

The Politics of Music: Women's Music Education in the United States in the late 18th Century

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A portion of this miniature panorama, dating from around 1810 to 1820, has become an iconic image in the history of American women's education. The frame featuring two women immersed in their studies—both leaning forward in concentration, one studying a globe and the other a book—graces the cover of Mary Kelley's *Learning to Stand and Speak* (2006). It is included in volume 2 of *The History of the Book in America* (2010), as well as numerous other books, textbooks, and articles, and can even be ordered online as a poster. Certainly, the image speaks to our modern understanding of female education. However, one scene in the miniature panorama does not constitute the whole of female education through the eyes of its creator, an unknown American female student. Our fixation on this one frame tells us more about our values than it does those of the young woman attending the school.

Let's take the panorama as a whole. First, the anonymous work now held in the collection of the St. Louis Art Museum was not created by a girl reading a book or studying a globe but rather by one engaging in what was known as the ornamental arts; in this case, she was drawing and painting with ink and watercolor on silk. The 7 1/16 inch by 96 5/8-inch miniature panorama was part of a popular genre around the turn of the 19th century, meant to be unrolled a little at a time to reveal a narrative or recreate a place, an event, or even a battle.

We can imagine we are unrolling this work as we read the bucolic narrative from left to right. Our journey to the seminary begins with two men, presumably schoolmasters. One is holding his violin and leafing through a music book, deciding what to play next. The other sits at a table, reading a book, like the woman at the globe. Both men appear to be relaxed and enjoying themselves. With a tree dividing the frames, we move into the

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schoolhouse itself presumably, where we are faced with the back of a young woman practicing at a square piano, with the portrait of a male overhead. This is the only frame that allows us to escape the pastoral imagery, and upon leaving this frame, the viewer journeys back outdoors, witnessing the two women we have already met, hard at work. In the next panel is a bull or cow in its pen (perhaps made from the wood of the trees for which we see stumps). Rustic and practical, the animal was probably a source of food. Beyond the next tree is likely the schoolhouse, where the girls lived and learned. Perhaps the garden plots that were outside the schoolhouse were used by the girls themselves, like at the boarding school in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Men: Life at Plumfield with Jo's Boys* (1871). The building in the next frame is surrounded by fowl and livestock. Church, school building, or neighboring house, it shows the integration of farming and community within the experience of those that attended these types of institutions.¹

Our next scene takes us back to the students. Three female students are reading and perhaps being read to by another female, a tutoress given her clothing. Despite the academic nature of the image, the presumably small livestock and fowl around the young women probably served to get this frame omitted from modern publications. The next panel is not about the school at all but rather likely serves to demonstrate the skills the artist learned at this institution: she shows her prowess as a painter by detailing an animal likely seen frequently here: a squirrel. As we move forward, we witness the students in their matching dresses at play: seven of the girls are taking turns jumping rope. Detailed renditions of a turkey and rooster serve as an interlude for an image of two girls hard at work making butter. Were these young women students as well? It is hard to know, given that they do not don the school uniform we see in other panels; however, the girls were likely helping around the school in some capacity, as was common with institutions of this sort.

To this student, life at her school was far more varied than simply reading books. She was entertained by her schoolmasters, jumped rope with her friends, and took part in and/or witnessed the production of food. Music is also featured prominently in this miniature panorama. We see it in the first two frames, as the artist is entertained by her professor and perhaps created music herself. Indeed, playing the keyboard was the only indoor activity featured. While reading and book learning were clearly valued by this student, so too was music and – considering the medium – art, though she chose not to feature that actively in a frame. Perhaps the artist was illustrating not only the various parts of her schooling but also fashioning the parts of herself both to herself and to the world around her.² Most of

the girls who attended this seminary and other similar institutions in the United States never set foot on a concert stage. They composed little music, but instead actively participated in a rich and varied American musical culture, as evidenced by their manuscripts and the burgeoning American music printing industry around this time.³

American women were not alone in their awareness of the power and importance of music and their embrace of its pursuit as a meaningful one. Scholars are continuing to detail both the substantive role that music played in the lives of female performers and more broadly, the importance of female “amateur” musicians within their societies in the 18th and 19th centuries. As Candace Bailey has explored in her groundbreaking book *Music and the Southern Belle: From Accomplished Lady to Confederate Composer* (2010), Antebellum Southern women embraced how performing music within the home was a useful pursuit to family and community alike; at the dawn of the Civil War, women recognized a newfound sense of responsibility and thus contributed to the war efforts in music through performance and composition. In late 18th and early 19th-century Berlin, Sara Levy was an influential salonnière defining musical taste, a keyboard performer of the highest caliber, and a champion of the works of the Bach family, as has been explored by numerous scholars and performers after the return of the Sing-Akademie Archive to Berlin in 2001.

While the musical lives of the students at women’s schools are sparsely documented, the discourse about their music education was in fact quite rich. This rhetoric can be best understood when examined as a convergence of ideas about education and educational philosophy, gender, and the power and role of music itself in the nascent republic. This article provides a background for these varying streams of thought and examines their intersection at the debate about what type of music is suitable for women to learn. That women should learn music was not a point of contingency, but how they should learn, what type of music they should study, and what role music would play in their lives were subjects of discussion.

