3 "Girling" at the Parlor Piano

La femme n'est pas une action, elle est une influence.

MARIÉ DE SAVERNY, La Femme chez elle et dans le monde (1876)

The type-writer is especially adapted to feminine fingers. They seem to be made for type-writing. The type-writing involves no hard labor, and no more skill than playing the piano.

JOHN HARRISON, A Manual of the Type-Writer (1888)

In an excruciating climactic scene in the American girls' novel Elsie Dinsmore, the pious eight-year-old heroine finds herself seated on a piano bench facing an irresolvable moral dilemma. Her father has asked her to play and sing for a gathering of his friends, and Elsie would be more than happy to comply, generous and tractable as always, but for the fact that it is Sunday. She protests that "this is the holy Sabbath day," but he is determined to test her obedience, insisting that she has no right to oppose his moral judgment with her own.

Elsie sat with her little hands folded in her lap, the tears streaming from her downcast eyes over her pale cheeks. She was trembling, but though there was no stubbornness in her countenance, the expression meek and humble, she made no movement toward obeying her father's order.

There was a moment of silent waiting: then he said in his severest tone, "Elsie, you shall sit there till you obey me, though it should be until to-morrow morning."

"Yes, papa," she replied in a scarcely audible voice, and they all turned away and left her.¹

Elsie sits on the bench for several hours, missing her dinner, until she faints.

Elsie's predicament is hardly subtle. As a good daughter, she has two

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¹. Martha Finley, Elsie Dinsmore (1868; New York: Dodd, Mead, 1893), 240–41. I am grateful to my colleague Ann Arnett Ferguson for reminding me of the relevance of this novel to my argument.
obligations—to her father and to her God—and they are momentarily at odds; she cannot fulfill both. But that the author situates her moment of moral crisis on a piano bench is far from arbitrary and in 1868 was equally obvious: a daughter spends her time at the piano.

My subject here is a myth, a system of representations: nineteenth-century girls at the keyboard.² The myth’s relationship to empirical reality—to the actual female piano playing that went on—is not evidentiary but symbolic, offering a rich ground for understanding the values and preoccupations of Victorian culture and something as well about the sacred aura around family domesticity, the myth’s most cherished breeding-ground. For myth-making is, as Alessandra Comini says, “civilization’s autobiography.”³ The myth is perhaps also, and more interestingly, causal: that is, it affected the actual lives of girls and women, and the more certainly as it gathered strength and definition in the course of the century.

I borrow the term “girling” from Judith Butler, who coined it to describe a two-way process that marks girls’ lived experience of their culture’s values. On the one hand, girling is the social process that forms girls appropriate to the needs of the society they live in; on the other, it is their own enactment—or, in Butlerian terms, their performance—of girlhood, both to satisfy familial and social demands on them and, as we shall see, to satisfy needs of their own either to resist those demands or to reassure themselves about their own capacity to fulfill them.⁴ In pursuit of both sides of this cultural thoroughfare, I want to survey not only the social prescriptions that seated the girls before those keyboards, but also and especially their reactions to finding themselves there.⁵

⁴. Butler used the term in a talk at Smith College in January 1994.
I believe that a project like this, both gender-specific and music-specific, can help flesh out much of the cultural theorizing that has been so interesting to musicology as well as to other disciplines in recent years; it adds specificity to our understanding of the bourgeois family as the real engine of larger-scale cultural developments, a nexus of relationships that has played a considerable role in much of that theory. For example, Habermas’s work on the complex and reciprocal interactions of public and private spheres suggests, among other things, that in such a culture as that of modern Europe it is within these newly construed family groups—hierarchical, blood-related, and emotionally charged—that individuals developed their manner of relating to others and their sense of what behaviors were appropriate to the public arena and what kinds of compensatory satisfaction were to be expected from the private. Norbert Elias’s argument about the sociology of manners and of civilized or “respectable” behavior rests crucially on the development of a sensibility of “private things” and of personal, intimate behaviors. Similarly the team of French historians who have been involved in the large-scale exploration of the history of private life demonstrated conclusively that in modern Western culture “private” has not, for better or worse, meant “individual” but always “nuclear family.” Friedrich Kittler’s “discourse networks” include a mechanism of maternal transmission of literacy—of “natural” acculturation—that speaks directly to this intimate sense of familial interaction. And no one, I think, has taught us more than Peter Gay about the perhaps surprising role of the most inti-


mate aspects of emotional life in shaping civilization even on the grandest scale. Such lines of research suggest eloquently, I think, that more needs to be understood about the particular behaviors and practices that marked and formed bourgeois families at home, and without doubt music was a predominant one of those practices.

Perhaps it goes without saying that none of the Victorian authors I cite had a particularly strong interest in teenage girls. But I believe that I can make a case for their central importance in this historical process, taking girls seriously enough to consider their real role in the development of societal forces and structures very much larger than what they themselves usually imagined—although some of them, in the privacy of their diaries, did sometimes speculate on their role in the great scheme of things, as teenagers with diaries will do.

I

Victorian texts are rife with observations about girls and pianos, some regarding the phenomenon as part of the natural order of things, but others rather less enchanted by what they saw as an artificial and inadvisable practice.

How frequently in the present state of narrow feeling do we witness the sad spectacle of a girl, entirely devoid of all musical ability, compelled to drudge away for hours daily at the piano because of her, every young lady ought to be able to play. The result is, that for a few seasons the patience of friends is exhausted, and their ears are tortured by the girl’s wretched performances.  

Thomas Carlyle, admittedly never very musical, complained about the incessant noise of pianos in hotel rooms.

This miserable young woman that now in the next house to me spends all her young, bright days, not in learning to darn stockings, sew shirts, bake pastry, or any art, mystery, or business that will profit herself or others; not even in amusing herself or skipping on the grassplots with laughter of her mates; but simply and solely raging from dawn to dusk, to night and midnight, on a hapless piano which it is evident she will never in this world learn to render more musical than a pair of barn-fanners!

Carlyle expressed the irritable hope that “the Devil some good night should take his hammer and smite in shivers all and every piano of our European world!”

In his moralizing volume entitled *Social Pressure*, Arthur Helps uses the same phenomenon as a horrific example of the fate awaiting the sensitive soul living in a large city:

If he is a father of a family, he learns to bear with something like fortitude the practising of his own daughters on the piano; but it seems hard that he should have to hear the practising of his neighbours’ daughters on that formidable instrument; and when, for the sixth time, he hears C flat instead of C sharp played in an adjacent house, he is very apt to be distracted from his work, and very much inclined to utter unbecoming language.

However it came about, and with whatever variation in pace and thoroughness from country to country, there is no doubt that domestic music making, and especially piano playing, had become thoroughly associated with young women by the middle of the nineteenth century; for better or worse, the piano-girl was ubiquitous. Any doubts we might have on that point would be set aside by a perusal of the dauntingly enormous iconographic tradition—a primary repository of cultural myth—and by a glance at the flood of piano music published with explicit inscriptions “to the ladies,” “to the fair sex,” “to Vienna’s beauties,” and so forth. In step with this fashion and its associated market, Carl Czerny published *Letters to a Young Lady, on the Art of Playing the Pianoforte* in Vienna around 1840, as a supplement to his more general method book. In it Czerny addresses a fictional pupil he calls, appropriately enough, Cecilia, describing her as “a talented and well-educated girl of about twelve years old.” He exhorts her to attend to her posture and to her appearance at the keyboard, he reminds her of her duty as a good daughter to play for the pleasure of her family and their friends, and he reinforces the point that piano playing, while of course suitable for everyone, is “yet more particularly one of the most charming and honorable accomplishments for young ladies, and, indeed, for the female sex in general.”

