

2021

The Gendered Origins of The American Musician

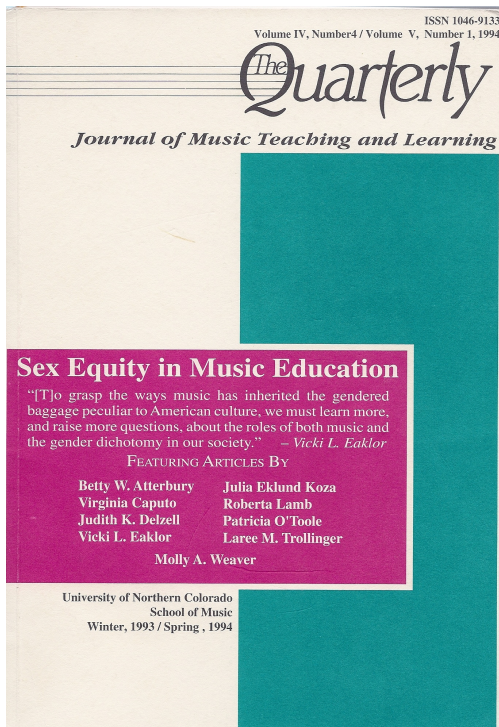
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Recommended Citation

Eaklor, Vicki L. (2021) "The Gendered Origins of The American Musician," *Visions of Research in Music Education*: Vol. 16 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://opencommons.uconn.edu/vrme/vol16/iss5/6>



Title: The Gendered Origins of the American Musician

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Source: Eaklor, V. L. (1993-1994). The gendered origins of the American musician. *The Quarterly*, 4-5(5-1), pp. 40-46. (Reprinted with permission in *Visions of Research in Music Education*, 16(5), Autumn, 2010). Retrieved from <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/>

It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.

The Gendered Origins Of The American Musician

By Vicki L. Eaklor

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Twenty years ago, as an undergraduate music education major and percussionist, I was aware of some very mixed messages about music and musician-ship. Although the messages were not then spoken aloud, they might be stated:

1. Teaching is feminine, but band directing is masculine.
2. Music is feminine, but drumming is masculine.

While the generic activities of teaching and music had become feminized, within them remained a few select masculine reserves, possibly defined by association with external, often protruding instruments, as compared with the cultivation of the internal, more personal vocal cords. It is tempting to pursue such a neo-Freudian analysis, but my research into nineteenth-century culture, specifically regarding gendered attitudes toward music, public education, and professions as separate and intersecting topics, would suggest a more complex set of relationships fairly well established by the turn of this century. Using the symbolic parameters of vocal music's entrance into Boston's public schools in 1838 and the introduction of instruments into the same in 1911, I hope to provide a sketch of what developed in between in order to suggest some directions in thinking about America's gender paradoxes on the subject of music and musicians.

Gender and Music

Just a few years before singing became part of Boston's common school curriculum,

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Alexis de Tocqueville was visiting the United States and recording observations which soon would be published as *Democracy in America*. Among the many phenomena which caught his attention was the prescribed relationship between men and women. "In no country has such constant care been taken as in America," he wrote, "to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways that are always different."¹ He was referring to the now-familiar ideology and practice of separate spheres of influence — public (i.e., political, economic) for men, private (home and family) for women — for middle-class Americans, based in turn upon the concept of a masculine/feminine dichotomy of physical, mental, emotional, and even moral attributes.² These characteristics, supposedly the product of biology (sex), consequently came to dictate both behavior and roles (gender) to the degree that sex and gender came to be inseparable in America; indeed, in retrospect, Tocqueville seems to have understated rather than overstated the situation, for the insistence that biological sex match culturally gendered qualities, hence social functions, approaches the level of an obsession in America, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing today. Whether or not the product of democracy itself, this uncompromising division is the central dynamic of American society and has affected the way we perceive music and musicians and dictates their activities no less than any other part of our culture.³ Music, like teaching, nursing, and reform activity, became one of the "feminized" professions by the end of the century, associated in circular fashion with both culturally defined feminine qualities and