The Value of the Ornamental Arts

One of the most contentious issues concerns the value accorded to skills such as sewing, tambour, music, and other “ornamental arts,” which some commentators dismiss either because they considered them not practical in the new nation or simply because these activities were associated with females. Even at the time, as Margaret Nash (2005) has illustrated in her history of women’s education in this period, the term “ornamental arts” did not have a standard definition, and furthermore the ornamentals often included the very trades that women could use to generate income

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(35-52).⁴ Women could support themselves with needlework and also by teaching all subjects at a small school, or specific subjects like music.

While educational reformers and the general public debated the value of ornamentals for American women at the time, our contemporary tendency to undervalue the cultural capital and social values of the ornamentals in the 1790s illuminates our perspective on what skills are valuable in our society.⁵ Succinctly put, we dismiss skills that do not or did not make much money.⁶ The dismissal of “ornamentals” in the history of female education illustrates an assumption that traditionally female activities were inherently less valuable and also shows a preference for activities that take intelligence rather than learned skill.⁷ Music was in fact highly valuable at this time, as is explored below, and many deemed it worthy of the effort and expense it required to learn.

Music and the Passions

Continuing from the early modern era, there was a strong association of music with the passions. In a book known to be in the collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia, *An Essay on the Passions* (1799), Englishman Kingsmill Davan echoes familiar sentiments on the power of music: “Music is the soul of each gentler passion; its sound awakens desire; it possesses a happy power to lessen, and, in a degree, purify the rougher passions. It cools anger, softens the savage edge of resentment; and awhile cheers and supports even the misery of despair” (77). He takes his point even further, writing that the sound of music “possesses an incomprehensible power to rouse and quiet the passions, seemingly in a manner independent of reason” (Davan 1799, 77).

This type of language about music was found in the writings of American publicist and diplomat Robert Walsh (1785-1859) as well.

The musician speaks the language of all ages and all nations. A universal language of sentiment, and of the passions. Its accents, going directly to the heart, without passing, as it were, through the mind, music produces effects unknown to any other; and the very vagueness of character which attends it, and which prevents it from giving to its accents the precision of speech, procures for it an unrivalled influence over the fancy, by the circumstance of its devolving on that faculty the business of interpretation. This influence, music enjoys in common with pantomime or gesticulation, that other universal language. (Walsh 1812, 197)

Walsh asked his reader to “[i]magine a people of enthusiasts, who, with our feelings and passions, were, moreover, gifted with organs much more acute, delicate, flexible, and sensitive; such a people would sing, instead of

speaking” (1812, 196).

Medical literature from this time illustrates how firmly these types of beliefs still took hold in thinking about the body and the passions. Music was routinely prescribed as a way to treat melancholy, a condition we might now label depression. In his *Essay on the Treatment of Consumptions*, surgeon Richard Charles (1787) recommends “music, cheerful company, and every thing that inspires mirth” as treatment for melancholy, which he writes often accompanies and aggravates consumptions (27). The 1845 English translation of French psychiatrist Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol’s (1772-1840) groundbreaking treatise on insanity tells of “cur[ing] diseases of the mind, by songs and harmony,” as has been recorded throughout history: “In order to render it efficacious, we must employ a small number of instruments, and select airs adapted to the condition of the patient” (230). In his *Practical Observations on Insanity* (1806), English physician Joseph Mason Cox (1763-1818) recommended musical study for patients who had “mental derangement” and “hallucinations” (79). He was “decidedly of opinion that music, as a mean in the treatment of many diseases, is undeservedly despised and neglected” (80).

Benjamin Rush (1746-1814), founding father, progressive physician, educator, and a prominent voice in the educational reform movement at this time, also weighs in on the power of music. Because of its power over the human soul, Rush believed that music ought to be approached with caution, played by those who could handle its power, and left untouched by the majority who could not (1786).

The effects of music upon the moral faculty, have been felt and recorded in every country. Hence, we are able to discover the virtues and vices of different nations, by their tunes, as certainly as by their laws. The effects of music, when simply mechanical, upon the passions, are powerful and extensive. But it remains yet to determine the degrees of moral extasy [sic], that may be produced by an attack upon the ear, the reason, and the moral principle, at the same time, by the combined powers of music and eloquence.

The eloquence of the pulpit is nearly allied to music in its effects upon the moral faculty. It is true there can be no permanent change in the temper, and moral conduct of a man, that is not derived from the understanding and the will; but we must remember, that these two powers of the mind are most affailable [sic], when they are attacked through the avenue of the passions; and these, we know, when agitated by the powers of eloquence, exert a mechanical action upon every power of the soul (Rush 1786, 25).

Rush’s beliefs in the power of music enhance our understanding of his dis-

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couragement of instrumental musical education for young women, which will be explored next.