In the sixty-two published volumes of the *Girl’s Own Paper* more than 250 items on music appeared,\(^{14}\) including exhortations by leading lights of the aristocracy like Lady Lindsay’s “Thoughts on Practising” (1882) or Lady Macfarren’s “Music in Social Life” (1895). The iconographic record, already mentioned, furnishes indisputable evidence of the ubiquity of the association. One striking but also typical example is a well-known drawing by Dominique Ingres (opposite page), a family portrait dating from 1818, similar in type to many such portraits both by the same and by other artists. This picture is reproduced in the nineteenth-century volume of *The History of Private Life*, with the following caption:

> The Stamaty Family is a classic of the genre. Each person strikes a pose: the father with his Napoleonic gesture, the mother in her finery, the slender young woman at the piano, the adolescent with his unruly hair, the young child, whose sex is revealed by his toys.\(^{15}\)

In other words, this placement of the girl at the keyboard was, precisely, emblematic. When a nineteenth-century artist, working in a conventional and commercial genre, needed to represent “daughterhood,” he did it with a girl at a keyboard.

An anonymous correspondent to the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* in 1800 partially explains the tradition:

> Every well-bred girl, whether she has talent or not, must learn to play the piano or sing; first of all it’s fashionable; secondly, it’s the most convenient way for her to put herself forward in society and thereby, if she is lucky, make an advantageous matrimonial alliance, particularly a moneved one.\(^{16}\)

To be sure, the writer goes on immediately to say that sons ought to learn music too. But, like most contemporary observers, this one is remarkably forthright about the purposes that were served by all this piano playing, and why in every advice book the girls were mentioned and addressed first. A young woman in 1800 in Vienna, just like most young women in most places before very recently, had but one job in life: to find a spouse; she soon found that music was highly effective as bait. Popular newspapers and magazines of the period are filled with jokes about escaping the little seductress at the keyboard.

\(^{14}\) A complete index by topic of the *Girl’s Own Paper*, compiled by Honor Ward, is available at www.mth.uea.ac.uk/~h720/GOP.

\(^{15}\) Perrot, *From the Fires of Revolution*, 98.

\(^{16}\) Quoted in Alice M. Hanson, *Musical Life in Biedermeier Vienna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 118.
Digging a layer deeper into this social phenomenon, we can find a more profound reason why music, and gradually all of the arts, were increasingly associated with women in bourgeois society—always bearing in mind that my discussion here is of amateur, not professional, musicians. It has something to do with the spread of a popularized, or perhaps I should say vulgarized, form of romanticism that idealized and sentimentalized women at the same time that it idealized and sentimentalized the aesthetic experience, creating a natural link between them.\(^{17}\) As the businessman or the bureau-

\(^{17}\) See chapter 4 for a more detailed exploration of this cultural phenomenon.
crat, practical-minded and uniformed in that nineteenth-century innovation, the business suit, became the Everyman figure of middle-class consciousness, those aspects of his personality and imagination that had to be repressed in competitive professional life gradually formed into the image of a counterpart, an Everywoman who was conceptualized as his opposite: she was intuitive where he was reasonable, artistic where he was pragmatic, nurturing where he was aggressive, delicate where he was robust, domestic and shy where he was public and gregarious, and so forth. The historian of philosophy Geneviève Fraisse says, for instance, that “nineteenth-century metaphysics thrived on concepts of duality, relation, and the unity of opposites, for which sexual difference was one representation and perhaps even a fundamental metaphor.”  

Boys and girls were educated differently, and during the course of the nineteenth-century educational “reforms” produced curricula that became in fact more sharply differentiated toward the rational/scientific for boys and the emotional/aesthetic for girls. Despite the fact that women were slowly gaining political and economic equality, the curricula were addressed to their increasingly absolute role differentiation later in life.

There is little need to rehearse here this by now familiar ideology; in place of an extended discussion I offer an emblematic quotation from Florence Hartley’s *Ladies’ Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness*, published in Boston in 1873:

“All circumstances well examined, there can be no doubt Providence has willed that man should be the head of the human race, even as woman is its heart; that he should be its strength, as she is its solace; that he should be its wisdom, as she is its grace; that he should be its mind, its impetus, and its courage, as she is its sentiment, its charm, and its consolation. (294)

Hartley’s exposition of the providential facts of life leaves little doubt which gender will take up the piano, and her comments, clichés that they are, are


especially interesting in light of their occurrence in an etiquette book: this is not a sermon, but a source of authority that girls and women might consult on a daily basis for practical advice, and very far from an unusual example of its genre in including such moral speculation. Furthermore, Hartley describes these aspects of the essential nature of men and women in the form of contributions to the “human race,” not merely as attributes or potentials for individual development. Another version elaborates even more lavishly the “opposite poles” theory of gender:

Man is bold—woman is beautiful. Man is courageous—woman is timid. Man labors in the field—woman at home. Man talks to persuade—woman to please. Man has a daring heart—woman a tender, loving one. Man has power—woman taste. Man has justice—woman mercy. Man has strength—woman love; while man combats with the enemy, struggles with the world, woman is waiting to prepare his repast and sweeten his existence. . . . [H]is day may be sad and troubled, but in the chaste arms of his wife he finds comfort and repose.  

The last few phrases here underline the particular ways in which the daughter is learning her job by practicing the piano. It was her specific task, as we read in many another etiquette and child-rearing manual, to offset her father’s alienated experience of the daily work grind and to provide sufficiently attractive entertainment at home to keep her brothers out of oyster bars and saloons—indeed, the rescue of brothers from the world’s temptations became a major issue and was much discussed by the moralists. In 1848 Punch defined the ideal daughter as one who “does not invent excuses for not reading to her father of an evening,” or, as Judith Rowbotham puts it, “it was woman’s first duty in life . . . to become as professional in her sphere as a man in his; to cultivate her feminine talents in the emotional realm so as to maximize their usefulness within the domestic orbit.”  

H. R. Haweis, a contemporary British clergyman who wrote a lot about the relationship of music and moral life, explains something about the implications of this role differentiation (although I believe that he did not quite fully understand the nature of the transaction involved): “As a woman’s life is often a life of feeling rather than of action, and if society, while it limits

her sphere of action, frequently calls upon her to repress her feelings, we should not deny her the high, the recreative, the healthy outlet for emotion which music supplies. . . . A good play on the piano has not unfrequently taken the place of a good cry up stairs."22 While Haweis is surely right about the piano’s role in female emotional life, my own interpretation of the testimony of memoirs and diaries, as well as countless scenes in nineteenth-century novels, is that the young woman was expected not, indeed, to repress her feelings but rather to enact the graceful and sensitive expression of feeling on behalf of society as a whole: some etiquette books actually taught young women how to weep effectively. The girl’s job would surely have included both the good play on the piano and the good cry upstairs.