with women as practitioners.⁴ But like the other feminization processes, it was never “completed” in the sense of being exclusive to women, or simply defined by the sex/gender correlation; rather, other factors intervened to create intersections not always visible at first glance. Among these factors were the projected role of American arts generally, based as it was upon the political and cultural anxieties of the early republic, and the middle-class public/private gender dichotomy as applied to a concurrently developing professionalization in all areas within that same class.

Two concerns shaped the ways middle-class Americans interacted with all the traditional arts, including music, in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. On the one hand was a growing desire for cultural independence from Europe that not only would correspond to political independence but also would reflect in its content the touted superiority of American institutions. In effect, the intelligentsia was faced with a glaring inconsistency between its assertion that the European political and religious tradition provided authoritarian, overcivilized, decadent models unworthy of emulation and its continued reliance on the artistic standards and products of that same heritage. On the other hand, and related to the first, was an insistence on preserving the moral virtue of the citizenry as the main insurance for the survival of the republic. Taken together, these ideas tremendously influenced the theory and practice of music in the United States as well as its feminization.

By the time Ralph Waldo Emerson told the Phi Beta Kappa boys at Harvard that “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” and outlined a controversial plan

for educating “The American Scholar,” a movement calling for distinctively American arts was well underway.⁵ Music came under the scrutiny of artistic nationalists (or nationalistic artists) no less than literature, drama, painting, and sculpture, and in ways that perpetuated rather than resolved the dilemma of America’s notion of political superiority/cultural inferiority to Europe. German music and musicians, for example, like German

philosophy, were well received in New England and became the models for the Good and Beautiful even as early music theorists promoted musical independence from Europe. Music critic John S. Dwight, in fact, supported both ideas at once in his long-lived *Journal of Music* and thereby embodied the paradox of encouraging uniquely American works based on implicitly unequalled European examples.⁶ Similarly, composer and critic William Henry Fry concluded a series of lectures on music in 1853 by stating, “It is time we had a Declaration of Independence in Art, and laid the foundation of an American School in Painting, Sculpture, and Music,” all the while writing music largely indistinguishable from his Italian models.⁷

Paralleling the calls for national arts was the concern with preserving the nation’s virtue, and both in turn were rooted in fears

for the republic’s survival. Virtue, as classical republicans like Thomas Jefferson used the term, was understood primarily in a civic sense wherein representative government depended upon the willingness and ability of economically self-sufficient (male) citizens to participate in the communal life, usually by sacrificing a portion of their individual free-

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dom to the common good. Although that meaning certainly did not vanish, the apparent strains of living in a tenuous political experiment caused some important ideological shifts in the antebellum era. At that time, the United States was a nation hardly formed and still defining itself, revealing at once hopefulness and anxiety about the future, and reaching a variety of solutions to an ongoing search for stability in a relatively open society. Add to this ambivalence the emergence of industrial capitalism and the gradual extension of democracy, throw in the revitalization of Protestantism within a national framework, and the result was a recipe for transforming "virtue" into "morality." Often still called virtue and akin to it, the latter ideals were more firmly grounded in Christian precepts and increasingly intertwined with ideas about work and consequent roles specific to both class and gender.⁸

Perhaps no group was more simultaneously optimistic and fearful than the amorphous middle class, itself undergoing continuous definition through most of the century. The belief in social mobility but denial of social class in the U. S., a contradictory combination, found those in the middle in flux, striving to rise while aware of the potential of falling. One way of gaining a sense of control was to develop and subscribe to strict modes of behavior to demonstrate one was on the ascent rather than descent. Out of these conditions arose what might be called a "parlor culture," in which were combined all the fears, desires, and goals described thus far, and in which women and music came to be seen as performing nearly identical social functions.⁹

