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The Complete Female: Musical 'Accomplishment' in the Late Eighteenth Century

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5. The Complete Female: Musical 'Accomplishment' in the Late Eighteenth Century

... music is universally admired, even by those who have the misfortune to have no taste for it. Besides, it is such an elegant accomplishment in itself! ... Accomplishments are such charming *resources* for young women Next to beauty, they are the best tickets of admission into society which they can produce.¹

This paper concerns what is meant by accomplishments. I argue that for females, the pervading definitions of elegance, adornment, decoration, ornament, and embellishment – but without substance, completion or perfection – are evidenced in pedagogical and decorum manuals, in moralistic essays in ladies' magazines, and in the imaginative literature of the period. Accordingly, several related issues must be addressed: (1) societal expectations governing the education and accomplishments of young women; (2) levels of musical accomplishment and social respectability; (3) domestic (salon) music and its contexts; and (4) the instruments permitted by social arbiters.

Although women *were* expected to have a working knowledge of arithmetic, geography, religion, literature and languages, botany/natural history, and a considerable understanding of household management, too much knowledge was a distinct disadvantage, for 'knowledge, like power beyond a certain degree, subjects those who possess it to many temptations and inconveniences.'² And John Gregory, in *A Father's Legacy to his Daughter* (1784), warns of the lack of femininity associated with learning:

If you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts and cultivated understanding.³

Yet more important in the female curriculum were needlework, penmanship, drawing, dancing and music. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady

Catherine subjects Elizabeth to a catechism which includes the subjects of drawing, singing, and playing an instrument; she does not quiz her on her knowledge of literature or geography. Lady Catherine's decorative arts were essential skills required of fashionable young women. Yet the acquisition of these skills or knowledge was necessary not for the pleasure they excited nor the stimulation they provided, but rather as a means to an end: these 'talents' gave idle hands something to do, alleviated boredom in an increasingly leisured society, gave promise of securing a husband, and, according to Edgeworth, were cultivated to be 'servicable in the instruction of [a future] family'.⁴ From the decorum manual, *The Mirror of the Graces*, we learn that

Of all the accomplishments, dancing and music are the most public, and therefore the most important: dancing is an agreeable exercise useful to health, promoting ease and grace; it is the accomplishment most calculated to display a fine form, elegant taste, and graceful carriage to advantage.⁵

And as Judith Tick so aptly puts it, 'music was part of one's presentation to the world.'⁶

Reformers who attempted to address the problems of both female education and the seemingly useless accomplishments promoted by female education manuals with their education-in-moderation stance were overwhelmed by a flood of publications designed to do just the opposite. The indoctrination began at an early age:

[a girl] child betrayed an early understanding, which her mother knew how to turn to her advantage; for, finding she imitated all she saw, and retained what she heard, made her mother guard against the ill consequences that might follow; she therefore told her, that it was a great disgrace in a little girl to take the liberty of repeating what she heard grown people say, or try to imitate what she saw them do, for that she must always ask mama's advice ... and thus she would avoid the danger of being wrong; that little girls ought to be very attentive to appear right in the opinion of the good and wise.⁷

While some manuals caution women of the dangers of depending on beauty alone, or on frivolous accomplishments, most make abundantly clear the strict rules which govern both female behaviour, and the quantity and quality of education they should receive, whether privately, in boarding schools, or in fashionable seminaries. Feminine ideals, closely integrated with education and accomplishments, and part of the core curriculum, are discussed in a number of manuals. In a *Female Instructor*, we are told that 'modesty and sweetness of temper are to be particularly observed,' and that 'after modesty, dignity is the

highest ornament of the female character.⁸ Analysis of such sources shows that women were expected to exhibit obedience, prudence, grace, truth, morality, domestic economy, simplicity, taste, elegance, propriety, duty, civility, compliance, softness and delicacy, virtue, contentment of domestic enjoyments, frugality, humility, industry, and true piety – all of these, somehow or other, to be practiced with good humour and cheerfulness. The following excerpt from *The Ladies' Literary Companion* (1792) describes such a 'reasonable woman':