Family history can help us understand the kind of intimate situation that provided the context for girls’ piano playing and—more to my immediate point—for the mythic system of representation that enfolded the piano-girls. One of the many enormous social changes produced by industrialization, everywhere in the Western world though at varying paces in different countries, was the shift from the relatively large “household” of the eighteenth century and earlier—which might contain several generations, relatives of various types, and a number of retainers and employees—to what the Germans called the Kleinfamilie, the nuclear family.23 As always, an ideology came along with the new formation for, as Justin Lewis writes, “cultural forms do not drift through history aimlessly: they are grounded in an ideological context that gives them their historical significance.”24 The members of the new family were expected to share highly charged emotional bonds and to live in considerable intimacy; this was the era in which arranged marriage was disappearing in favor of affectional choice, and when middle-class mothers were giving up wet nurses and nannies to care for their children themselves.

At the same time, status in the new kind of society was increasingly based on wealth rather than birth, so that “upward mobility” took root as one of the family’s goals. Many scholars have detailed the process by which the bourgeois wife gradually became the symbolic representative, first of the leisure her husband’s economic success could buy for the family (a leisure

23. Chapter 4 continues the discussion of this transformation.
more apparent than real in most cases), and then of the family’s purchasing power through increasingly elaborated consumer practices. Thus the woman inexorably comes to be associated with—and, according to some historians, confined to—the home, facilitating the century-long process of establishing “an ideal that removed women from all productive labour but childbearing, that separated the men and women of a family during their working hours, and that channeled women’s energies, and only women’s, into arranging for the consumption of goods and services.” This ideal, I would argue, produces piano playing under two guises, both as an expression of leisure and as a form of moral and emotional labor within the family. The cultural reasoning might proceed as follows: music was necessary to society, not as mere entertainment but (in the well-regulated and enlightened nineteenth-century home) as a sort of combination spiritual therapy and mental hygiene. The family, laden with symbolic responsibility in its newly intimate configuration, was the natural and proper locus for this Herzensbildung along with other kinds of education and socialization. The father’s job was to provide for the family’s material sustenance, which he now ordinarily did outside the home; the emotional or spiritual well-being of the family, inside the home, was the responsibility of the women. And the adolescent daughter was ideally suited to take over the musical portion of this responsibility; in keeping with the customary ways in which Victorian children were, as J. S. Bratton pithily puts it, “pressed into instrumentality,” she could perform this important service role within her birth family while at the same time practicing for her own wifely and motherly career. From this scenario we understand some of the emotional charge that surrounded her piano lessons. She wasn’t only learning music or making herself more marriageable, although she certainly was doing both of those; she was also participating in a system of family discipline and, perhaps most important, absorbing the essence of the larger aesthetic and emotional realm that made her femininity convincing.


On this point there is a nearly inexhaustible supply of pertinent quotations for the choosing—from all over Europe, North America, and their colonial sites—since the nineteenth century saw a floodtide of advice manuals, etiquette books, and treatises on family life, and as far as I have seen they all tell more or less this same tale. For one example, consider Sarah Josepha Hale, arbiter of American mores and editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*: “Music is the art of all arts in its sweet and refining influence on humanity.” Instruction in music is therefore necessary in every family, since it “will have abiding effect on the happiness of home-life, and the character of our people.” Hale urges that children of both genders be taught music, somewhat against the American grain, but her reason for including the males is especially revealing: “To a man himself, . . . the power to play is of use. He may not always have a sister, wife, or daughter, to sing and play to him.” Here is another version, from a German source:

Father comes home in a bad temper, having had a hard day in the hostile world outside; his daughter opens the piano, touches the keys and sings her father his favorite song. Isn’t it wonderful to see the sunshine return to his face, and the ugly shadows disappear?

and here a considerably less beatific and sentimental admonition:

I have no mercy for the young lady who has had time and money lavished on her musical education, who will not take the trouble to play to her brothers in the evening. If she distrusts her powers she need never

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29. Sarah Josepha Hale, *Manners; or, Happy Homes and Good Society* (Boston, 1868), 49, 50, 171. I have found precisely the same words in other advice manuals and cannot tell who originally penned them; e.g., the anonymous “Man in the Club Window,” in *The Habits of Good Society: A Handbook of Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, ca. 1875) is clearly a reprint of an English book. Apparently “success writers cribbed, pirated, and plagiarized lavishly and unabashedly” from one another (Hilkey, *Character Is Capital*, 48).

But some etiquette books worried that young women were spending too much of their time practicing, at the expense of more pious activities or more fundamental aspects of home management. Hence we must read comments specifically on piano practicing in conjunction with other sections or chapters—usually among the first in the book and underlying everything that follows—concerning “woman’s role” or “woman’s mission.”

play to other people who may ask her out of compliment; but when brothers ask their sisters to play, they mean that they want the music, and they should have it.\textsuperscript{31}

In the German-speaking world a teenage girl was familiarly known as a \textit{Backfisch}—a baked fish or, perhaps, a fish suitable for baking—in any event, a dish, and one waiting for consumption; similar attitudes prevailed elsewhere, even in the absence of such a colorful epithet. In diaries and memoirs women describe this time as unhappy and tense; some of them bitterly accuse society of treating them like commodities, whose market value would decrease steeply if left on the shelf for too long. Others describe a protracted sense of emotional upheaval, a feeling that life was on hold and an intense reliance upon the intimacy that their pianos offered them as ways of killing time while they waited. Here is the source of a whole flood of parlor pieces written and published especially for them: “Backfisch’s Dream,” “The Maiden’s Prayer,” “Elsa’s Longing.”

This repertory was, as may be imagined, highly successful commercially. Just like the present-day romance novels of which they were surely predecessors, these pieces constitute a functionally and ideologically defined genre quite unlike the formally defined ones music history is used to; they bear individual, albeit stereotyped, titles that are in fact not unlike the titles of romance novels. Their emergence vividly exemplifies Jeffrey Kallberg’s notion of a “generic contract” between composer and listener\textsuperscript{32}—in this case, the solitary performer is her own audience, and the contract specifies the emotional solace she expects in exchange for the money she pays for the sheet music and her hours of practice. On a larger scale, the implicit contract that binds the genre as a whole promises to produce women who are correctly “girled” according to the needs of the society in which they are destined to take their places.

II

Today I put a hen on thirteen eggs and I hope that all of them will hatch. I have also been out milking twice today, and I have finished the comforter I was making for Mamma and I think that is fairly good, for me that is. Then I practiced the piano for an hour.

\textsuperscript{31} E. Chester [pseud. Harriet Eliza Paine], \textit{Girls and Women} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 150.