It is a basic tenet of women's history that Victorian women were to be the moral guardians of the nation from a sanctified home base as a complement, even an antidote, to the potentials of moral decay thought to pervade the public endeavors of business and politics. Equally well known, and treated here as such, is that the arts, especially music, were central to middle-class femininity and cultivated in the home as part of the general edification of family and friends that was the female contribution to a well-ordered republic. Less understood, I

believe, is that the rationale behind such use of music in the American parlor by women was hardly limited to that location, but was in fact the prevailing ideology of music among those in the best position to shape the dominant musical culture.¹⁰

When Lowell Mason wrote in 1856 that "Music's highest and best influence is its moral influence," he encapsulated the prevailing view of music and other arts at that time.¹¹ Earlier, he had stated that "[music] *should be cultivated and taught, not as a mere sensual gratification, but as a sure means of improving the affections, and of ennobling, purifying, and elevating the whole man.*"¹² As a church musician and composer, Mason was central to a general reform of New England sacred music in his time, and thus he carried notions from that tradition into all his endeavors. The main goal of church music reform was to revive congregational singing after decades of relegating musical worship to choirs, which performed increasingly complex music. Grounded in the idea that music, though both an art and a science, was first and foremost a "handmaid" to a greater social purpose, the reformers worked on two fronts: the simplification of sacred music and education in reading music.

The aim of fulfilling the duty of singing in church, equalled to prayer since Puritan settlement, led to the introduction of vocal music into the common schools that were created in the same period to indoctrinate good republican citizens. Here music, rather than losing its specifically religious role, merely acquired a nationalistic one as didactic lyrics set to "appropriate" tunes came to be seen as the ideal means of accomplishing the main function of the schools themselves: to instill Christian/republican principles in young Americans and so ensure the continuance of the nation and concurrently the protection of the interests of the middle class espousing those principles.

If music could promote morals in church and school, then so it could in the arena of social reform itself. Once again the "handmaid" analogy was applied, particularly in the movements for temperance and against slavery.¹³ In a particularly revealing association, Hartley Wood's *Anniversary*

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Book of Music (Boston, 1843) is subtitled, “for the Fourth of July, Temperance, and Anti-Slavery Occasions.” The preface expresses the hope that the book’s contents “... will render it useful in promoting the cause of Freedom from Tyranny [*sic*] Alcohol and Slavery.” Abolitionists were singularly adamant about the importance of music to their cause and exhibited that concern in their records and tracts and through the hundreds of songs written for and performed at their meetings.¹⁴ Using the same rationale as church musicians and music educators, advocates of social reform saw in music a perfect tool for their ends, and so utilized it and advocated its use outside as well as inside the home.

Even in the concert hall, music did not escape its prescribed function, as a brief look at the critical press reveals. Arising from music commentary, actual criticism, in which analysis begins to supplement simple reporting, evolved by midcentury. In sum, that analysis throughout most of the 1800s was a hodgepodge of music theory and theorizing, biography of composers and performers, and remarks about the performances, united by a general conception that “good” taste in music and virtue were interdependent; cultivating one inevitably enhanced the other. Further, it was widely assumed that “... the bad taste of the artist produces that of the public, and this again the bad taste of the critics; and such is the pernicious circle in which the musical world, like all other worlds, performs its evolutions.”¹⁵ As “artists,” which could be composers, performers, or both, the American press revered Handel, Beethoven, and especially Mendelssohn and Haydn due to assumptions that a “moral” nature and “moral” works were symbiotic: the latter reflected the former while the former could produce only the latter. About Haydn, for example, the *Family Minstrel* proclaimed, “there are many traits in his character, which are well worthy of our praise and admira-

tion,” and after naming industry, diligence, and zeal, the author concluded that he was “*a talented, an honest, a persevering, and a religious man.*”¹⁶ The same criteria — a combination of middle-class values more than questions of skill or aesthetics — applied equally to performers, though as a group they were less highly esteemed than creators of music.