The Morality of Women

Because of music's association with the passions, it follows that music would play an especially important role in the education of women because of the women's perceived superiority in matters of the spirit. In this place and time, it was commonly believed that women were closer to God, and morally superior to men, a topic explored by Nancy Cott (1997) in her monumental work *Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835*.⁸

In the writings of prominent educational reformers, we find reflections of these sentiments. Benjamin Rush, for example, emphasized that "the opinions and conduct of men are often regulated by the women" (76). Rush was known to receive much advice from his wife, and later in life, wrote to his children that "Had I yielded to [your mother's] advice upon many occasions, I should have known less distress from various causes in my journey thro' life" (Fried, 2018). Noah Webster (1758-1843), lexicographer and educational reformer of dictionary fame, among other things, expanded further on this idea, writing:

There are innumerable instances of men, who have been restrained from a vicious life, and even of very abandoned men, who have been reclaimed, by their attachment to ladies of virtue. A fondness for the company and conversation of ladies of character, may be considered as a young man's best security against the attractiveness of a dissipated life. A man who is attached to good company, seldom frequents that which is bad. For this reason, society requires that females should be well educated, and extend their influence as far as possible over the other sex (Webster 1792, 279).

In their position as the gatekeepers of morality and reason, educated women were considered vital to the success of the young republic. John Swanwick (1759-1798), Philadelphia mercantile and U.S. representative from Pennsylvania who also took an active role in the debate on education, wrote that "The influence of the fair sex over our modes of thinking and of acting has been in every age the theme of poets and historians. How fortunate then must it be for us if that influence be secured in favor of our government and laws, as it were in their infancy" (1787, 22). Further, there was a more pragmatic need for women to be educated. As we had seen in the Revolution, women were managers of a household and as such were

“stewards and guardians of their husbands’ property,” and Rush believed that they needed to be educated to fulfill these duties.⁹

Defining American Education

The educational reformers in the early republic provide a uniquely American perspective, striving to separate the new educational system for a democratic citizenry from the English model of education.¹⁰ If the United States was to be more than a fleeting moment in history, a different educational system would have to take root. Webster wrote, “We find Englishmen practicing upon very erroneous maxims in politics and religion; and possibly we shall find, upon careful examination, that their methods of education are equally erroneous and defective” (Webster 1968, 4). The long-term success of the government lay in the hands of the youth. John Swanwick emphasized this: “In a republic like this, where every citizen is, on every principle, bound to contribute his proportion to the general mass of information and usefulness,” education:

is of peculiar consequence in this, where the foundations of future greatness are probably now to be laid on the exertions which may be used to cultivate the minds of the younger branches of the community, on whose virtue, wisdom, and activity, the labours of the present age must rest for their final success; and on whose conduct, not only their own, but the welfare of multitudes, in successive generations, must probably depend (Swanwick 1787, 5-6).

While the progressive Americans viewed a classical education as a thing of the past, girls’ schools changed their curriculum far more quickly than boys’ schools. While many girls were studying botany, natural history, astronomy, chemistry, and other subjects we associate with a liberal arts education, many boys’ educations had Greek and Latin at their core.¹¹ Girls’ education in the United States was designed to be practical, and it was widely believed that American women required a more substantive education than British women. What subjects this entailed and whether American women had room in their busy days to play instruments was the subject of lively debate.

How to Educate Women

The circle of people surrounding the Young Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia were convinced that they had created a model of education that would spread throughout the United States; they had cast a mold that other institutions would follow. John Poor (1752-1829), the principal of the Philadelphia Academy, stated that “[h]owever novel or unprecedented

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an institution of this kind, and the mode of rewarding female merit may be, I flatter myself, from reason and past experience, that it has, and will obtain the general approbation of the more enlightened part of the present age” (*Rise and Progress* 1794, 26). Reformers and girls alike knew that they were doing something groundbreaking and important. As John Swanwick wrote,

The institution of seminaries for the PUBLIC instruction of young ladies in the various branches of polite literature is for aught I know, one of the singularities which mark this happy country. In other nations, institutions of this kind have been lavished in profusion on the other sex – but when was there seen before a commencement for young ladies? So numerously attended and honored by all that was dignified in the government of the country? This perhaps is a spectacle as yet reserved for you who as equal guardians of the community must protect the growth of knowledge alike in all conditions and in all sexes – If so, may we not congratulate America on this new proof of her civilization and look up with confidence to you for its future support and protections (Swanwick 1787, 22)

Adapting the educational system of women to meet the needs of the new republic was the primary concern of educational activists. “The education of females,” Webster wrote, “like that of males, should be adapted to the principles of the government, and correspond with the stage of society. Education in Paris differs from that in Petersburg, and the education of females in London or Paris should not be a model for the Americans to Copy. . . In America, female education should have for its object what is useful” (1792, 282). But Americans seemed to have different views as to what was useful, and people are not always willing to throw away what is pleasurable in favor of what is practical.

A good example of this can be seen in the treatment of reading in women’s education. We know that novels exploded in popularity at the end of the 18th century, despite the fact that women were discouraged from reading them. Generally advocating a more conservative education of women than Rush, Webster believed that women “cannot be too well acquainted with the writers upon human life and manners” (1792, 282). He recommended reading *The Spectator* (likely Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s popular paper collected into volumes), other periodical papers, and “some of the best histories” (Webster 1792, 282). As for the reading of novels, he believed that “some of them are useful, many of them pernicious, and most of them trifling. A hundred volumes of modern novels may be read, without acquiring a new idea. Some of them contain entertaining stories, and where the descriptions are drawn from nature, and from characters and events in themselves innocent, the perusal of them may be harmless”

(ibid. 1792, 282).

