Transforming Women's Education

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During the late eighteenth century, daughters of American upper-class families had the opportunity of being educated at female seminaries and academies.¹ Such institutions were attractive if they could offer from twenty to forty or more “English” (academic) subjects as well as such ornamental arts as music, painting, and embroidery. Apparently many parents considered a school’s popularity more important than its level of instruction. Advocates of women’s education, including Emma Willard and Mary Lyon, rising up in opposition to the courses that offered little depth, laid the groundwork for the female seminary movement. The seminaries offered comprehensive academic education, which often prioritized quality music instruction; educators regarded music as one of the few accomplishments appropriate for women and argued that music had intrinsic value. Since employment prospects for women were limited, music instruction opened a door for graduates to find jobs as teachers or governesses should working for pay become necessary. A woman who would need to provide for her own financial support, or to help with family finances in the event of a father’s or husband’s illness or death, could rely on a thorough music education with a solid academic foundation as the basis for a respectable career.

Why a book about the female seminaries and academies? Given the importance of these institutions as launching pads for many degree-offering women’s colleges, it is surprising that the standard histories of American music, including *Music in the New World*, *America’s Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*, and *America’s Musical Life: A History*, have neglected them.² Instead, the authors of these works begin with instruction provided in the
singing schools of the mid- to late eighteenth century and then leap to the achievements of Lowell Mason (the founder of public school music education) in the 1830s. This lacuna testifies to the limited scholarship available on institutions for women that offered musical training. The lack of interest in women's education has likely contributed to the omission of these schools from scholarly works. Another reason for this gap is that relevant archival documents are widely dispersed and fragmentary and are often not well cataloged or indexed, making basic historical research difficult. I am fortunate to have conducted research at the Emma Willard School (Troy Female Seminary), Litchfield Historical Society (Litchfield Female Academy), Mount Holyoke College (Mount Holyoke Female Seminary), and Music Vale Seminary archives, which house such valuable documents as school catalogs, letters, diaries, journals, programs, and music books.

Further, the seminaries have been given minimal, if any, treatment in the histories of American music education, such as A History of American Music Education. As would be expected, considerable attention is given to the singing schools, Pestalozzian music instruction, and Lowell Mason, but seminaries and academies are not mentioned. A History of Music Education in the United States includes a brief discussion of female seminaries and academies, but only marginal attention is allotted to the level of music study and repertoire at these institutions.

Much scholarship has been published on the history of women's education, focusing on the establishment of women's schools and their curricula. Examples include A History of Women's Education in the United States; Women's Education in the United States, 1780–1840; and Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic. These sources provide critical documentation of the history, curricula, pedagogy, and philosophy of the academy and seminary in the chronological development of women's education. They do not, however, expound on the value of music beyond its function as a social accomplishment or as part of women's higher education.

Because women in antebellum America generally did not enjoy public concert careers, and scholarship documenting music education at the better female seminaries and academies is grossly deficient, the music studied and performed at these institutions has been overlooked in recounting American music history. Seminaries and academies that promoted a quality academic education encouraged women to develop their talents fully but did not prepare them for the concert stage. An investigation of the piano repertoires
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studied and performed reveals that some American students at these progressive schools played the same repertoires performed in European salons and concert halls by artists such as Henri Herz, Sigismond Thalberg, and Louis Moreau Gottschalk. Why were these institutions rigorously and intensely training their students if a professional career was not open to them? While some nineteenth-century women’s advocates, ministers, advice writers, and educators believed music education for women should do more than allow them to reach only a level of mediocrity, the value of this level of instruction needs to be assessed.

The Importance of This Book

In this book I examine the role of the seminaries as major institutions in the progress of women’s higher education, particularly the treatment of music as a subject of artistic value, not merely one representing a social accomplishment. This book is a salient contribution to the existing literature on women’s academic and music instruction in higher education. Although private teachers and music societies likely provided alternative sources of instruction, my study does not consider those venues.

