to converse within polite society, with the potential to attract suitors. There was also a more financially driven motivation as to why a young woman demonstrating accomplishment in music was attractive to a future husband. The hiring of a master, in any of the ornamental accomplishments, was expensive and therefore, a daughter's demonstration of skill was an outward display of a family's monetary worth.

Music education may have been a vain adornment but in many cases it was fundamental to maintaining a social pretence. The ability to critically assess the abilities of

oneself and others whether it be professional performers, fellow amateur peers, or a woman's own children proved useful. As a mother, though she may have wished to maintain a sense of modesty about their musical skill, her musical and critical awareness would better equip her to effectively assess the musical interest and talent of her children before employing an expensive master. After all, maintaining disposal income required a watchful eye on the purse strings.

¹ John Aitkin & Anna Lititia Barbauld, *Evenings at home: or, The juvenile budget opened: Consisting of a variety of miscellaneous pieces, for the instruction and amusement of young persons* (London, J. Johnson, 6th ed. 1805) 87.

² Michele Cohen noted similar attitudes regarding woman and the study of French. *Fashioning Masculinity: National Identity and Language in the Eighteenth Century* (London, Routledge, 2002) 64

³ Richard Leppert, *Music and image : domesticity, ideology and socio-cultural formation in eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988) 29

⁴ There are frequent discussions about music in Austen's novels including *Sense and Sensibility* (London, T. Egerton 1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (London, T. Egerton 1813), *Mansefield Park* (London, T. Egerton 1814)

⁶ Elizabeth Sarah Villa-Real Gooch, *Fancied events: or, The sorrows of Ellen* (London, George Cawthorn 1799)

⁷ Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-century Women: An Anthology* (Routledge, 2013) 45

⁸ Elaine McGirr *Eighteenth-Century Characters: A Guide to the Literature of the Age*, (London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 125

⁹ Christine Mayer noted that while Burton's *Lectures* were initially self-published the second edition was widely distributed in Britain and were translated and published in Germany in 1794. 'Female education and the cultural transfer of pedagogical knowledge in the eighteenth century' *Paedagogica Historica*, 48:4, 511-526, (Routledge, 2012) 516. John Burton, *Lectures on female education and manners* (London, J. Johnson; J. Murray; and J. Evans, 2nd ed. 1793) 97

¹⁰ Jeremiah Whitaker Newman, *The lounge's common-place book* (London, Kerby and Co, 1792) 303

¹¹ Barbara Hofland, *Ellen, the teacher: A tale for youth* (London, J. Harris and Son, Corner of St. Paul's Churchyard, 1819) 128

¹² John Aitkin & Anna Lititia Barbauld, *Evenings at home*, 89.

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- ¹³ Richard Edgcumbe *Musical Reminiscences of the Earl of Mount Edgcumbe*, (London, W. Clarke, 1827)
- ¹⁴ Sarah Elizabeth Villa-Real Gooch, *The Life of Mrs Gooch*, (London, Sold by C. and G. Kearsley, 1792) & Richard Edgcumbe, *Musical reminiscences of an old amateur, chiefly respecting the Italian opera in England for fifty years, from 1773 to 1823*, (London, W. Clarke, 1827)
- ¹⁵ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, (London, T. Egerton, 1818) 12
- ¹⁶ Penny Gray, *Jane Austen and the Theatre*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 9
- ¹⁷ Helen Berry, *The Castrato and His Wife*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 72
- ¹⁸ Lucy Peacock, *The visit for a week, or, Hints on the improvement of time: containing original tales, anecdotes from natural and moral history, &c. designed for the amusement of youth* (London, Printed for Hookham and Carpenter, 1794) 229-230
- ¹⁹ Noggle, James, *The Temporality of Taste in Eighteenth-Century British Writing*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012) 174
- ²⁰ Hannah More, *Essays on various subjects, principally designed for young ladies* (Edinburgh : Oliver and Boyd, 1777) 127-128
- ²¹ Venanzio Rauzzini, *Twelve solfeggi or exercises for the voice to be vocalized*, (London : Goulding, Phipps, D'Almaine & Co, 1808), ii
- ²² Elizabeth Saville was possibly the daughter of the singer John Saville (1736-1803) who was in an intimate relationship with Anna Seward.
- ²³ Anna Seward, 'Letter from Anna Seward to William Hayley, Letter Xxi, December 23, 1785', *Letters of Anna Seward : Written between the Years 1784 and 1807* (Edinburgh: Printed by George Ramsay & Company, for Archibald Constable and Company, 1785)
- ²⁴ Anna Laetitia Barbauld, *The works of Anna Lætitia Barbauld with a memoir by Lucy Aikin*. (London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1825), 22
- ²⁵ Anne Murray, *Mentoria or the young ladies instructor* (1778) 185
- ²⁶ Anon, *Zeluca; or, educated and uneducated woman* (London, Baldwin, Craddock and Joy, 1815), 70
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* 66-67
- ²⁸ Somerville, Mary Fairfax Greig, *Memoir of Mary Fairfax Greig Somerville, in Personal Recollections, from Early Life to Old Age, of Mary Somerville* (London, John Murray, 1873), 377
- ²⁹ Thomas Edwards, *So much neglected? An investigation and re-evaluation of Vocal Music in Edinburgh 1750-1800*, PhD thesis, (Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, 2015) 41

³⁰ Donald Campbell, *Edinburgh: A Cultural and Literary History*, (Edinburgh, Signal Books, 2003) 231

³¹ Anne Gunn, *An introduction to music : in which the elementary parts of the science, and the principles of thorough bass and modulation, as illustrated by the musical games and apparatus, are fully and familiarly explained*, (Edinburgh, C. Stewart and Co. Sold by Muir, Wood, and Co. 1803) vi

³² Maria Child, *The Mother's Book*, (Glasgow, Richard Griffin & Co & London, Thomas Tegg, 1832), 138

³³ *Ibid.* 139-140

³⁴ Anon, *The school for sisters; or, The lesson of experience*, (London, Longman & Co. 1823) 182-183

³⁵ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer or female difficulties*, (London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Paternoster-Row 1814)

³⁶ 'Robinson, Anastasia,' *Dictionary of National Biography*. (London, Smith, Elder & Co. 1885–1900)