After a night spent in healthful repose, the reasonable woman rises in that happy tranquil frame of mind, which results from pleasant reflections on the past day, and anticipating the temperate pleasure and important duties of the commencing one Before engaging in domestic cares, she prepares her mind for meeting with firmness, or bearing with patience, the little rubs and vexations of the day: she plans a thousand schemes of benevolence and utility; and the good she cannot perform, but generously intends, is recorded in heaven as virtue. The time necessarily spent at her toilette, is short; it is, however, rendered pleasing by the delightful hope of becoming more agreeable in the eyes of a husband, whom she loves too dearly to omit a single opportunity of complying with his taste, or confirming his esteem. ... Through the day she checks the little sallies of her own temper, and, unobserved, steals from others, by the influence of her good humour, every disquieting care Her conversation ... has no aim, but to instruct or amuse; and in her care to please others, she seems wholly to forget herself. Her elegant, yet frugal board, presents a striking emblem of her mind. ... When in public, she appears with propriety and modesty. She envies not beauty, she covets not grandeur, she seeks not to engage attention; for in the pleasing consciousness of discharging her duty, in the love of her husband, and esteem of her friends, she finds complete happiness.⁹

Such are the general behavioral ideals; but they took on at least three different incarnations as far as the practice of music itself was concerned.

The three distinct strata of musical entertainment in the late eighteenth century were: the professional, public platform; the semi-private gathering or court entertainment; and the sphere of domestic or social entertainment.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere,¹⁰ present views about earlier musicians (male or female) derive from nineteenth-century perceptions of the musician as exalted-creator. The mystique attached to composers – and particularly to solo performers – is a Romantic aesthetic; but the eighteenth-century musician was viewed not as godly creator, but as a servant or artisan. Since any musical employment was considered trade, the stigma attached to working for a living did not fit society's

expectations of a gentle class; and for women, the public spectacle of vanity and ambition hardly adhered to the rules of decorum.

Music as social accomplishment and music as a profession were two very different spheres of endeavour. We know of singers – both solo and operatic performers – who made successful careers on the stage with varying degrees of social approbation: Sophia Corri, Marie Fel, Nancy Storace, Corona Schroeter, Madam Mara; however, dancers and singers in an opera chorus fared less well, and their careers were often brief, terminated by marriage, pregnancy, thievery, or prostitution.¹¹ Attitudes towards the hierarchy and social status of female accomplishments are conveyed in an amusing dialogue in *Practical Education*:

‘Fond mother, would you, if it were in your power, accept of an opera dancer for your daughter’s governess, upon condition that you should live to see that daughter dance the best minuet at a birth-night ball?’

‘Not for the world,’ replies the mother. ‘Do you think I would hazard my daughter’s innocence and reputation for the sake of seeing her dance a good minuet? Shocking! Absurd! ...’

‘Would not you, as a good mother, consent to have your daughter turned into an automaton for eight hours in every day for fifteen years, for the promise of hearing her, at the end of that time, pronounced the first private performer at the most fashionable and crowded concert in London? ...’

‘For *one* concert?’ says the hesitating mother; ‘I think it would be too high a price. Yet I would give anything to have my daughter play better than anyone in England. What a distinction! She might get into the first circles in London! She would want neither beauty nor fortune to recommend her! She would be a match for any man, who has any taste for music!’¹²

Instrumental performers found a platform in the *concert spirituel* and the burgeoning subscription concert. Madame Krumpholtz was probably the century’s most brilliant harpist; Marianne von Martinez was recognized as both a performer and composer by such musical arbiters as Charles Burney; and great acclaim was given Maria Theresia von Paradis, the harpsichordist and pianist who made an asset of her blindness, and Anna Maria Kirschgessener, who gave a fleeting popularity to the glass harmonica, the instrument invented by Benjamin Franklin.

