

The public privacy: The woman performer-composer in England at the end of the 18th century

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Aims/Context

This paper questions the myth that women's musical activities at the end of the 18th century in England mostly took place in the home. In order to appreciate women's participation in musical life, it is necessary to approach the dichotomy between the *private* and *public* spheres cautiously: a private concert could take place in a private home or a garden, with a paying public of 300-400. This paper also questions the idea that *anonymity* was a condition for women composers and performers to get their works published. This lasting misconception is contradicted by the registries that include full names of many women, e.g. subscription lists and lists including names of performers and place of first performance.

One related topic is the significance of performers before the nineteenth century, often ignored in music-historical writings. Coupled with a perspective that excludes some genres as less important, the canonized methodology of academic work concentrates only on masterworks as end products and leaves out the contributions of many women in music history.

Methodology

The social environment in which women performers and composers lived will be investigated and their performances and works will be put into a sociological framework and context. The relationship between music and gender will be studied and its connection to feminist theory will be presented.

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In the late eighteenth century, England was the principal country in the Industrial Revolution, and the combination of manufacturing and trade with foreign countries brought great wealth to the country. Advances in technology were made, such as the steam engine, and many factories were established. The economic as well as social changes in England, as for example the fast growth of prosperity, greater freedom and equality, and especially the rise of the middle class, also had an effect on music and music making. The musical instrument that was the most widely produced and experienced immense popularity was the pianoforte. With its manifold and intricate structure, and particularly with its large quantity of repeated parts, the pianoforte was especially suited to the philosophy of industrial production. This new large-scale production eventually led to lower production costs and to further reduced prices, which in turn broadened the market and enabled more people to buy the instrument.

This broadened market naturally led to an increase in the number and quality of works that were composed and published. The new pianoforte became a symbol of respectability among the middle and upper classes. The instrument was usually linked with the amateur woman musician, since it could be used at home. The history of the pianoforte is in fact intimately linked with the social status of women. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1797), we learn that all families "gentrifying" themselves had at least one pianoforte; all "great" ladies had one in their living room and another for their housekeeper to use.

One of the many social and economic changes England witnessed during the last part of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth was the rise of the middle class as well as a new prosperity. The middle class could now afford to buy the goods that were offered as well as spend money on entertainment. This group became important music patrons in England at this time. They held private concerts in their homes with both amateur and professional musicians, and they constituted the audience in the theatres and in public concerts. Naturally this also led to an increase in public concerts, which often came in the form of subscription, benefit, or garden concerts. Music was also used by the middle class as a vehicle of aspiration, and homes which had some social pretension always had a pianoforte. The new prosperity made it possible for the country to become the world's leading consumer of the arts.

London was the centre of the country's culture, arts, intellect, in addition to being the centre of government and the economy. It could be argued that London's musical life was unparalleled in Europe at the time. The database *Calendar of London Concerts 1750-1800*¹ lists nearly 5,000 concerts taking place in those years, not counting the numerous unadvertised or private concerts. Around 1790 London experienced an extreme passion for musical entertainment, described as the current "rage for music."² This term referred not only to the upper class, but to the middle and lower classes as well.

Women were active on all levels in the cultural life, especially as performers: as singers and pianists. In order to get a complete understanding of women's contribution to 18th century musical life – composition, performance or musicological research – it is pertinent to include the ideas of the time that were intimately linked to the performer and how central this was.

The principal concert organizations in London at the time were varied: the theatres (where Italian and English operas in addition to plays were performed), modern concert series, oratorios, Ancient Music and other societies (the Noblemen and Gentlemen's Catch Club, Madrigal Society, Glee Club), benefits, mid-day concerts (summer performances and organ recitals), private concerts (Nobility Concert and Ladies Concert), the Court (Queen's Concerts and sacred concerts at Buckingham House), church, and garden concerts.

Subscription concerts - which, together with the benefit concerts and oratorio performances mainly took place between February and May - started early in the eighteenth century in London. Competing successfully with these concerts were the subscription concert series. The programs at these concerts usually included a mixture of alternating instrumental and vocal compositions; it was not customary at the time to have concerts consisting of instrumental music alone. The concerts could last a long time: favourite movements were often repeated, which extended the length to sometimes three to four hours.

Another important concert type was the benefit concert. In a typical year there could be the same number as subscription concerts; in the 1792 winter season thirty were advertised. The term "benefit concert" usually meant a concert sponsored and financed by one musician, with the goal of making a profit for himself/herself. However, there could also be a benefit concert for the support of a special cause or charity. The program for a benefit concert was similar to that for a subscription concert, including the mixture of instrumental and vocal music. The musician sponsoring the concert might perform more on the concert than his or her colleagues.

¹ Simon McVeigh, *Concert Life in London from Mozart to Haydn* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), xiv.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

Another important type of concert at the time was the performance of oratorios, which occurred on Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent, when there were no opera performances. Oratorios were performed in the London theatres: the most popular were Covent Garden, Drury Lane, and the King's Theatre in the Haymarket. During the summer, garden concerts also took place in London. Very popular was an evening at the pleasure gardens of Vauxhall or Ranelagh. The audience could take a leisurely walk among the flowers and plants, drink tea, and listen to music presented by an orchestra and singers. The program was similar to the benefit and subscription concerts, consisting of a mixture of vocal and instrumental music.