What all this suggests in terms of understanding the feminization of music by 1900 is that music itself was given the “female” role in American society as duties were divided severely along gender constructs. Music, like all the arts and like women themselves, was to contribute to the nation’s survival and growth by reinforcing the social and moral precepts of the developing middle class. If this helps to explain the general feminization of music, however, it does not address how and why the process was selective, and in the particular ways it was selective.

Professionalization, Music, and Women in Public Space

Corresponding to the acceleration of industrialism in late nineteenth-century America was a trend of both professionalization and specialization in business, government, and in new occupations created at the time.¹⁷ Reliance on experts, who claimed special knowledge of principles and data considered scientific, eventually replaced the antebellum notion that “Every man, so it seemed, could be his own doctor, lawyer, or political oracle.”¹⁸ Of particular significance here is that both the arts and teaching, like most areas of American life, were similarly transformed in this era, acquiring their own uniform standards as both cause and effect of acquiring credentials through higher education. What this meant for these already feminized occupations, however, was an inherent conflict between the “masculine” public role of the expert and the inherited “feminine” role of the activity; indeed, the greater the

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claims to legitimacy as a profession, the more pointed the contradiction between the sex of the persons in the role and the designated gender of the role.

One source of confusion about feminization with respect to the arts, I believe, has been the tendency to equate public and private spheres of influence with literal arenas rather than with the societal function of the activity. It is understood, for example, that when women became nurses, teachers, and reformers in the nineteenth century, they were performing their “private” nurturant and moral functions within public space. It was only because they continued to fulfill a feminine role that they were allowed into this space at all. It was when women sought to enter masculine preserves — increasingly the very definition of “professional” — that conflicts arose, as those women were perceived as inappropriately crossing the gender boundary. Conversely, as the feminized professions grew more *professionalized* — or more dependent on specialized knowledge gained through higher levels of formal education — the presence of both men and women in them became more problematic: either sex could be acceptable or not, depending now upon more subtle and specific perceptions of functions within the range of activities possible. I hope to suggest avenues for further research and analysis by looking briefly at two relationships in flux from the mid to late nineteenth century: women and music, and women and teaching.

As common to contemporary scholarship as the delineation of a public/private gender dichotomy for middle-class Americans is the recording of women entering previously male professions by 1900, in conjunction with the evolution of feminist ideology and movements for women’s rights in the social, economic, and political realms. Because music itself was undergoing professionalization at that time, women who achieved recogni-

tion as performers often are cast in the same light as other “pioneers” of their sex who were challenging and breaking gender boundaries; in short, that female performers are further “progressive” evidence of women becoming professionals in all fields.¹⁹ While I would not deny the presence and importance of some of these changes, I propose that women on stage were in many cases still perceived in terms of their private, “parlor” role despite the actual location of their activity outside the home. Thus, when a woman sang or performed at a keyboard in public, she may not necessarily have been seen and heard as a “professional” any more than nurses were equated with doctors or teachers with principals. At the same time, the masculinity of male musicians would come under increasing scrutiny regardless of their place in the hierarchy because the feminine role assigned the arts in America was not quickly superseded by their professionalization.²⁰

All this suggests that rather than compare music to more typical public activities viewed as masculine at the time, a more valid parallel would be to another feminized occupation, similarly brought from private to public space while retaining its home- and moral-centered rationale. Public school teaching, in fact, not only offers a better paradigm for understanding the complexities of music as a profession in the U. S., but the interaction of women and music in the public school over time also highlights the changes under consideration here.