This is an entry from the diary of Kena Fries, a fifteen-year-old Swedish immigrant living outside Orlando, Florida.33 I quote her precisely because there is nothing in the least unusual about her, or about her account of her activities on this March day in 1883. The obverse of the coin of girlings as social formation, the girls’ response to their own acculturation by piano, is readily and ubiquitously visible in their diaries and letters. Many of them, as we shall see, express dramatic and even melodramatic feelings about the process but others, like Kena, seem to take it simply for granted. I found particularly revealing the memoirs (sometimes also the diaries) of women who became prominent later in other fields—not musicians, but women whose public profile was such that they were led to ruminate on the means and ramifications of their own upbringing. Strikingly, it is almost impossible to open a nineteenth-century woman’s diary, correspondence, or memoir without encountering piano lessons or piano practice at some point.

Several themes emerge from these girls’ accounts. They let us know all the ways in which their practicing and their playing are part of the family dynamic of the household; they speak volubly of their attitudes toward practicing and the kinds of discipline applied in getting them to do it regularly; many of them confide deep feelings about music and about the role “their” pianos play in their emotional lives—pianos and diaries are frequently coupled as expressive confidants; they are at least as aware as their later historians of the piano’s potential as a site for flirtation, courtship, and proto-sexual dalliance.

But it is particularly important to keep in mind the intense doubleness of these girls’ experience: they surely are subject to social formation at those keyboards, and they know it. Some internalize the lesson without demur, but many exhibit forms of resistance or manage to co-opt the whole endeavor and turn it to their own ends. For most girls, the girling experience was an ambivalent combination of all these reactions; in real life, there were few Elsie Dinsmores.

**Family Discipline and Family Service**

As I suggested above in describing the intense nineteenth-century form of family life, teenage girls had enormous responsibility in bourgeois families, especially when they were the oldest or only daughter. It was largely unacknowledged responsibility, because it consisted mostly of emotional work. In these families, especially toward the end of the century as essentialism

grew more and more absolute, the sense of the individual role of each family member was strongly marked and differentiated. Kena Fries, our friend of the thirteen eggs, makes a very typical remark—typical as well in its off-hand brevity:

Friday, September 7, 1883. . . . Mr. Jimmie Mitchell was here this morning, Mrs. Mitchell is dying, poor people, I played for him.34

Such a morning’s activity seems to be as much a part of daily life as setting the hens, milking, or quilting.

Even in the unlikeliest of circumstances, on the overland trail in covered wagons, the young women provided the cultural consolation of music, and although they did not usually have their pianos with them in the back of the Conestoga, they made do with more portable instruments. Amelia Hadley wrote in April 1851, somewhere outside Council Bluffs, Iowa:

We are a merry crowd, while I am journalizing one of the company is playing the violin which sounds delightful way out here. My accordion is also good, as I carry it in the carriage and play while we travel, had a very hard rain this evening, and every thing seems afloat.35

Mariett Foster Cummings took a melodeon along. In July 1852, from somewhere on the Humboldt River in Nevada, she tells us: “In camp today with a large mule train. Very warm. Got out my instrument and had some fine music.”36

In effect, in many of these families the teenage daughters were the home entertainment centers. Young Eliza Ridgely of Baltimore, away from home at Miss Lymann’s Academy in Philadelphia in 1816, is repeatedly exhorted by her father in his letters. “I hope you will persevere,” he says, “in the determination [to win the music prize], as I need not tell you how much importance to you it would be if you could entertain us all with good musick,” and again a year later: “I need not remind you of your music and drawing. I hope and believe you will not neglect them—remember how often you can entertain us by good music.”37

The eldest of the four daughters of Lord Lyttleton, Meriel, was the fami-

34. Ibid., 349.
ily pianist and was expected to provide the music for elaborate family theatricals, never to appear in them. Her sister Lucy wrote in her diary in 1857, “Buried alive behind the Fairies’ Grotto . . . this most unfortunate individual saw nothing of the whole concern.”38 The scene is reminiscent of numerous such occasions in Jane Austen’s novels, in which the sister who has been identified as the “musical” one is doomed to spend whole festive evenings at the keyboard, never to dance herself.

Female Transmission of Musical Responsibility

Today has been a sad one. Amelia grieved us both so much. She was reading when she should have been practicing and I feel anything like deceit so much. May the poor child never suffer as we do for her. I wonder how she can be cured. I am so distressed as my Amelia was my pride.

Of course, Amelia’s mother wrote this: she was Lucy Ronalds Harris of Toronto, and she made this diary entry in December 1886, when Amelia was twelve.39 Her excessive distress, for such a small transgression, may have been occasioned more by the child’s deliberate deceit than by the lack of practice per se, but surely Lucy was also worried about a potential failure of the transmission process that was part of the piano-playing contract between women and Victorian society. Women’s prescribed role as providers of musical—and other emotional—sustenance for family and community entailed as well their responsibility to teach the skill to the next generation. The vast iconography of women at keyboards contains a substantial subset of pictures of this intergenerational transaction: young mothers play with infant daughters on their laps or with preteen daughters hanging over their shoulders, young women play for their aging mothers, and so on in innumerable configurations. Mary Lamb’s story “The Changeling” invokes common assumptions in its reliance on the inheritance of musicality from mother to daughter to reveal the truth about a pair of switched-at-birth children.40

Lucy Harris was not alone in confiding such sentiments to her diary. In 1863 Josephine Clay Habersham of Savannah worried in a similar way about her daughter Anna, age fourteen: “The child has a fund of energy in her

40. Mary Lamb, Mrs. Leicester’s School (1831; London: Macmillan, 1897).
composition to do what she wants to do that must be guided and watched. . . . And yet, often if she does not feel like it, she frets over practicing." Josephine does not seem to care whether or not Anna evinced any musical talent or interest. As we would expect, the most common transmitters of female piano playing were piano teachers themselves, and of those the most interesting for my own purposes are not the ones who were really professional musicians but women who took up music instruction as a business, usually out of necessity, and are living testimony to the bottomless pianogirl market. Perhaps the ideological understanding of that intergenerational female obligation helped society cope with what in many instances would otherwise have been an alarming intrusion of women into the world of professional work? Louis Ehlert was not alone in attempting to work through the social meanings of this difficulty:

though it cannot be denied in a general way that men have exhibited in this field [i.e., music teaching], as in all others, an advantage in the way of greater productiveness and a more widespread cultivation, the less degree, on an average, of feminine intellect may be balanced by moral thoroughness. For teaching exacts two qualities that are more feminine in their nature than masculine—patience and love. . . . Not without reason, then, is the female teacher often preferred to the masculine in rudimental instruction.

His argument invites an analysis like Friedrich Kittler’s parallel observation that mothers’ responsibility for teaching literacy at the same time silenced them in the wider world of literature and language. But female teachers could also be preferred simply because they were available, just as they frequently undertook the teaching only for want of more congenial work. Millie Gray, for example, lived in Fredericksburg, Virginia quite comfortably until her husband lost his job; she cast about for ways to help support the family that would be permissible for a genteel married woman in her mid-thirties, and she ended up doing “writing” (that is, copying work), dressmaking, and piano lessons. She records them as business transactions:

It rained & snowed last night, & we have terrible walking—though the weather is mild. It did not prevent some of my scholars from coming—amongst them Lucy Taylor—She has taken about 3 lessons p-week for

42. Louis Ehlert, From the Tone-World, trans. Helen D. Tretbar (1877; New York: Charles F. Tretbar, 1885), 125. On Kittler, see note 8 above.
I believe 3 weeks—that is, the 1st week in December, when I gave her a Lesson nearly every day—they were interrupted then by the meazles untill the middle of Jany.—say the 11th—since which she comes regularly—and I calculate 3 lessons p-week making up to this day 9 Lessons.\[43\]

Millie's diary is rather exciting, because during the family's period of hardship her husband decided to move them west into the then-republic of Texas, and the story of her mental and material preparation for the trip is gripping. Once settled in Houston, however, and having secured Texas citizenship, Millie no longer gives piano lessons: instead, she takes in many of the republic's legislators as boarders.