In the process of narrating this neglected history, I address several broad issues within the context of middle- to upper-class American women: the importance of education as related to gender, education as women’s ticket to intellectual and financial success, the level of instruction afforded by the seminaries, women’s role in society, and performance venues open to them. Since most of my research concerns the years before the Civil War and women of color did not attend the schools under examination, I do not address the issues of slavery or of African American students. Further, given that such pioneers as Willard and Lyon were opposed to the inequality of academic education available to women rather than music instruction, I do not include a comparison of music training accessible to both sexes.

_Transforming Women’s Education_ is a sequel to my book _Music, Women, and Pianos: The Moravian Young Ladies’ Seminary in Antebellum Bethlehem, Pennsylvania_ (2008), the first study to document not only the academic and music curricula offered at this distinguished female seminary but also the importance of piano study from a sociological viewpoint and music-making in a gendered environment. In researching and writing the earlier book, I became aware that further research and publication were necessary to illuminate issues surrounding women’s academic and music education.
The Need for Female Seminaries and Academies

After the American Revolution, political leaders realized the necessity of an educated citizenry if the new republic was to survive and advance as a nation. In postrevolutionary America, words such as “independence” and “self-reliance” now had personal as well as political implications. Preserving the republic became as much an educational as a political responsibility; revolutionary leaders needed assurance that successive generations would continue to uphold the beliefs set forth in the Constitution. Since a mother was responsible for educating her children to become good citizens, she herself needed to be properly educated. Further, emerging from a barter system to a market system, propelled by the Industrial Revolution, Americans needed more education than their ancestors had received.

Numerous grammar schools, academies, seminaries, and other collegiate institutions for men, such as Harvard (1636), Yale (1701), and Princeton (1746), were established well before the Revolutionary War. Colonial society deemed men’s education a necessity: “from the guardian care of Legislatures, the presidencies and professorships of our colleges are some of the highest objects to which the eye of ambition is directed.” Female education, however, had been relegated to the “mother’s knee,” town schools (providing instruction when boys were in the field or otherwise unavailable), and “the mercy of private adventurers” eager to profit. Many of the formal institutions for women were finishing schools that earned a discreditable reputation from those who valued education. Rather than focusing on young women’s education, these schools became business enterprises. Emma Willard’s biographer, John Lord, aptly describes the level of education offered at these popular seminaries:

Daughters of ignorant people, suddenly enriched, attend for a year or two, to “finish” an education never earnestly begun; where girls of seventeen are put to the study of books which are only used in colleges for senior students, and this when these girls can neither spell correctly, nor write legibly, nor talk grammatically; when they are signal deficient in the very rudiments of knowledge such as are taught in common schools; when these girls, thoughtless, inattentive, ignorant, are grossly flattered and indulged and amused, so that their time may pass pleasantly; where their overindulgent parents are grossly deceived as to the advance made by their daughters; where study after study is pressed upon them, nominally—either to gain commissions on the articles sold, or to satisfy the demands of ignorant parents, who think the more books their daughters have looked into the greater is their proficiency;
where holidays and amusements of all sorts are freely given—any thing to please the girls—any thing to seduce them to return—smiles, favors, rewards.¹⁵

Such an education did not produce knowledgeable, literate women prepared to instruct their own children, manage the home, or benefit society. According to Lord, although a young woman who received this level of education was purportedly trained to entertain suitors in her parlor with a few choice piano selections and French idioms, no one seemed surprised when her marriage failed due to inadequate preparation.¹⁶

**Nineteenth-Century Women’s Advocates**

While the Moravian Young Ladies’ Seminary in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, founded in 1742, should be regarded as a superior institution compared to any other school available for women in mid-eighteenth-century America, it remained for nineteenth-century educators and female institutions in the Northeast to advance women’s education for the nation at large. The meritorious efforts of such advocates as Sarah Pierce, Emma Willard, and Mary Lyon to promote higher education need to be acknowledged. Unlike the Young Ladies’ Seminary, the institutions established by Pierce (Litchfield Female Academy, Litchfield, Connecticut, 1792), Willard (Troy Female Seminary, Troy, New York, 1821), and Lyon (Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, South Hadley, Massachusetts, 1837) did not have the financial backing of a religious organization. Thus these educators found it necessary not only to appeal to the public for support but also to educate society regarding the importance of women’s education.