Some of these women belong to my second category as well – that of participants in the fashionable soirée or court entertainment. In such a venue they could avoid the stigma of performance as spectacle, and demonstrate considerable musical intelligence and ability. But praise of their performance was always tempered by conditions. Burney, who

is of particular interest for his accounts of private musical gatherings throughout Europe, has this to say of female performers:

Mademoiselle Diderot ... is one of the finest harpsichord players in Paris, and, for a lady, possessed of an uncommon portion of knowledge in modulation [by which he means improvisation],¹³

and on another occasion:

Madame Brillon ... is one of the greatest *lady*-players in Europe. This lady not only plays the most difficult pieces with great precision, taste and feeling, but is an excellent sight's woman; of which I was convinced by her manner of executing some of my own music.... She likewise composes She plays on several instruments ... she likewise draws well and engraves, and is a most accomplished and agreeable woman.¹⁴

Newspaper reviews of concerts and recitals reiterate this tone of almost patronizing condescension. Whether she sang in the opera, performed on the harp at a Salomon concert, entertained for a select and musically literate audience, or played for a family gathering, the female performer was relentlessly subject to the same kind of critical review. The feminine ideals I have isolated are transferred again and again to describe the manner of female musical performance: such phrases as these, which appear frequently, prove that the same language is used to describe *both*: 'elegance of manner,' 'purity of tone,' 'grace and charm,' 'softness and delicacy,' 'sweet sensibility,' and 'ornament of the profession.' Burney again:

There is always a want of force, of learning, of courage in female performances, occasioned perhaps by that feminine softness, with which in other circumstances, we are so enchanted.¹⁵

And he is not averse to making gratuitous remarks: 'this singer is possessed of a pleasing degree of plumpness.'¹⁶

'I would not make my daughter a virtuosa I wish my Eudora to be able to accompany her voice agreeably on the harp. I wish that she may play agreeably on the pianoforte.'¹⁷ Edgeworth clarifies the ideal of my third level of female accomplishment, the domestic sphere.

In *Emma*, we are given the well-educated, clever, musical bluestocking, Jane Fairfax, who enjoys practising on her new pianoforte. We infer that her musical tastes and technical abilities are superior to those of Emma, Mrs. Weston, or Mrs. Elton. Unlike Mary Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, who has neither taste nor execution, Jane Fairfax has both,

and for her, music is an art; for the others it is a skill necessary to secure a husband; once the knot is tied, there is, we are told by Mrs. Elton, little opportunity for practice or retaining one's skills – and possibly little need; after all, the main goal of music as a social accomplishment has been met.

For fashionable young ladies, instruction in one or more of lute, guitar, lyre/guitar, mandolin, voice, harp, harpsichord and piano was a social necessity; they were expected to entertain at domestic evening entertainments and provide the music for informal hops. Lack of talent was no deterrent; Ancelet writes with some irony that 'every young lady, whether or not she has the talent, must learn to play the piano or sing ... it is the fashion.'¹⁸ And a little later:

A timid young girl allows herself to be coaxed to sing After many curtsies, she proclaims she has a cold, but finally sings by heart the lesson composed by her teacher. By dint of hastening the tempo, the little song comes to an end, and the curtsies begin again.¹⁹

These 'little songs' were ballads, simple airs, folksong arrangements, German Lieder, and arias from operas and oratorios. For the harp or keyboard player there was no dearth of material: dance forms such as Scotch reels, cotillions, minuets, quadrilles, allemandes, and later, German waltzes, were written to be played on either harp or piano (the late eighteenth century made little idiomatic distinction between such instruments as the harp and piano). Genres for the more proficient performer included operatic arrangements (often as duets) and the ubiquitous themes and variations on familiar airs. Directed towards amateurs, these genres placed few demands – technical or musical – on their performers, and even fewer on their listeners. Entertaining, reasonably simple, and often charming, they provided amusement and direction in an age of carefully-orchestrated rituals of self-entertainment. The following *Allemande* by Fanny Krumpholtz is typical of such genres.²⁰ This music was published in great abundance – much of it composed by women; even Rousseau had allowed women *some* creative talent: '[while] women in general have no art, are familiar with none, and have no genius, they can succeed in small works that demand only a lightness of the spirit of taste, of grace'²¹ It was a view commonly shared, unfortunately, by even the most talented women composers; their predilection for composing miniatures reflects the image which society stamped upon them. In the 1785 edition of Cramer's *Magazin der Musik*, Corona Schroeter discusses her views:

I have had to overcome much hesitation before I made the decision to publish A certain feeling towards propriety and morality is impressed upon our sex which does not allow us to appear alone in public, and without an escort. Thus, how can I otherwise present this, my musical work, to the public, than with timidity?²²

Clara Schumann was to express the same diffidence fifty years later.



While domestic music-making was preferably taught by music masters, households which could not afford one had recourse to the burgeoning genre of the music method. By 1780 one could buy methods for all manner of instruments from the conventional to the bizarre, from guitar and mandolin to bagpipes and hurdy-gurdy; but keyboard and harp methods were the most popular, and appeared in great abundance, many with persuasive title pages promising easy, swift, and tasteful instruction. Madame de Genlis' *New Method for Learning to play the Harp* makes the outrageous claim that one can learn to play it in less than six months!²³ The promise of instant success and assumptions of universal musical talent are both indicative of the prevailing attitude towards domestic musical accomplishment. We are reminded of Lady Catherine's 'If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient.'²⁴

The harp, keyboard instruments, and voice were the socially acceptable instruments for females. Instruments not generally encouraged in fashionable society included the cello, for few women could play it with dignity or grace, and the violin, which scrunched the neck, giving the effect of a double chin. Brass and percussion instruments, scarcely off the battlefield, were closed areas to women, as were wind instruments. It was not considered flattering to a woman's beauty for her face to be reddened and distorted, lips and cheeks compressed from playing the oboe, chalumeau or bassoon; with their fat reeds and cylindrical inner bores, these 'masculine' instruments needed considerably greater breath pressure than do their modern counterparts.

The flute was acceptable because the embouchure required resulted in a pleasing upturning of the lips (the flautist's smile), and singing was certainly encouraged, but decorum dictated a pleasing, unaffected, natural style, without facial distortion or force of volume. 'Let the expression be in the voice and composition of the air, not in the looks and gestures of the lady singer.'²⁵ Women were exhorted to sing with simplicity, without exhibition, 'that men of principle need not turn away disgusted.'²⁶ Newer instruments such as the portmanteau lyreguitar or lyra-harp were structurally elegant, designed to complement the ideal female form—some even had waists—but their popularity was short-lived, probably because of their awkwardness and weight: they were cumbersome to play. More emblematic than practical, they serve to remind us of the agony of fashion.

Harps and harpsichords had been decorated with images of women since the Renaissance; this symbolic connection between object and player continued in the eighteenth century both in furniture design and musical decorum. These 'female' instruments were looked upon with great favour, although young ladies were adjured as much to practise a physical stance at the piano or harpsichord as the instrument itself:

There are many young women, who when they sit down to the piano ... twist themselves into so many contortions, and writhe their bodies and faces about into such actions and grimaces, as would almost incline one to believe that they are suffering under the torture of the toothach[e] or the gout. Their bosoms heave, their shoulders shrug, their heads swing to the right and left, their lips quiver, their eyes roll; they sigh, they pant, they seem ready to expire! And what is all this about? They are merely playing a favourite concerto²⁷

But the harp was the epitome of grace, elegance and refinement:

the shape of the instrument is calculated, in every respect to show a fine figure to advantage. The contour of the whole form, the turn of a beautiful hand and arm, the richly-slippered and well-made foot on the [pedals], the gentle

motion of a lovely neck, and above all, the sweetly-tempered expression of an intelligent countenance; these are shown at one glance when the fair performer is seated unaffectedly, yet gracefully at the harp.²⁸