Another sort of accidental piano teacher was Lucy Maud Montgomery, later herself a beloved friend to teenage girls as the author of the well-known series of books that began with *Anne of Green Gables*. Her journals are not published in full, but even from the available portion it is easy to see that Lucy served her whole community in Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, by playing the piano and organ at events of all kinds. From about the age of eighteen, she earned spending money and began to prepare for her planned career as a schoolteacher by traveling to other towns to give piano lessons.\[44\]

*Training Regimes*

Here is Louisa May Alcott at the age of eleven: "I had a music lesson with Miss P. I hate her, she is so fussy. I ran in the wind and played be a horse."\[45\] Louisa is a child right in the painful midst of being girled. At eleven, she'd rather be a horse than a girl, and indeed, under the circumstances, who would not? An eight-year-old who suffered the regime more cheerfully was Florence Nightingale, who wrote to her mother in 1828:

I do figures, music (both Piano-forte, & Miss C[hris]tie's new way too,) Latin, making maps of Palestine, (and such like about the Bible) & then we walk, & play, & do my patchwork, & we have such fun.\[46\]

\[45\] The Journals of Louisa May Alcott, ed. Joel Myerson and Daniel Shealy (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 45; diary entry for 14 September 1843.
She does not explain, alas, what “Miss Christie’s new way” was. Here is a more neutral account from Charlotte Forten Grimké, later the great abolitionist writer, a rare middle-class African American living in Salem, Massachusetts during the 1850s. At the age of seventeen, a record of the daily round of Charlotte’s activities—typically saturated with tasks from hour to hour—appears as the very first entry in her diary:

May 24, 1854. I stand by the window listening to [the birds’] music, but suddenly remember that I have an Arithmetic lesson which employs me until breakfast; then to school, recited my lessons, and commenced my journal. After dinner practised a music lesson, did some sewing, and then took a pleasant walk by the water. 47

The regimented nature of practicing, as it is reported in countless girls’ diaries, results no doubt from a combination of factors: the repetitious nature of the work that is actually required to learn to play the piano together with the boot-camp quality of ordinary Victorian practices of education and what Margaret Beetham calls “the regular collapse of entertainment into instruction” during the period. 48 Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell worried a good deal about “this ruinous system of education,” especially as it was practiced in boarding-schools for girls, for its “long hours of unnatural confinement” and its deleterious effects on physical health, 49 but there seems to have been more widespread attachment to the aphorism about the satanic opportunities offered by idle hands.

Musical regimes were not infrequent targets of contemporary satire—even the Victorians sometimes could poke fun at themselves. The popular writer Augusta Webster included a chapter under the rubric “Pianist and Martyr” in her tell-all book called A Housewife’s Opinions, published in London in 1878, in which she offers a description of the regime:

When Music, heavenly maid, was young, did she practise many hours a day? Did she train her fingers gymnastically with scales and shakes and exercises on five notes; and did she plod through the bars of toilsome fantasies, repeating them through weeks, a dozen times together, until at last the patient process had achieved the crown of success, and she could take the allegros, and for the matter of that

the andantes too, at a fast prestissimo? And did she have next-door neighbours?

Ruminating on the moral implications of all this drilling, Webster concludes sardonically, “The better the girl the longer she practises.”

It does not follow that the girls ensconced in such regimes cared for them, that they had warmer feelings for the piano lessons than they necessarily did for arithmetic problems. A teenager in Anthony Trollope’s Miss Mackenzie is emphatic:

“Susanna thinks that going to school at all is rather a nuisance,” said Miss Mackenzie.

“You’d think so too, aunt, if you had to practise every day for an hour in the same room with four other pianos. It’s my belief that I shall hate the sound of a piano the longest day that I shall live.”

“I suppose it’s the same with all young ladies,” said Mr. Rubb.

“It’s the same with them all at Mrs. Crammer’s. There isn’t one there that does not hate it.”

I very typically found comments like the following, failed instances of girling: “Music was always taught me by a sister. I gave a certain time—not very much—to the piano every day, but never showed any talent for it.” That particular version comes from Louise Creighton, who as a girl was the tenth of twelve children in a family in which many of the others were in fact musical, and one of whose regular daily visitors was George Grove.

Particularly intriguing are the accounts left by young girls whose names we recognize from their later achievements in other arenas. How well some of them understood, like Louisa Alcott and Harriet Martineau, Fanny

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It is the condition of the young lady’s existence. She breakfasts at eight, she does “Mangnall’s Questions” with the governess till ten, she practises till one, she walks in the square with bars round her till two, then she practises again, then she sews or hems, or reads French, or Hume’s “History,” then she comes down to play to papa, because he likes music whilst he is asleep after dinner, and then it is bedtime, and the morrow is another day with what are called the same “duties” to be got through.


Lewald and Florence Nightingale, that the piano lessons were not suited to their talents or their inclinations but were still somehow an inescapable part of their daily round. Beatrice Webb, for instance, described her regimen at around age sixteen, conceding that “I have left off music almost entirely; I practise exercises and scales for half an hour, half because Mother wishes it, and half because I do not want to leave it off entirely. Drawing is what I should like to excel in.” Resistance was not infrequent, then, but it was usually unavailing. The French novelist Gyp, Sibylle de Mirabeau as a child, recalled her alarm at her grandfather’s announcement that piano lessons were impending.

Je saute en l’air:
—Le piano! ... Ah! mais non ... Je ne veux pas apprendre le piano!
—On ne dit pas: “Je ne veux pas!”—observe Grand-père.

The memoirs of the German novelist Fanny Lewald provide one of the most extreme examples of the training regime that I have seen. After she left school, Fanny’s father provided daily schedules for her that detailed every moment of her time from the minute she got up in the morning until bedtime. The schedule for Mondays included piano practice “of new pieces” from 8:00 until 9:00 in the morning and a lesson with her teacher at 5:00 p.m.; on Tuesdays the second hour is filled with “practice of old pieces” in the place of the lesson. Fanny comments from her adult vantage point that “this schedule, with its curt commands, seemed neither unusual nor harsh to me. I had been accustomed to a specific schedule and discipline from childhood on.”