Pierce, Willard, and Lyon deplored the meager instruction offered in the fashionable schools and contended that a woman needed an education comparable to that offered at men’s colleges. Thanks to the trailblazing work of these women, a new type of educational institution was established in the early nineteenth century; most of these schools were founded between 1830 and 1860.¹⁷ Emma Willard presented *A Plan for Improving Female Education* to the members of the New York Legislature in 1819. This plan helped to provide a foundation for the “female seminary movement,” outlining the education and facilities Willard deemed appropriate for women.¹⁸

An examination of the accomplishments of Willard, Lyon, and Pierce illuminates the challenges they experienced in their struggle to convince society of the necessity for women’s higher education. Using these three institutions as case studies sheds light on the curricula and organization of prominent
schools in the development of the seminary movement. The inclusion of Orramel Whittlesey’s Music Vale Seminary (Salem, Connecticut, ca. 1835) is crucial, since it is recognized as the first music conservatory in the nation and established exclusively for women. Whereas each of these institutions is distinct in its own right, they also shared the belief that women’s intellectual ability was equal to that of their male counterparts.

Since Mount Holyoke did not open its doors until 1837, one might question how this school fits into the history of the seminary movement. In the early nineteenth century, daughters of the middle class often did not have the wherewithal to attend a seminary or academy. Lyon’s objective was to establish an endowed institution in order to offer an education to those of lesser means.

My initial intention in describing the female seminaries and their philosophies of music was to focus on the antebellum era. However, I needed to make adjustments based on available sources. For example, I conclude my examination of Litchfield Female Academy in 1833. Although the school continued until 1844, its history, including Sarah Pierce’s involvement, is sketchy beyond 1833. Under Pierce’s leadership this institution achieved recognition as a prominent school for women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and served as an important predecessor to the nineteenth-century female seminary movement. Documentation for Troy and Mount Holyoke is more complete than that of Litchfield, with the exception of music programs at Mount Holyoke. Describing the history, curriculum, and music performances at Music Vale proved to be challenging because of sparse and haphazard programs, catalogs, and historical documentation, none of it cataloged. Thus, I found it necessary to expand the time period beyond the Civil War in order to obtain a coherent picture of the repertoire studied and performed at Music Vale.

Outline of the Book
Chapter 1 traces the views of women’s education from the time the colonists came to America to the establishment of the female seminary movement. In order to understand the struggles that women’s advocates faced, it is necessary to provide an outline of the slow development. Given that the home was believed to be their sphere, women initially received a limited education. As the population grew during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women began to take on responsibilities outside the home as men assumed positions in the workforce, business, and leadership. The importance of religion and
the establishment of churches also accelerated the progress of literacy, since the majority of churchgoers were women. At a minimum, women needed to be able to read the Bible.²⁰

Though the demand for women's instruction seemed apparent, convincing the public of the need for higher education proved to be a battlefield. Much of society feared that schooling would make a woman discontented with her place in it. The elite members of society believed that, rather than solid academics, their daughters should receive a “finished education” that would make them marketable for marriage. After the American Revolution, women's roles continued to expand with the emergence of a middle-class society. The meager instruction women had received in previous decades was no longer sufficient for the “real” woman, who was now expected to assume multiple roles: mother, wife, educator, and, if necessary, breadwinner to support herself or her family.²¹

Chapter 2 challenges the common view of music as an accomplishment. A comparison of the philosophy of music study at the finishing schools to that at such respected institutions as those mentioned above reveals dramatic differences and provides a solid basis for music education. I argue that these institutions treated music instruction as comparable to an academic subject, and I examine the benefits of music beyond the finishing school mentality.

