Transforming Women's Education

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Educators and proponents of women’s higher education in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries supported the founding fathers’ philosophy that as a new nation, America demanded a literate citizenry. Such activists as Sarah Pierce, Emma Willard, Catharine Beecher, Zilpah Grant, and Mary Lyon argued that both women and men needed to be educated in order to produce a learned public. They endorsed the philosophy “When you educate a woman, you educate an entire family,” implemented at the Moravian Young Ladies’ Seminary, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, founded in 1742.¹ Like the Moravians, Pierce, Willard, and Lyon insisted that women were as intelligent as men and deserved an equivalent education.²

Rather than establishing fashionable schools where young women would obtain an education that focused on fripperies and made them marketable for marriage, these educators advocated a liberal arts education that prepared young women to make laudable contributions to the home and society. Without such training, women were “deprived of intellectual pursuits and pleasure” that would enable them to have a proper influence on their sons and daughters.³ While education for men was liberally supported, instruction for young women had been “left to the individual exertions of a private preceptress, whose health is worn out in the service of others, and to whom a bare subsistence is scarcely allotted as a reward for a useful life of industry and talent.”⁴ Those who received a fashionable education had no greater advantage than those of lesser means:

Shut out from intellectual enjoyments and their minds deprived of wholesome food, is it any wonder that their mental and social powers were frit-
tered away upon unworthy objects? that they fell into foolish and extravagant views? that they became the devotees of fashion and the slavish worshippers of dress, finery, and show? What else was left to them? And yet, without a tithe of the elevating influences that man enjoyed, and in spite of those faults that circumstances wove around her sex, woman contrived to keep ahead of him in refinement, in purity, in sobriety, and in all of those virtues that most adorn human nature. . . . Is it not the least that we can do, to bring her out of this unwilling and enforced bondage to frivolity and ignorance?

Such was the state of education for most women in the United States when Pierce, Willard, and Lyon began their innovative work.

The founding of academies and seminaries that offered a liberal arts education ushered in a new era in the history of women’s education. Litchfield Female Academy (as a precursor) and Troy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminaries laid the foundations for the “female seminary movement” that spread across the nation between 1830 and 1860. An author writing in the *New York Mirror* in 1832 argued, “How important, then, are these seminaries, and how deserving of notice and encouragement. How much it is the duty of every one, and more especially of the public press, to foster them, and make them what they should be—the nursery of the virtues.” If the new republic was to survive and advance as a nation in its own right, women needed to be properly educated to fulfill their responsibilities.

Music instruction became a vital part of the liberal arts education offered at the seminaries and academies. Instead of offering instruction in music as an accomplishment, as taught at the fashionable schools, Litchfield Female Academy, Troy and Mount Holyoke Female Seminaries, and Music Vale Seminary viewed music education as an academic subject with physical, mental, and emotional benefits. Students who had the privilege of attending these schools were encouraged to develop their talents to the fullest. Further, young women who enrolled at Troy and Music Vale had the opportunity to receive instruction from some of the finest professionally trained teachers available in the United States.

These schools were important institutions in laying the groundwork for women’s education as we know it today. While much has been accomplished in the history of women’s education, more research needs to be done with regard to the influence of these schools and later developments in music instruction. For example, what influence, if any, did these schools have on the founding of later music departments in colleges, universities, or conservatories? What were the graduates’ careers? How do the music instruction and repertoires studied and performed at such schools as Troy and Music Vale
compare with that of the music departments and music schools established in the later nineteenth century? Was there any difference between music education in women's and men's institutions? An investigation of the work of Emma Willard, Sarah Pierce, Mary Lyon, and Orramel Whittlesey is vital in understanding the history of American institutions for women that offered musical training as part of a liberal arts education.