Elizabeth Rogers Mason Cabot, a Boston schoolgirl, wrote at the age of fifteen:

A schoolgirl’s life, although a happy one as a general rule, and full of interest, in nevertheless often a very weary one. To rise in the morning and hurry down and breakfast and hasten to school at nine o’clock; to study from that time till two, recess and all; and never be allowed to open your lips or move from your seat unless in a recitation; to come home, swallow down a dinner, and seat yourself at the piano for an hour and a half; and then if the weather be too unpleasant to walk, to sit down to write a composition or learn some lesson that must

be done during the week; and then to spend the whole evening in studying for the next day: to do this, I say, is enough to weary most anyone.\textsuperscript{56}

Lizzie Mason is particularly interesting because she gives us a long, meditative diary entry during her seventeenth year, in which she muses on the difficulty of balancing all of her family responsibilities. Beginning with “What is life? a conflict of emotions” (76), she goes on to puzzle out all of the opposing demands on her time, and how she could possibly meet them. Lizzie’s mother was an invalid and demanded her company much of the time when she was not in school; in addition she was expected to do her homework and her daily practicing conscientiously.

I feel that, situated as I am, an only daughter, with a mother often sick and depressed, never gay, it rests upon one, to make our home bright, cheerful and attractive to the boys, and comfortable to Father. When I think how much boys are exposed to, how much a happy home may keep them from, and how much depends on me for making it happy, I feel almost discouraged by my own responsibility. (78–79)

As we have seen, such responsibilities were very real indeed for a sixteen-year-old in 1850.

\textit{Penitential Practicing}

Catherine Pozzi, a French girl who grew to modest fame as a novelist, provides a good model for this very familiar trope. She was thirteen when, in 1896, she decided to reform her life thoroughly. “C’est toute une nouvelle vie que je commence. Je vais étudier 2 heures de piano par jour, me lever bien plus tôt, et faire ma prière régulièrement.”\textsuperscript{57}

Somewhere in Austria there lived a young girl, calling herself Rita, who published her childhood diary anonymously many years later; the book became famous as the subject of an analysis by Sigmund Freud, and it is known in the literature simply as \textit{A Young Girl’s Diary}. Rita, too, understood the sacrifice value of practicing, and when, at the age of eleven, she wanted unusual permission to attend a slightly too-grownup party, she knew perfectly well that family business around music was to be transacted with her mother: “Father really lets me do anything I like, but not Mother. Still, if I practise


my piano regularly perhaps she’ll let me go.” For many of these girls whose interest in music was modest at best, practicing served as a currency with which they could purchase desired privileges.

There was another side to this particular self-inflicted penance, as well. Harriet Martineau describes in her autobiography occasions when she was essentially sent to the keyboard as a punishment but recognized and relished its ambiguity in that capacity. That is, she learned to co-opt the essentially disciplinary nature of the experience and turn it to her own gratification. After an especially energetic argument with her mother and her sister Rachel, for example,

I saw . . . that I had gained some ground; and this was made clearer by my mother sternly desiring me to practise my music. . . . The question now was how I should get through. My hands were clammy and tremulous; my fingers stuck to each other; my eyes were dim, and there was a roaring in my ears. I could easily have fainted; and it might have done no harm if I had. But I made a tremendous effort to appear calm. I opened the piano, lighted a candle with a steady hand, began, and derived strength from the first chords. I believe I never played better in my life.\(^{59}\)

Others internalized the whole process, combining Martineau’s revelation of emotional power with complete acquiescence in the moral lesson being offered:

What a wonderful bond of sympathy there is between lovers of music! . . . With me, a love and knowledge of the science is a passport to my esteem. I contend that it is the only one of the arts exempt from the trail of the serpent—so its devotees must be noble and pure.\(^{60}\)

The future educator of women Frances Willard ruminated similarly on musicality:

Father wishes me to be a musician. I have asked myself, “what is the power, the ability to strike in succession several chords upon the piano, melodeon or organ, worth, if it is merely mechanical?” . . . and I have decided with myself that it is worth comparatively nothing. When I hear music, it means something to me. It talks with me and tells me that which I did not know before, and makes me by that much, wiser than I was. It conveys ideas to me. If I were somewhat more spiritual,

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I know I might translate it into words;—and they would be beautiful ones, and the world would listen to them.  

Symbolic Domesticity

The instrument, as well as the piece of furniture that embodied it, was inextricably associated with domesticity in women’s minds and not infrequently marked the moment at which a new dwelling, even a particularly rough or humble one, came to feel like home. Rachel Haskell was in her late thirties when she moved with her husband and family to a mining town in Nevada in 1867. Rachel is cheerful and energetic, facing with considerable equanimity the continual dirt, cultural deprivation, and abundance of rough characters in town, but she is not insensitive to the domestic norms the mining families brought with them from the East:

Monday 11th. . . . How comfortable and cozy the sitting room did look this evening by twilight. The shelves laden with books, specimens, minerals, shells. The Piano, the Sewing Machine, comfortable sofa and easy chair, with healthy, happy, prattling, chippy, little children all . . . I played on the Piano for Mr. C.  

Rachel respectfully capitalizes both Piano and Sewing Machine, those preeminent representatives of female civilization.

There are even more dramatic examples of the highly symbolic significance of these pianos to young women living in remote areas in difficult circumstances. I came upon heart-rending accounts of disasters along the overland trail in the American westward migration, when heavy items of household furniture had to be left behind in the struggle to get animals and wagons over the continental divide, the piano a frequent victim of poor itinerary planning.

But sometimes the instrument successfully made the whole journey. Such a scene is shown in a wonderful photograph in Kenneth Ames’s material culture study, Death in the Dining Room; a “photograph of Mr. and Mrs. David Hilton and children,” taken in Nebraska around 1880, shows the family surrounding an elaborate parlor organ, standing outdoors amidst farm

animals and wagon parts. Perhaps it has just arrived and has yet to be moved into the house? The family members proudly flank the instrument, the Hiltons’ two daughters embracing it closely on either side.64

A young army wife, taken by her brand-new husband to Camp Halleck, Nevada in 1868, reported on her first night in camp:

As I lay in bed that night, feeling decidedly homesick, familiar airs, played upon a very good piano, suddenly sounded in my ears. It seemed impossible that there could be a fine musical instrument such a distance from civilization, particularly when I remembered the roads over which we had come, and the cluster of tents that alone represented human habitation. The piano, which I soon learned belonged to our captain’s wife, added greatly to her happiness, and also to the pleasure of us all, though its first strains only intensified my homesick longings.65

Often, indeed, pianos were singled out in surprising ways for special effort. Luna Warner was fifteen when her family moved from Massachusetts to Kansas in 1871, homesteading on the Solomon River. The Warners arrived in mid-March, and by mid-June had framed and partially enclosed their new house; but before the walls were even completed Luna tells her diary that her elder brother Alf has gone back to Solomon City “after my piano”—note that “my”! She watches the road eagerly for several days, and finally on August 3 she writes:

Watched impatiently all day for Alf and the piano but did not see them. About half past 9 after we had gone to bed, he came. Soon after he got here it rained hard,

and on the next day,

They unloaded the piano and got it into the house. We all worked about all day getting it set up. It was soaking wet and the varnish spoiled but the inside is all right but needs tuning badly. I played all evening.