James Neal, whose essay “On the Education and Genius of the Female Sex” was published with an account of the 1794 commencement at the Young-Ladies’ Academy of Philadelphia, discouraged the reading of novels and other trivial publications:

It is not in perusing numerous publications, that knowledge is to be obtained; such publications, I mean, as are calculated to mislead and inflame the mind of inexperience. A brilliant display of superficial attainments, collected from romances, is often mistaken for real learning; and the obvious effects resulting from them, are attributed to erroneous and foreign causes: thus perverted and mistaken judgments are formed, and destructively propagated: even admitting partial evils as the result: can we from hence justly condemn a blessing so great, so obvious! (Neal 1795, 6)

While a few probably gave up novels altogether (like Mary in *Pride and Prejudice*) and some were carried away in their fancy, many others likely tried to balance the reading of moral and historical texts with novels, or rather work with pleasure, the useful with the ornamental. Perhaps paradoxically, Neal states that this is the very purpose of female education: “To direct the *Fair Sex* in the attainment of useful and ornamental acquirements – to caution against improper, nugatory and trivial pursuits, is an object of the greatest magnitude; and to destroy vulgar prejudices, and errors of every kind, is rendering an essential service to our country” (1795, 6). How to do this was a subject of debate.

The educational reforms argued for a rigorous academic curriculum for women. Rush advocated a wide range of subjects for females, including English (reading, speaking, spelling and grammar), writing, figures and book-keeping, geography (important for enabling the reading of history, biography, and travels), astronomy and natural philosophy, and the reading of history, travels, poetry and moral essays, all of which would prepare women to educate themselves, as he thought that the time of schooling was short but life was long. Rush emphasized a religious education as well, which included reading the Bible every day. Dr. Benjamin Say, doctor, apothecary, and U.S. Representative for Pennsylvania, broke the core education of women into seven branches, which included spelling, reading writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, and composition (*Rise and Progress* 1794).

Debating about Music

Educational reformers seem to agree on the core academic subjects that

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should fill a young ladies' curriculum, but the role of the arts in a women's education inspired lively discussion. The debate centers around this question: given the rigorous academic education necessary to women for the success of the nation, did they have the time to learn anything less practical? While foreign language, especially French, is mentioned in this debate, music takes center stage. Two published speeches given at the Philadelphia Young Ladies' Academy illustrate the heated viewpoints in this debate. Rush's speech on July 28, 1787 was met in opposition by John Swanwick, who poignantly voiced his opinion in addressing Rush's views in a speech given at the same institution a few months later, on October 31, 1787. Rush and Swanwick agree that music was an essential part of a woman's education, for reasons that will be explained below, but Rush encouraged the study of vocal music for most women, while Swanwick believed that women should learn instrumental music in addition to vocal music.

In his speech, Rush fights against the blossoming music industry in the hands of female performers and encourages women to study vocal music rather than instrumental. Rush extols the power of vocal music in lives of women. In addition to "preparing her to join in that part of public worship which consists in psalmody, it will enable her to soothe the cares of domestic life. The distress and vexation of a husband – the noise of a nursery, and, even, the sorrows that will sometimes intrude into her own bosom, may all be relieved by a song, where sound and sentiment unite to act upon the mind" (Rush 1787, 9).

Rush wanted women to adapt their musical pursuits to America's present situation and discouraged women from studying instrumental music because of practical reasons – money and time. The study of instrumental music was "by no means accommodated to the present state of society and manners in America. The price of musical instruments, and the extravagant fees demanded by the teachers of instrumental music, form but a small part of my objections to it" (Rush 1787, 9). He believed that there were some cases, when a lady possesses a "musical ear irresistibly dispose[d] to it," that an instrumental music education might be appropriate, but these circumstances "form an exception to the general conduct that should arise upon this subject" (1787, 17). While instrumental music was appropriate for English women, American women were to have a pragmatic education. "The state of property in America, renders it necessary for the greatest part of our citizens to employ themselves," according to Rush (6). Rush was mainly opposed to the amount of time that it took to become proficient at an instrument.

From two to four hours in a day, for three or four years, appropriated to music, are an immense deduction from that short period of time which

is allowed by the peculiar circumstances of our country to the acquisition of the useful branches of literature. . . How many useful ideas might be picked up in these hours from history, philosophy, poetry, and the numerous moral essays with which our language abounds, and how much more would the knowledge acquired upon these subjects add to the consequence of a lady with her husband and with society, than the best performed pieces of music upon a harpsichord or a guittar [sic]! (Rush 1787, 16)

Rush also laments that because of the nation's situation, once women become mistresses of the family, they no longer have the time to devote to music, and practical knowledge will help them in life much more than instrumental music would. For these women, "their harpsichords serve only as side-boards for their parlours, and prove by their silence, that necessity and circumstances, will always prevail over fashion, and false maxims of education" (1787, 16).

While John Swanwick praises the vocal music education enacted at the seminary, he encourages the study of instrumental music as well. He begins by complimenting the vocal music education that women receive at the school:

Vocal music has long been ably taught here by a gentleman, who has considerable merit, or the pains he has taken to instruct the youth of this and other cities, in this very agreeable art, of which no body can be more sincerely an admirer than I am; but which, I think, never is seen to so great advantage as when united to instrumental music – a science which, tho' not usually taught here, I hope none will neglect within whose ability it may chance to fall to acquire it. (Swanwick 1787, 9)

Music ensures that people do not pursue more dangerous pursuits.