Of the three levels of female music-making, the first group of highly skilled performers won public acclaim, but not necessarily social approbation; the second – perhaps the most envied – won both. The last group, the most common by far, were concerned not with the art itself, but with the perceived usefulness of music in securing their futures; by modishly adhering to societal conventions of accomplishment, they became fair game for satirical engravings and poetical lampoons:

Behold Miss Tasty every nymph excel,
A fine, accomplished, fashionable belle.
Plac'd at the harpsichord, see with what ease
Her snowy fingers run along the keys;
Now quite in alt, to the highest notes she'll go;
Now running down the bass, she falls as low;
Flats, sharps, and naturals, together jumbled,
She laughs to think how little folks are humbled
While some pretending coxcomb sighing, says,
So loud that she may hear, 'Heavens, how she plays.'
Then she speaks French. Comment vous portez vous?
Ma chere amie! ma vie! o ciel! mon dieu!
And dances—sink, chasse and rigadon,
Or hops along, unheeding time or tune,
As fashion may direct²⁹

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Notes

- 1 Maria Edgeworth, *Practical Education*, 2nd. ed. (Boston, 1815), II, pp. 111, 114.
- 2 Ann Murry, *Mentoria; or the Young Ladies' Instructor*, 12th ed. (London, 1823), p. 206.
- 3 John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to his Daughter* (London, 1774), quoted in Judith Tick, *American Women Composers before 1870* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), p. 15.

- 4 Edgeworth, II, p. 124.
- 5 *The Mirror of the Graces* (New York, 1813), p. 164.
- 6 Tick, p. 13.
- 7 *Instructions for the Conduct of Females from Infancy to Old Age* (London, 1788), p. 16.
- 8 *The Female Instructor* (London, n.d.), pp. 3, 12. The feminine ideals discussed here are reiterated in numerous female instruction manuals of the late eighteenth century.
- 9 *The Ladies' Literary Companion* (Burlington, 1792), pp. 149-52; the entire essay, 'Description of a Reasonable Woman' ['by a Lady'] is germane to my subject.
- 10 Ursula M. Rempel, 'Women and Music: Ornament of the Profession,' in Samia I. Spencer, ed., *French Women and the Age of Enlightenment* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 171.
- 11 Emile Campardon, *L'Académie royale de musique au XVIIIe siècle* (1884; New York: Da Capo, 1971). This archival work lists biographical data about singers and dancers associated with the Academy.
- 12 Edgeworth, II, pp. 110-11.
- 13 Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (London, 1771), p. 392.
- 14 Burney, p. 342.
- 15 Cited from Burney's diaries by Paul Henry Lang in 'Tales of a Traveling Music Historian,' *The Journal of Musicology*, 2 (Spring 1983): 198.
- 16 Lang, 198.
- 17 Edgeworth, II, p. 116.
- 18 Quoted in Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos* (London: Gollancz, 1955), p. 313.
- 19 *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, III (1800-1801): 66.
- 20 Fanny Krumpholtz, unpublished manuscript, B.L. Add. Ms. 49288, f. 14r.
- 21 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (Amsterdam, 1758), p. 193, quoted in Marcia J. Citron, 'Corona Schröter: Singer, Composer, Actress,' *Music and Letters*, 61 no. 1 (1980): 22.
- 22 *Cramer's Magazin der Musik* (1785), pp. 693-94, quoted in Citron, 21.
- 23 Comtesse de Genlis, *Nouvelle Méthode pour apprendre à jouer de la Harpe* (Paris, 1811; rpt. Minkoff, 1974), t.p.
- 24 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 119.
- 25 *Mirror of the Graces*, p. 183.
- 26 *Mirror of the Graces*, p. 184.
- 27 *Mirror of the Graces*, pp. 181-2.
- 28 *Mirror of the Graces*, p. 185.
- 29 Susanna Rowson, 'Women as they are,' from *Miscellaneous Poems* (Boston, 1804), cited in Tick, p. 20.