Indeed, for the next several days the diary repeatedly records “I played most all day on the piano,” or “I played a good deal” even though the piano was out of tune. What seems to me the most intriguing line of all is recorded on August 28: “I keep the piano locked when I am not playing.” Luna obviously regarded the instrument as her own, and the rest of the family clearly


respected her ownership rights and was willing to endure a good deal of effort and expense to accommodate her. A few days later, though, Luna went too far. A man who was staying with the family while his own house was being completed made the mistake of playing the piano himself. "Devil take Root," she writes. "I locked the piano while he was playing. Papa was mad and took the key away from me."66

*The Piano in Emotional Life: Companion and Confidant*

It is not without significance that one of the best-known books of that Victorian moralist of female lives, Sarah Stickney Ellis, was entitled *Education of the Heart: Woman's Best Work* (1869). For there is no doubt that the management of the heart was women’s work, and that the apprenticeship for such work required a good deal of emotional training and experience during adolescence. Anne Vincent-Buffault’s *History of Tears* traces the development of this particular womanly task from the eighteenth century as an aspect of the sentiment of family feeling and elaborates the theories of “redemption” through female tears and the somewhat voluptuous pleasure those tears could sometimes engender.67

It has been suggested by more than one writer that for nineteenth-century girls and women the piano was closely related to the diary itself in its status as a confidant and source of emotional rescue. Here I should say that this particular behavioral trope has a considerable history, one not restricted to nineteenth-century females. Much earlier in the century, and indeed even in the eighteenth, a whole genre of poetry grew up in Europe—especially in Germany and Austria—consisting of apostrophes to the piano as friend and companion. Schubart’s poem “Serafina an ihr Klavier,” set as a *Lied* by Schubert with the degendered title “An mein Klavier,” is a typical representative of the genre. Originally this little poetic convention seems to have applied to both sexes and to have represented a sentiment that was

conventionally expressed in public situations. By the mid nineteenth century, however, and especially in Anglophone cultures, the tradition had shifted: it became both unpublic and decidedly unmanly. For women, in their private diaries, the tradition went on uninterrupted.

Grace Brown Elmore was in her midtwenties and lived in Columbia, South Carolina when she recorded these very familiar sentiments, in 1864:

My music is very, very much to me, and my happiest if not my only happy hours are those I spend at the piano. Yet I could not define either the thoughts or the feelings excited by the music, but life, the world, every thing is beautiful and full of poetry. The nature of fact and the real disappear, and I for the time am given up to the Imagination, I am glad I possess this outlet to my restless energetic spirit, that while the hands are tied by conventionalities, nothing ever binds the spirit.

It is notable that Grace, like most young women who actually enjoy the musical aspect of their girl ing, doesn’t think of it as one of those oppressive conventionalities she disdains.

Here is another, and I think quite extraordinary, rumination on music from the diary of Pauline DeCaradeuc of Aiken, South Carolina, who was twenty-one when she wrote it:

August 28th, 1864. I believe there is nothing that our better nature needs more absolutely than music, no other art of perfection possesses that strange power of gliding into our every emotion and forming a part of it. . . . In happiness our joys are expressed & increased by music from the sweet lullaby, sung by a low voiced mother, to the last sad requiem at the grave, music has been unceasingly the soul’s true panacea.

Laura Nisbet Boykin lived in Macon, Georgia, during the Civil War—indeed, these diaries from the American Civil War, of which many have been preserved, are an especially rich source of information about the important emotional support pianos provided in the lives of women who watched helplessly from the sidelines as their brothers, husbands, and sons were slaughtered. Laura wrote in August 1864.

How grateful to my soul, in these turbulent times, is music! It lifts me from the earth and bears me away to regions of ethereal bliss and

68. Head gives another example, beginning “Süß ertönendes Clavier! Welche Freuden schaffst du mir!” (“‘If the Pretty Little Hand,’” 211).
purity! . . . My nerves were so excited by playing [last night], that
I was a long time invoking sleep, ere it came. 

During the following summer, Laura recounts further music making and
asks rhetorically in her diary: "Thus we enjoy ourselves, and forget perhaps
for the time that our beloved soldiers are in the trenches, living on corn-
bread and bacon, and daily exposed to the death-dealing shells of the enemy.
Is it right? Is it not selfish?" (16).

Marie Bashkirtseff was a young Russian woman, although she lived for
extensive periods in Italy, who famously died of tuberculosis at twenty-five;
"famously" because Marie's diary was published posthumously in 1880,
around the time that the Goncourt brothers' even more notorious diary also
appeared, and she became widely known primarily as a rather flamboyant
diarist. In her diary entry for 16 March 1876, at the age of sixteen, she re-
hearses an unwanted proposal.

About 10 o'clock Pietro came in. The salon is very large and very
handsome; we have two pianos. I commenced to play softly one of
Mendelssohn's songs without words, and [he] commenced to chant
to me his own particular song. The more seriousness and warmth he
put into his plea, the more I laughed and the colder I became. . . . "You
are too young," I said, changing the music, and from Mendelssohn
passing to a nocturne, sweeter and strong . . . breathless, with tears in
his eyes, he fell at my knees. I recoiled, red with anger. Oh, piano, my
protector! 

This last ejaculation in particular is surprisingly frequent in diaries, including
those of girls a lot less self-satisfied and grandiose than Marie Bashkirtseff.
Clearly they were in the habit, whether seriously or mischievously, of cast-
ing their pianos in the role of protector, confidant, and chaperon. Not for
nothing does Laura Boykin refer to her piano as "my darling 'grand'" or
does John Bennett warn girls as early as 1789,

It will enable you to entertain your friends; to confer pleasure upon
others, must increase your own happiness, and it will inspire tranquili-
ty, and harmonize your mind and spirits, in many of those ruffled or
lonely hours, which, in almost every situation, will be your lot.

71. Boykin, Shinplasters and Homespun, 10.
72. A. D. Hall and G. B. Heckel, trans., Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff (Chicago:
Rand McNally, 1890), 96.
73. Boykin, Shinplasters and Homespun, 12.
74. John Bennett, Letters to a Young Lady, on a variety of useful and interest-
ing subjects, calculated to improve the heart, to form the manners and enlighten
the understanding (Warrington, 1789), 235.
“What new can I say, my dear readers, about a piano, this patient friend to whom you confess alternately a sadness or a joy? It will patiently listen to everything and it can sing everything on its own,” promised an anonymous writer in the Polish Magazine of Fashion and Needlework in 1865. And the girls took the promise very seriously. Thirteen-year-old Catherine Pozzi found that her music sided with her in battles with her mother.

Et moi! Jamais Maman dit, “Catha, tu es gentille, tu travailles bien, tu me fait honneur . . . “ Voilà ce que je pensais en jouant du piano. Et j’ai pleuré, pauvre bête que je suis! Alors, j’ai déchiffré un air de Mozart. Ce qu’il y avait dans cet air, je ne sais . . . mais il m’a calmée, il était si doux!  