If dancing may be suffered as an agreeable substitute for the ignoble pleasures of drinking and gaming in our assemblies of grown people – how much more instrumental music, on which this very dancing depends, whose influence and power it shews (sic), and whose whole expression, whether of life or grace, is entirely derived from it. If dancing promotes health and renders the figure and motions of the body easy and agreeable, it is because instrumental music has first enlivened the fancy, and given the ease to the soul which so naturally communicates itself to the body. Let the music cease, and the effect is instantaneous – the astonished dancer wonders at the charm that has impelled him, and unable to proceed without it, waits for the return of its animating influence. (ibid, 9-10)

Addressing Rush's concerns directly, Swanwick hopes "that instrumental music will not be excluded the circle of female accomplishments in

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America, but that it may regain its place among the politer studies of our well educated fair” (1787, 9-10). Boldly, he addresses Rush: “The objections that are usually stated to instrumental music are these; the cost of the instruments, the expence [sic] of teachers, the long time and practice it requires, and the few who make any use of this accomplishment after marriage” (ibid, 9-10).

Swanwick does not disagree that a musical education is expensive, but rather argues that a musical education is worth the cost:

As to the expence, I have never known the time when complaints have not been made as to the cost of education, while at the same time, money is found in profusion for exterior decorations, and for dissipations of every kind. Surely parents can in nothing lay out their money to more advantage, than on the minds of their children, and yet so it happens, that often they have money for every purpose but this, hence do we see such heavy arrears frequently due to seminaries of learning, on the score of tuition, even in the most indispensable branches of science: of this I am persuaded, that there is no man who has the real happiness of his child at heart, but what will be found active in enabling himself to bear, without a murmur, the charge of its education. Economy in other things will go a great way here, the cost of learning to play a few tunes on the guitar will not be much; if the harpsichord or forte-piano be found unattainable, and what additional industry it may require from the father, the harmonious pleasure of a tune from his daughter, will more than repay. (ibid, 11-12)

Taking his argument a step further, Swanwick states that music will stand in for other entertainments that are often had “at the expense of health, sometimes of virtue, and generally, at that of domestic ease” (1787, 12). Countering the unerring focus on the practical elements of education in America, Swanwick believes that “we cannot always be employed in history, philosophy, poetry, and moral essays. . . part of our time must be allotted to pleasure and entertainment” (ibid). If this is true, instrumental music is a “harmless” pleasure, and will do nothing to destroy “morality and virtue,” and further, Swanwick quotes James Beattie in saying that “music may inspire devotion, fortitude, compassion, benevolence, tranquility” (ibid, 13).¹²

As for the drain on a woman’s time, Swanwick kindly illustrates Rush’s tendency to focus on the serious. Swanwick writes that he “would not have a lady entirely devoted to music, nor give to it the time due to other attainments of consequence; all I could desire is, that it should form a part of the education of our ladies” (Swanwick 1787, 13). Women should be taught instrumental music so that they may “please, charm, and entertain, at home, among their families and friends,” which will take “less time and less expence than is generally imagined” (1787, 14). Swanwick believes

that Rush exaggerates how busy women should be with their intellectual pursuits, and women should also spend time practicing music, which will create a happy home for their future families.

Here I would just observe, that it is impossible a young lady's time should be so taken up, by the study of the language, and other usual pursuits of that sex, as not to allow an hour in the day for the acquisition of music: this hour, then, is not so employed, might possibly be passed in indolence, which stupefies, or in folly, which debases the mind; and when ladies grow up to the age which introduces them into society, there is always in the afternoon or evening a portion of time that may fall heavy on their hands, or perhaps be spent in insipid commonplace observations, unless appropriated to music, which, when introduced, never fails to have the best effects on all present: so that, if duly considered, it will be found time is devoted to this study which could have been more profitably bestowed on any other. (ibid).

In Swanwick's experience, women that excel at instrumental music do not lack in other areas. Further, Swanwick believed that music enlivens a life lived at home:

I have not observed those young ladies of my acquaintance who perform on instruments of music, to be at all inferior to any of their companions in other acquirements; but on the contrary, have generally remarked, that this study gave aid and countenance in various departments. . . Since some pleasures must be had for the mind, and none are more innocent; since it tends to make ladies fond of their homes, by giving them one more amusement there; since it combines with morality and virtue to make life amiable and happy, let not the American fair conceive of it as unaccommodated to them – it will soften the ruggedness, and gradually polish the rudeness of our deserts – it will smooth the untoward accidents of life, and, at last, assimilate us by its influence to those spirits of an higher order. (ibid, 16)

While Rush insists that women will quit playing once that are married, Swanwick argues that music is a purposeful activity that women can do within their marriage for the betterment of the lives of their family members. Swanwick tells a story to illustrate his point:

I was lately present at the house of a lady in this city, remarkable for the attention she pays to the education of her family – this lady had early acquired the art of playing on the harpsichord, and when the evening was like to prove tiresome, from its length, she did not disdain, tho' advanced in years, to reassume the employment of youth. She played on the harpsichord, and the whole happy family danced at the sound. Who can read a somewhat similar description in the *Sentimental Journey* of Sterne, to which this scene recalled my attention, without feeling a fresh admiration

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of this very valuable art? – which applies to all the noblest faculties of the mind, and of all the pursuits of this world, is one of the few that appears to be worthy of a better. (ibid, 10)

Swanwick emphasizes the attention that women pay to her family's education, and in doing so, instrumental music falls in line with women's role within the family in the new republic. The manuscript collection of Elizabeth Henry, a student at the Moravian Young Ladies' Seminary in nearby Bethlehem, PA and later wife of Philadelphia grocer John Jordan (and mother of four children including John Jordan, Jr., one of the founders of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, where her collection is housed) suggests that the scenario that Swanwick describes was at least sometimes the truth. Elizabeth Henry's music consists of six manuscript books varying in length from around 25 to 70 pages, four of which are dated: February 5, 1796, August 4, 1796, and two dated 1800.¹³ A couple of the books are also dated by "Mrs. John Jordan" in 1823. Henry made sure to fill all pages of her books, using one of the volumes at a later date to copy pieces from the 1830s, and one can assume that she likely had printed music in her library as well.¹⁴

Later in the text, Swanwick addresses Rush's comments more directly.

Another objection to music is, that ladies lay it aside after marriage, that their harpsichords then serve only as side-boards to grace their parlours, but is this perhaps not too high colouring. A lady, while single, has numerous occasions in which she may display her musical, as well as other acquirements, of which she is deprived, or can not properly avail herself, after marriage, then her chief pleasure will naturally consist in soothing, with her accomplishments, her husband, her children, her family, and from happy hours thus employed, those not immediately connected with the house may be excluded; but we should not do right thence to conclude none such existed. I have the honour to be acquainted with several married ladies of this city, who have frequently given me the greatest pleasure when they have admitted me to their harpsichords, where I never failed to improve, and where, indeed, all must improve, and who know how to set a proper value on female excellence: several of these ladies I have known, after marriage, even to employ tutors to perfect them on the forte-piano. Let it be recorded to their honour, for they are not behind hand in the skillful management of any other family concerns, with any ladies of their acquaintance in this large metropolis; however, if married persons are so happy in each other, and in the various engagements which employ them, as not to stand in need of this auxiliary, music will still be found, as good books always are, friends in reserve, to be produced, if wanted, but not intruding, unless called for. "Public spectacles, gaudy assemblies, horse-races, &c." says a late writer on American affairs, 'drag both men and women from the country, and inspire them with disgust for it. Music, drawing, painting, architecture,

attach all persons to their homes. An harpsichord is a neighbor always at command, who answers all your questions, and never calumniates." (Swanwick 1787, 14-15)

As for Rush stating that a woman should be given a broader musical education if they were "possessed of a musical ear," Swanwick says that this cannot be ascertained without trial. He believes that "there are very few who have not this ear for music," and music's popularity was a testament to that (1787, 15-16).¹⁵

While Rush may have pushed some towards a vocal musical education, it seems he didn't push many away from instruments, as can be seen by the growing collection of sheet music printed in America. Rush was standing against what was popular, and it appears that he did not win his war. While the study of instrumental music was not included in the curriculum at the Philadelphia Young Ladies' Seminary at the time Rush and Swanwick were speaking, it was made available to the students at many a seminary, including the Moravian Young Ladies' Seminary, another prominent institution that served as a model for women's education. Rather than being a left-over product of English education, music was included within American women's education because of its power and meaning within society at this time, and perhaps more importantly because people liked it.¹⁶ Nash (2005) argues that the most overlooked reason that women were educated at this time in America was simply for the pleasure of education. To put it another way, education did not always exist to serve women in the world but rather was rewarding in itself – rather than being a means to an end, it was an end in itself. Music falls into this category as well, as can be observed from fiction and from the widespread consumption of musical goods at this time.

Theory and Practice

Reformers, historians, and parents alike may have argued and continue to assert that academics were valued more than the ornamentals. I believe that this varied greatly, and further, that this probably depended not only on the institution but also on the students themselves, as is illustrated in the case of Theodosia Burr (1783-1813). U.S. Vice President Aaron Burr (1756-1836), distrusting the new U.S. academies in a Lockean fashion, oversaw the education of his daughter, Theodosia Burr, himself (Nash 2005, 37). In a letter dated October 30, 1791, Burr instructed his wife to omit music from their daughter's education and instead focus on French, writing, and arithmetic, writing that "she has made no progress in the latter, and is even ignorant of the rudiments."¹⁷ Aaron Burr believed women were the intellectual equals of men and thus insisted on teaching his daughter as such,

but Theodosia Burr was passionate about music. Just as no two people are the same, students responded to and interacted with their educational curriculum in different ways.