The status of women in the 18th century has led to controversial topics for modern researchers. An ongoing debate has been centred on the separate sphere ideology, which limits the middle class woman at the end of the 18th century to the home. There is a disagreement among researchers to what extent women's lives were limited to the "private sphere" (in the home, with the family) and to what degree the "public sphere" (culture, finance and politics) was the male privilege. An attitude which supports this private sphere ideology was the thoughts that women's lives were in the home. There they learned the so-called "accomplishments," consisting of dress, politeness, drawing, needlework, and music. Maria Edgeworth published her *Practical Education* in 1798; and chapter 20 is entitled "On Female Accomplishments, Masters, and Governesses." There she states that "accomplishments are such charming *resources* for young women, they keep them out of harm's way, they make a vast deal of their idle time pass so pleasantly to themselves and others!"³ Girls were encouraged to pursue music – but prior to marriage. This was done in order to keep young girls busy and out of trouble in their teens. This is reflected in the book by Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Loose Hints upon Education* (1782): "In this country, it is common to teach girls the harpsichord, which shows a pretty hand and a nimble finger, without ever thinking whether they have a genius for music, or even an ear. It serves indeed to fill a gap in time, which some parents are at a loss how otherwise to employ."⁴ When married, women had one important task, which was producing children, and were otherwise regarded as ornaments to men. John Hill, in his book *The Department of a Married Life* (1798), stated that "there is only one Path by which a married Woman can arrive at Happiness, and this is by conforming herself to the Sentiments of her Husband."⁵

It seems that musical skills was one of the domestic talents a man would want in a wife, as long as music making were confined to a domestic setting. An anonymous pamphlet from around 1778 stated that children who show an interest in music should be given training – not so that they can exhibit their talents and perform in a theatre, but instead "to amuse their own family, and for that domestic comfort, they were by Providence designed to promote."⁶ The important word here is "family": a woman's talent should only flourish within the domestic environment. Many women appear to have become qualified musicians, if only because they did not have so many other ways to spend their time. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, music and the other finer accomplishments were mainly designated for the upper class; by the end of the eighteenth century these accomplishments were more usual among the lower middle class.

These ideas about the two separate spheres and the emphasis on women's restrictions regarding performing areas and compositions have a tendency to make us feel

³ Maria and R. L. Edgeworth, *Practical Education* 2nd ed., vol. 3 (London 1801), quoted in Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos; a Social History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1990), 282.

⁴ Lord Henry Home Kames, *Loose Hints upon Education, Chiefly Concerning the Culture of the Heart*. 2nd ed., enl. (Edinburgh: Printed for John Bell, 1782), 272.

⁵ John Hill, *The Department of a Married Life*, 2nd ed. (London 1798), 2-3, quoted in Richard Leppert, *Music and Image. Domesticity, Ideology and Socio-cultural Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 223.

⁶ *Euterpe; or Remarks on the Use and Abuse of Music, as a Part of Modern Education* (London, ca. 1778), quoted in Richard Leppert, "Men, Women and Music at Home: The Influence of Cultural Values on Musical Life in 18th Century England," *Imago musicae* 2 (1985), 86.

the loss over women's lost opportunities. If we turn away from these ideas we can instead question the importance of the composer and public music making and instead ask if this gives a complete picture of the musical life in the 18th century. The term "private music making" is not adequate, since the term has some connotations and cannot include any degree of "publicness". However, concerts in the 18th century that were labelled private were neither necessarily small nor amateurish. In conclusion we can state that the dichotomy private and public has been important in the understanding of which restrictions and attitudes a woman in the 18th century encountered. At the same time it is not an adequate term to describe the society and the various concert arenas women performed. The arenas could be varied, and the term performative continuum could be used instead as a more adequate term. The performances could be informal family gatherings, gatherings with friends, neighbours or invited guests. Even if these gatherings were considered informal there were still many rules of conduct that should be followed and rules about how a musical performance should take place. A hostess could invite a guest, who inhabited musical skills. The guest would be invited to perform a piece, which he/she would accept, with modesty. After the guest having performed a short piece, the hostess herself would perform. The rules dictated that it was impolite for the hostess to perform first and the hostess also had to make sure that the invited guest was not on a lower performing level than herself, since that would otherwise be regarded as a sign of vanity.⁷ Women also performed in more formal gatherings that were held in private homes. These were often referred to as "academies", where members were poets, musicians, philosophers, historians and authors. There were held concerts in these academies, which included ticket sales, and the performers could be a mixture of professionals and amateurs. In England there were also many *musical societies*, where you could find concerts. Other concerts could be private concerts that could take place in private homes or gardens (but include both professional musicians and ticket sales) as well as the above mentioned concert arenas: benefit concerts, music festivals, concert series and subscription concerts.

Conclusions

All of these arenas show that women's performances were not just linked to the home and the so-called private sphere. Even if concerts took place in a private home or outdoors in a private garden, and had been labelled private (and thereby seemingly uninteresting in musicological research), these concerts were nothing but private in the modern sense of the word. Not only were these concerts professionally performed and included ticket sales; they also had the same appeal as a cultural and social activity since they could compete with other professional concerts in London at the time. A private concert given by Lady Rockingham in 1755 had more than 400 people in the audience in addition to an opera orchestra and singers.⁸ This could compete with the so-called public concerts in London at the time: subscription concerts from 1760-1790 could have around 500 people in the audience.⁹ In conclusion, we can state that in the 18th century women performances have not been limited to the home and the private sphere but instead have been unfolded in a performative continuum.

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⁷ Ritchie 2008:59.

⁸ Burrows og Dunhill 2002:304

⁹ McVeigh 1993:20

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