The story of Princess Alice, third child of Queen Victoria and in married life the grand duchess of Hesse, is especially poignant, because the piano could not console her for a tragedy in which it itself had been implicated. In the spring of 1873, her two young sons came running into her room somewhat too energetically while she was playing, and in the confusion the toddler Frederick fell to his death out a window. Some months later, Alice wrote to her mother:

You ask if I can play yet? I feel as if I could not, and I have not yet done so. In my own house it seems to me, as if I never could play again on that piano, where little hands were nearly always thrust when I wanted to play. Away from home—in England—much sooner. I had played so often lately that splendid, touching funeral march of Chopin’s and I remember it is the last thing I played, and then the boys were running into the room.

**Romance and Sexuality**

There are always plenty of courtship stories surrounding Victorian girls and their pianos; these, I suspect, are sufficiently familiar to need no further illustration. They show up as perfectly conventional situations, endlessly, in Victorian novels. The diaries I have been reading are replete with them as well, and it is interesting to speculate on the relationship between the girls’

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76. Pozzi, *Journal de jeunesse*, 42.
own attitudes toward their pianos and what they learned from reading such scenes in those very novels, ranging from the strategic deployment of music, like Marie's of Mendelssohn, to ward off an unwanted suitor, to the use of piano music to mask an amorous conversation from eavesdroppers, to the maternal insistence that reluctant young girls put themselves on display as performers before roomsful of local society.\textsuperscript{79} It also becomes clear that many men counted "musicality" as a sine qua non in the choice of a wife, as we know from the quantities of personals ads in European newspapers that mentioned the trait along with good character and literacy. Mary Moragné of antebellum South Carolina, the morning after having been introduced to a gentleman she sourly refers to as "squire Danforth of Georgia," reports in her diary that "I suppose I must have made an impression on the brusque looking old gentleman:—this morning before I got out of bed, I heard him in the piazza asking my father where I was educated, & what instruments I played."\textsuperscript{80}

The deployment of music and musicality in the sexual marketplace was not, of course, without its dangers, two sorts of which were widely recognized. One was simply that girls were wasting time at the keyboard, applying themselves to frivolous "accomplishments" rather than to the real work of running a household, or becoming "interested in self-display at the expense of womanly modesty."\textsuperscript{81}—the fear, in short, that they were enjoying themselves too much. But far more worrisome was the possibility of oversophistication in the emotional realm, the very susceptibility to which was so central to their gender definition to begin with. Strong feeling—especially sexual feeling—was always a dismaying possibility in the presence of music, and more explicitly so at the end of the century. It was a subversion, indeed, of the very ideology of true womanhood because it celebrated and heightened private experience, not family service.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{79} Some must have enjoyed the visibility. Arabella Goddard herself found it necessary to warn girls to "wait till [the music] carries you away with its loveliness, but don't try to carry it away before the right moment with your loveliness" ("How to Play the Piano," \textit{Girl's Own Paper} 1 [1880]: 166).


representations of this state of affairs, and increasing suspicions about women’s reasons for spending sometimes incapacitating amounts of time at the keyboard, no doubt prompted Edmond de Goncourt’s notorious description of the piano as “the lady’s hashish.”

The *Musical Times* offered in 1893 the alluring description of a particular kind of piano, fitted into an environment whose decoration was hardly subtle; a sort of late-Victorian Martha Stewart with a lascivious twinkle, this author adds a knowing turn to a powerful subtext of privacy and hidden spaces. Whoever plays this piano is no longer edifying the family.

Placed near a bay window, it shuts in the cosiest lovers’ nest imaginable. Soft-cushioned window seats that have room for just two—intuitive seats they might be called—are hidden thus away completely from the cold, cruel world. Little couches may be hidden in the shadow of such a piano when rich hangings fall from a corner window. Or a delightful tea corner is made with a screen for a doorway, and soft divans and dim lights inside. Or the back of the piano may be hung with a soft shade of yellow, brocaded with dull green leaves and flowers. Against this a little tea-table can be placed, with its dainty belongings, and a low chair beside it. A yellow cushioned divan can extend entirely around this corner, lighted by the soft radiance of a lamp with a pale green shade, and piled high with a baker’s dozen of pillows.

It is difficult to elaborate very fully on this subject from these particular sources because even in their diaries—not to mention in their published memoirs—most Victorian women were reticent on the subject. But a good deal is revealed to us in the Reverend H. R. Haweis’s extremely influential *Music and Morals*, even as he attempts to elevate his language with a romantic purple haze.

That poor lonely little sorrower, hardly more than a child, who sits dreaming at her piano, while her fingers, caressing the deliciously cool ivory keys, glide through a weird *nocturno* of Chopin, is playing no mere study or set piece. Ah! what heavy burden seems lifted up, and borne away in the dusk? Her eyes are half closed—her heart is far away; she dreams a dream as the long, yellow light fades in the west, and the wet vine-leaves tremble outside to the nestling birds; the angel

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of music has come down; she has poured into his ear the tale which she will confide to no one else, and the “restless, unsatisfied longing” has passed; for one sweet moment the cup of life seems full—she raises it to her trembling lips.85

To unpack this lurid paragraph might require an entire essay, but Haweis nonetheless has the appeal of one who takes these girls and their experiences seriously, and for that I appreciate him. He does not seem to make fun of their troubles or complain that they don’t work at their music more seriously or that they aren’t good enough daughters, and he clearly understands their relationship to their loving piano friends. To be able to confirm this account from the girls themselves would be very satisfying indeed (although I am absolutely certain that Haweis’s thinly veiled discussions of emerging sexuality are precisely right), but, again, we may never have the chance to do so, because Victorian mothers and sisters were very likely to read a diary left in any accessible place, and because Victorian girls, especially the younger ones, simply did not have the vocabulary to tell us what we prurient twenty-first-century readers want to know. Some unusually outspoken ones, like Marie Bashkirtseff, explained:

Music is a traitress . . . beware of her, she makes you do many things you would not do, if your head were cool. She seizes hold of you, twines herself around you, makes you lose your senses—and then it is terrible.86

As the diaries make clear, the piano—as furniture, as discipline, as emotional confidant, and as medium of sexual apprenticeship—played its role in innumerable nineteenth-century female lives. For the girls and young women I have quoted, its meanings are very multiple, as often sinister and manipulative as exalted or comforting. Let me give the last word to Elizabeth Lindsay Lomax, a widowed mother of six living in Washington just before the Civil War. She gives us a glimpse of the finished product, as it were, of the girling process; for her, the piano had come simply to mean “home.” As southerners, Elizabeth and her family were not welcome in the capital as it became clear that war was impending; for long weary years they moved from pillar to post, living as refugees with friends or in rented houses. On Christmas 1861, writing in Fredericksburg, Elizabeth puts the best possible face on the situation:

85. Haweis, Music and Morals, 103. Thanks to Jeffrey Kallberg for focusing my attention on this particular paragraph.
86. Hall and Heckel, Bashkirtseff, 291.
Christmas Day, but it does not seem like Christmas.
We dined at Evergreen and returned to our tiny house which we
find very comfortable and cozy after being wanderers for so long.
We have no maid, but the girls have taken hold with great enthusi-
asm and everything goes on harmoniously.
We have a piano.87

87. Leaves from an Old Washington Diary, ed. Lindsay Lomax Wood (New York:
E. P. Dutton, 1943), 181.