Benjamin Rush's stance as to the opposition to instrumental music education for most women ought to be considered along with the personage of his wife. In sitting for a portrait in 1776, the year of her marriage to Benjamin Rush, Julia Stockton Rush (1759-1848), was painted playing an English guitar sitting next to a stack of books. Recently discovered correspondences between Rush and his wife illustrate her role as his political advisor, and she was known to be a learned person as well as a gifted singer (Fried 2018). In a 1775 letter to his future wife, Rush wrote that "If the business of a married woman's life consisted simply in receiving & paying visits—in providing food for a family—or in bringing a number of children into the world, I should pity you in entering so early into matrimony. But I know you have higher objects principally in view. You long to share with me in the pleasure and honor of communication health & happiness to individuals & the public" (2018, 138). He gifted her a library upon their engagement and continued to gift her books during their marriage, but their correspondence became increasingly focused on their family, as they brought thirteen children into the world. Did Julia play her guitar while raising children? Perhaps it doesn't matter, and it simply was a part of who she was. Did music play a broader role in her education? These questions are still central in the debates about music education today.

Music was an accomplishment, but it was simultaneously more than an accomplishment in this place and time. In a society very concerned with the practicality of education for both men and women, the purpose of the arts was questioned. Yet even with doubt about the relevance of music education in the early republic, the growth of the music printing industry and the burgeoning collections of printed music and manuscript music in America suggest that musical culture was thriving, and indeed, music had a place within the American home. In fact, its functionality exceeded its frivolity, and women, who were both forced and pleased to pursue the art, were entertainers, teachers, moral compasses, and eager pursuers of new liberties.

Notes

1. John Cosens Ogden, Episcopal Reverend of St. John's Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, details the interwoven nature of the Moravian Young Ladies' Seminary and the broader Moravian settlement in Bethlehem, PA in *Excursion into Bethlehem & Nazareth in Pennsylvania*, in the year 1799 (1800).
2. The role of consumerism in the fashioning of self – particularly in the lives of women in this era – has been explored recently by Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor in her book *The Ties*

That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America (2009) and Kathryn R. Goetz in her dissertation “‘Tell me how you like the shoos’: Gender, girlhood, and material self-fashioning in America, 1770-1850” (2013). Both historians are careful to note that consumerism is not the only way that women fashioned themselves, but did note that material objects played a role in how people develop an identity. In music, we find both material object and practice and skill worthy of hours of devotion. Hartigan-O’Connor writes that “Emotional life in a broader, social sense was lived through objects precisely because of their portability and alienability. Just as hoarding spoons would never pay the rent, hoarding handkerchiefs was a recipe for social isolation. The social and emotional value of many objects could be realized only through sharing and circulation” (170). Music became more valuable as it was shared with friends and circulated throughout a community.

3. This article concerns Northerners, specifically Pennsylvanians. A balanced portrayal of the rigor of academics and the ornamentals within an upper-class woman’s education in the antebellum south is well laid out in the work of Christie Anne Farnham (1994).

4 Nash documents how subjects taught at both men’s and women’s institutions fell into the category of useful or ornamental, with ornamental subjects sometimes including astronomy and arithmetic, depending on the institution. Music, however, as well as various forms of art and needlework seem always to have fallen into the category of ornamental.

5. In an effort to claim that women had an education that was equal to men – that they were not occupied with conventionally female tasks – scholars have tended to discount or ignore the study of music. Mary Kelley’s groundbreaking book (2006) on women’s schools in America does not even mention music, despite the fact that it was such a large part of the curriculum at numerous schools. While Kelley meticulously details women’s academic prowess and opens a door for much further study on women’s education, the omission of music, perhaps in order to demonstrate women’s intellectual equality, skews the importance of music in the female’s education. It appears that in order for women to receive a “real education” in our modern eyes, activities that were not typically a part of the masculine curriculum are dismissed. We see similar feminist agendas in musicologist Jewel Smith’s work about the Moravian Young Ladies’ Seminary (2008) in antebellum America. In an article published in *The Musical Quarterly* (2007) that sets out to “demonstrate the Moravians’ belief that women were the intellectual equals of men in theory and in practice,” Smith glosses over suggestive differences in curriculum that might disprove her hypothesis about educational equality.

6 In her book about modern motherhood *What Mothers Do: especially when it looks like nothing*, psychotherapist Naomi Stadden (2004) describes mother’s frustration with saying that they don’t do any “real work,” when in fact they are working around the clock at mothering. In our current culture, a job is “real work” and mothering (and all the cleaning and household running that typically is in the mother’s realm) is not (15). Throughout her book, Stadden explores how women’s abilities at mothering are dismissed along with the very tasks themselves. We perpetuate this myth of nothingness further when we fail to respect the wholeness of early American women’s lives: all the duties, the tasks, and the many branches of their education. In the late 18th century, American women in schools studied textiles and music in addition to an academic curriculum. These were respected and important skills.

7. For a compelling and thorough study of textile arts in early American history and the women and circumstances that helped create them, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (2001). In addition to breaking down the 19th-century lore around objects created by women, Ulrich traces these everyday objects back to the culture and the people who made them, making a strong case

for studying the material possessions that were at the center of daily life for many women.