Chapter 3 explores the lives of Sarah Pierce, Emma Willard, Mary Lyon, and Orramel Whittlesey and their contributions to the growth of women's education. It also includes material on the establishment of Litchfield Female Academy, Troy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminaries, and Music Vale Seminary. The founding of each school is not only entwined with the accomplishments of prominent leaders in women's education but is also associated with the history of women's education. Whereas it is common to include Willard and Lyon in scholarship dealing with the history of women's education, Pierce is less familiar. Pierce made a name for herself with the opening of her academy in Litchfield; however, the work of noted Congregational minister Lyman Beecher and the first law school in the nation (founded by Judge Tapping Reeve), both in Litchfield, have eclipsed Pierce's accomplishments. Nevertheless, Pierce deserves attention, given her life and school in Litchfield, one of the cultural centers of the new nation.

Emma Willard’s impact on this narrative is profound. While conducting a female school in Middlebury, Vermont, she became desirous of expanding educational opportunities for women in order to compete with those available for men at such institutions as Middlebury College. It was at that time Willard began to write A Plan for Improving Female Education, which changed
the course of women’s education and remained influential for decades. Her school in Troy, New York, became a model for female seminaries, attracting visitors who came out of curiosity to witness this advancement for women.22

Like Pierce and Willard, Lyon could be called a woman ahead of her time; she devoted herself to the cause of women’s education and courageously pleaded for support to build Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. She became convinced that in order for a seminary to endure, it must be financially endowed. Moreover, Lyon was aware of the necessity of educating middle-class women.

Rather than making a noted contribution to women’s academic education, Orramel Whittlesey played a vital part in training young women to become music teachers and performers beyond the level practiced at the finishing schools. His philosophy of music education concurred with that of Willard, Lyon, and Pierce: music was a subject in its own right and deserved quality instruction.

Chapter 4 considers the governance of the institutions. An examination of the personnel, student body, admission and retention polices, and expenses are all part of the cultural context.

Chapter 5 provides a comparison of the academic and ornamental curricula at the four schools. Ornamental courses included painting, elocution, languages, and the like. These subjects and the level of instruction offered reveal the emphasis placed on higher education for women. Analysis of the examination exercises affords a window on the assessment of students’ knowledge and the examiners’ views of women’s education.

In chapters 6 through 8, I explore music instruction and repertoire at these institutions. In chapter 6, I examine music education by comparing the number, gender, and qualifications of the music teachers, music instruction (instruments, fees, and methods), music courses (aside from private instruction), performance opportunities for students, guest recitals, and the use of music in seminary life (such as recreation, calisthenics, and religious training, including church services). Although the amount and level of instruction varied at Litchfield, Troy, and Mount Holyoke, music education was nonetheless emphasized. Students who were privileged to attend Music Vale for one year received intense music instruction.

Chapters 7 and 8 cover instrumental and vocal repertoire, respectively, organized by genre, studied at the four schools. Piano was the chief instrument for young women to study. Troy and Music Vale over time also included lessons on the guitar, harp, and cabinet organ. In addition, students attending Troy from 1847 to 1850 could study violin. Mount Holyoke focused
solely on vocal music, though students who had studied piano before entering the seminary received permission to continue studying on their own. Extant programs at Mount Holyoke prior to 1869 do not include piano performances. An examination of the piano literature found in student diaries, music books, school catalogs, and on programs reveals that the institutions kept abreast of current publications. Students were encouraged to develop their talents to the fullest, studying repertoires from a variety of genres by over 120 European and American composers.

The study of vocal music closely rivaled that of piano instruction at the seminaries and academies. While Troy and Music Vale offered private voice lessons, students attending Mount Holyoke and Litchfield had the opportunity to receive class instruction. Students sang sacred and secular compositions from various genres scored for diverse vocal parts. Like the instrumental repertoire, vocal literature was composed by Americans and Europeans. An investigation of the repertoire and performance reviews indicates that students were challenged to cultivate their abilities and to study literature presented by professional singers.

The importance of the female seminary movement, as illustrated by developments in these schools, cannot be underestimated in relation to the progress of women's education in general, the advancement of music education for women, and music-making in America. Without a consideration of the music curricula and the performances at such institutions as Troy, Music Vale, Mount Holyoke, and Litchfield, we miss a vital link in the history of American music and music education in America.