The fact that teaching — especially teaching young children — was feminized in nineteenth-century America is well known, as are its results in comparatively low professional salaries and lack of prestige.²¹ Male and female reformers alike promoted the cause of women teachers for a variety of reasons related to concerns and stresses of the antebellum years already mentioned. Not the least of these was the perception of women as a

cheap labor force, but equally important was the fact that schools, like women and music, were expected to uphold middle-class, Protestant, capitalist values and so ensure the continuation of the nation. Since women were to perform this role at home, and thought naturally suited for it, “grade-school teaching,” as Ann Douglas succinctly puts it, “appeared a mere step away from cribside duty.”²²

So successful was the implementation of “republican motherhood” in public grade schools that by the late nineteenth century women dominated the profession just when it began to undergo professionalization.²³ Public schooling, like every other area of American life, was brought ever more firmly under the control of experts, bureaucracy, and standardization and was governed by a growing concern for credentials. Predictably (in retrospect), the more specialized knowledge thought necessary for teaching, the more concern voiced over the preponderance of female teachers.²⁴ Suddenly no longer a natural offshoot of motherhood, instructing children now demanded higher educational training which was, by definition, part of the male sphere (indeed, male experts, via medicine and psychology, co-opted motherhood itself at this time!²⁵). Although teaching, like music, was clearly a feminized profession, the developments of late nineteenth-century industrial America created changes and carved out (or preserved) masculine areas within it that corresponded to the public-versus-private assignment of each task or position. Thus, being male was a prerequisite for holding all administrative posts, for teaching in disciplines thought to require more rationality and/or training than others, and for teaching older students in general.

Music teaching as a profession, then, adds one more complication. On the one hand, it became doubly feminized, with music and teaching affected separately by the process but often for identical reasons. But within each area there evolved different delineations of public and private, neither immediately obvious nor simply paralleling the exact location of the activity — inside or outside the home. On the other hand, professionalization entailed *masculinization*, and the re-

sult was a strange mixture of gendered ideas about music, education, social roles, and the national destiny.

Conclusion: Neither Masculine nor Feminine?

By the time Albert Mitchell brought instrumental music instruction into Boston's public schools in 1911, the rationales supporting both education and cultivating music in and out of the school had changed — partially.²⁶ Never losing its original moral, “feminine” purpose in the culture, music instead acquired “masculine” attributes as well when it became a profession in the terms of the postbellum middle class. The result, it seems, was a vocation problematic for either sex: neither masculine enough for males at any level (the only legitimate professionals), nor feminine enough for females, depending upon the selected activity, arena, and level of education and training to be acquired or taught. Much more needs to be done to sort out the various subtleties and implications of the feminization and then professionalization of music; the intersection of these developments with the lingering ambivalence toward European cultural models, and with the rise of feminist and anti-feminist ideologies themselves, for example, remain rich ground for further study. In the attempt to grasp the ways music has inherited the gendered baggage peculiar to American culture, we must learn more, and raise more questions, about the roles of both music and the gender dichotomy in our society.

Notes

1. *Democracy in America*, vol. II (New York, 1840; New York, 1980), p. 212.
2. Among the numerous sources which define and examine separate spheres are Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston, 1980); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York, 1976); and Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly*, Summer, 1966, pp. 151-174.
3. For democracy as the root of the rigid gender dichotomy, see Tocqueville, *Democracy*, chapter XII; and Sklar, *Catharine Beecher*, *passim*. It should be noted that neither the masculine/feminine dichotomy nor the feminization of music

are peculiar to the U.S. or the nineteenth century. Rather, the difference lies in the specific degree, dynamics, and results associated with both phenomena, which in turn were the product of events and concerns I do claim were unique to American Victorians. Further, the insistence on maintaining the gender dichotomy is thought to contribute to America's unusually high rate of crime against women and intolerance of homosexuals, as compared to other Western nations.

4. An especially provocative examination of this topic is Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977).

5. "The American Scholar," in Sculley Bradley, et al., eds., *The American Tradition in Literature*, 5th ed. (New York, 1981), pp. 599-614; quote, p. 613.