8. In the introduction to the second edition of her seminal work, Cott explores how belief in women's moral superiority actually took root early than she explored in her book, which paved the way for further research on the topic. Cott writes that, "[i]n the British work *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, which was widely reprinted in New England after 1775, Dr. John Gregory maintained that women were more "susceptible" to religion because of their 'superior delicacy,' 'modesty,' 'natural softness and sensibility of . . . dispositions,' and 'natural warmth of . . . imagination.' (Men, he assumed, naturally had harder hearts and stronger passions, and were more dissolute and resistant to religious appeal because of the greater freedom they enjoyed.) By the early nineteenth century New England ministers took for granted that women were the majority among Christians. They had assimilated the eighteenth-century argument that 'women are happily formed for religion' by means of their 'natural endowments' of sensibility, delicacy, imagination, and sympathy. It testified how far New England Protestantism had become a matter of 'the heart' rather than 'the head' between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century – just as it had become a religion chiefly of women rather than men – that such characteristics manifested a 'religious' temperament" (128-129).

Cott (1997) also writes of how "religious identity also allowed women to assert themselves, both in private and in public ways. It enabled them to rely on an authority beyond the world of men and provided a crucial support to those who stepped beyond accepted bounds – reformed, for example. Women dissenters from Ann Hutchinson to Sarah Grimké displayed the subversive potential of religious belief. Religious faith also allowed women a sort of holy selfishness, or self-absorption, the result of the self-examination intrinsic to the Calvinist tradition. In contrast to the self-abnegation required of women in their domestic vocation, religious commitment required attention to one's own thoughts, actions, and prospects" (140).

9. Much attention has been paid to Benjamin Rush's comments about "Republican motherhood," a term coined by Linda Kerber in her groundbreaking study "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment, an American Perspective" (1976). Historians have refined and discussed the concept in depth. It is my opinion that we can come to a greater understanding of the concept by considering Rush's peculiar writing style and putting him in context with other writers at the time, including John Swanwick, and further and perhaps most importantly, considering the growing importance of mother in the late 18th century, particularly in reference to Rousseau. Our modern feminist struggle between the home and the workplace taints our ideas of the past; in seeing women of the past negatively as solely homemakers and mothers, we see generations of women robbed of meaning in their lives. However, in coming to see the past with eyes of respect, I think we come to fully appreciate the strength and courage of these women, as mothers and as educated members of society. Respecting fully the roles of women at this point in time (though of course their roles were gendered) is essential to moving into a more peaceful and less gendered future. Many women were excited with the doors of education opening in front of them and excited to affect the future of the country through their children (see Nash (1997), Zagari (1992), and Lucia McMahon (2012)).

10. The crafting of a new educational ideal for a country raising democratic citizens is discussed in depth in Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle's book *The Learning of Liberty* (1993).

11. Kim Tolley compares the curriculums of boys' and girls' schools in her fascinating article "Science for Ladies, Classics for Gentlemen: A Comparative Analysis of Scientific Subjects in the Curricula of Boys' and Girls' Secondary Schools in the United States, 1794-

1850" (1996).

12. Swanwick quotes Scottish philosopher and poet James Beattie, (1776, 155).

13. Some of the manuscripts are missing pages, and Henry did not paginate the books herself, so it is difficult to know the precise lengths of some of the books.

14. The construction of Henry's books suggest that they were likely imported and purchased already bound.

15. Swanwick writes that, "When not found at home, at the theatres, at the concerts, at assemblies, private parties, walks, and in fact, everywhere where it is likely to be found; and this taste is so diffused that it pervades all ranks, the lowest are not too low, the highest not too high for its influence – It reaches alike the monarch on his throne and the prisoner in his dungeon, – it is applied to in prosperity as a crown of joy, as it is for a cordial in the sharpest conflicts of adversity – so good is Providence in this respect, even to the slave, that frequently this sweet Laethean stream, imparts to him serenity of a king" (1787, 16).

16. Lucia McMahon (2012) gives a broad overview of the various philosophies encompassing the ornamentals within female education, but still sees ornamentals as useful subjects, frivolous to true education, rather than anything one could perhaps fall in love with. She writes that "young woman approached the pursuit of education with enthusiasm, rigor, and determination" at academies throughout the United States (24), but seems to see music through the eyes of some educational reformers, whom she writes "insisted that these pursuits 'should never be allowed to encroach on the more important cultivation of the intellectual powers'" (26). Physical evidence, however, suggests that many women balanced their intellectual and musical pursuits. Certainly, women could approach music and/or any of the ornamentals with "enthusiasm, rigor, and determination" as well. Prioritizing intellect over the arts is a modern construct, and certainly one many people disagree with even at this time.

17. In another letter to his wife dated February 15, 1793, Burr writes the following: "You have heard me speak of a Miss Woolstonecraft [sic], who has written something on the French revolution; she has also written a book entitled Vindication of the rights of Woman. I had heard it spoken of with a coldness little calculated to excite attention; but as I read with avidity and prepossession everything written by a lady, I made haste to procure it, and spent the last night, almost the whole of it, in reading it. Be assured that your sex has in her an able advocate. It is, in my opinion, a work of genius. She has successfully adopted the style of Rousseau's Emilius; and her comment on that work, especially what relates to female education, contains more good sense than all the other criticisms upon him which I have seen put together. I promise myself much pleasure in reading it to you.

"Is it owing to ignorance or prejudice that I have not yet met a single person who had discovered or would allow the merit of this work?" Aaron Burr, letter to Mrs. Burr, February 15, 1793, *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, Massachusetts Historical Society. <https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/>

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