6. *Dwight's Journal of Music, a Paper of Art and Literature* (Boston, 1852-1881).

7. "Mr. Fry's 'American Ideas' about Music," *Dwight's Journal*, II(March 12, 1853), p. 181. See also Barbara A. Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor, 1980), p. 25.

8. Sources which discuss anxieties underlying the optimism of American nationalism include Paul C. Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality 1798-1898* (New York, 1971); and David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, 1971). Also, Fred Somkin's *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (Ithaca, 1967) has been influential in my thinking.

9. Accounts of middle-class culture include E. Douglas Branch, *The Sentimental Years 1836-1860* (New York, 1934); Meade Minnigerode, *The Fabulous Forties 1840-1850: A Presentation of Private Life* (New York, 1924); and Ronald G. Walters, *Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice to Victorian America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1974).

10. This thesis is fully developed in Vicki L. Eaklor, "Music in American Society, 1815-1860: An Intellectual History" (Ph.D., Washington University in St. Louis, 1982), and is examined in relation to music education in Vicki L. Eaklor, "Roots of an Ambivalent Culture: Music, Education, and Music Education in Antebellum America," *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 33 (Summer, 1985), pp. 87-99.

11. *Mason's Normal Singer* (New York, 1856), p. ii.

12. *Manual of the Boston Academy of Music*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1836), p. 35; emphasis in the original.

13. George W. Ewing, *The Well-Tempered Lyre: Songs and Verse of the Temperance Movement* (Dallas, 1977); Vicki L. Eaklor, *American Antislavery Songs: A Collection and Analysis* (Westport, CT, 1988).

14. Eaklor, *Antislavery Songs*.

15. "The Critic and His Obligations," *Musical Cabinet*, December, 1841, p. 83.

16. Z. L., "Biography of Haydn," *The Family*

Minstrel, July 1, 1835, p. 81, and July 15, 1835, p. 89; emphasis in the original. See also Anne Hui-Hua Chan, "Beethoven in the United States to 1865" (Ph.D., University of North Carolina, 1976); and Joseph A. Mussulman, "Mendelssohnism in America," *Musical Quarterly*, July, 1967, pp. 335-346.

17. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967) has been especially influential in my thinking about this period.

18. Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York, 1978), p. 147.

19. Studies include Christine Ammer, *Unsung: A History of Women in American Music* (Westport, Ct, 1980); and Judith Tick, "Passed Away is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Musical Life, 1870-1900," in Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, eds., *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (Urbana, 1986), pp. 325-348.

20. These ideas were first suggested to me as I researched the gender dynamics of Swedish singer Jenny Lind's American tour (1850-51), the results of which I compiled in "From Parlor to Stage: Women and Music in Nineteenth-Century America" (unpublished, 1988). Also, Frank R. Rossiter's *Charles Ives and His America* (New York, 1975) in part explores the gendered dynamics of Ives's musical concepts, and first raised questions about their origins in my mind.

21. Redding S. Sugg, Jr., *Motherteacher: The Feminization of American Education* (Charlottesville, 1978); see also Nancy Hoffman, *Woman's "True" Profession: Voices from the History of Teaching* (Old Westbury, NY, 1981).

22. Douglas, *Feminization*, p. 89.

23. For republican motherhood, see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980); and Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*.

24. Douglas, *Feminization*, p. 89; see also David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA, 1974).

25. See, e.g., Sheila M. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1870 to the Present* (New York, 1978), for changes in concepts about motherhood. In the reversal of the antebellum notion of the "natural" role of women as mothers, the new (male) experts claimed their own knowledge to be essential to the proper birthing and rearing of children.

26. For string instruction see, e.g., Albert W. Wassell, "Class String Instruction in America (A History and an Evaluation)," *American String Teacher*, 14 (Fall, 1964), pp. 29-32; 15 (Winter, 1965), pp. 40-42; 15 (Spring, 1965), pp. 47-49. 