

Music, Education, and Social Status in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg

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Evidenced today by the funding battles involving music and the fine arts in public and private schools around the world, music has long been considered an integral aspect of the education of any scholar or youth. Moreover, this education and musical refinement has come to play a significant role in class distinction and has helped to accentuate the differences between the elite and the masses. In his *Politics*, Aristotle observes that students should "practice even such music as we have prescribed, only until they are able to feel delight in noble melodies and rhythms, and not merely in that common part of music in which every slave or child and even some animals find pleasure."¹ Classical thought clearly distinguished between the refined, sophisticated music of the elite and the common, simple music made by children and the lower classes.

This philosophy thrived among the elite in eighteenth-century Williamsburg, VA. Thomas Jefferson, who was educated at the College of William and Mary and who spent a significant amount of time in Williamsburg thereafter, points out that music is an essential element in any cultured individual's educational diet. He makes apparent music's leisurely, philosophical, and social value, for music "furnishes a delightful recreation for the hours of respite from the cares of the day, and lasts us through life. The taste of this country, too, calls for this accomplishment more strongly than for

¹ Aristotle, *Politics* 8.6 (1341a), trans. B. Jowett, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon (New York, 1941), 1313, quoted in Donald Jay Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 2001), 4.

either [dancing or drawing].”² The implications of this statement are notable; Jefferson subtly hints that the more refined classes in society have many “hours of respite” available to them because of their wealth and privilege. Music is one way in which the elite can distinguish itself from the yeoman farmers and servants who would have spent most of their time in the fields working. More explicitly, Jefferson sees music as a way of improving the “taste of this country” by turning to music as a means of mirroring the European cultural refinement that America was so keenly lacking, especially pointing out the deficiency of a strong American tradition of art music.

One of the ways in which this cultural refinement through music took place was the education of children of middle- and upper-class families. Abundant records of music teachers and their dealings in this period makes clear their cultural significance. Advertisements abound in the local newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*, for music instructors of all varieties. In 1752, a Mr. Singleton “proposes to Teach the Violin in this City, and Places adjacent,”³ and Francis Russworm “Begs Leave to acquaint the young Gentlemen in and about *Williamsburg* that he shall open School..., at Mr. Singleton’s House, to teach the Violin, German and Common Flutes” and requests that “those Gentlemen who intend becoming Scholars will please to subscribe their Names.”⁴ In addition, William Attwood, in a 1771 edition of the paper, “Begs Leave to inform the Gentlemen of *Williamsburg* that he teaches the *French* HORN, HAUTBOY, AND

² Thomas Jefferson to Nathaniel Burwell, Monticello, 14 March 1818, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb, vol. 15 (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1903-4), 168.

³ *Virginia Gazette*, 12 June 1752, 22.

⁴ *Virginia Gazette*, eds. Purdie and Dixon, 16 May 1771, 31.

German FLUTE; and has, for that Purpose, rented a Room near the College.”⁵ The emphasis on the words “gentlemen” and “scholars” clearly points to the implications of refinement and influence that would have been characteristic of the boys privileged enough to subscribe to music lessons. In addition, the reference to the College of William and Mary strongly suggests that these music teachers advertising their services were appealing directly to university students who would likely have had the financial means and intellectual and cultural stimulation to pursue the study of music.

Another focal point of music education in Williamsburg centered on children and the parlor of the home. On home music-making in Williamsburg, Colonel Landon Carter remarked, “I hear from every house a constant tuting [*sic.*] may be listened to upon one instrument or another.”⁶ The rise in parlor music in Europe, especially England, during this period no doubt also influenced music-making in America. Accordingly, keyboard and other instruments flowed into the area and affluent members of the community sought proper instruction for their children. Extremely common were the guitar and keyboard instruments such as the harpsichord, spinet, and virginal. These instruments were thought extremely appropriate for girls, and boys were free to learn these and any other instruments available. For example, Philip Fithian, a tutor, remarked, “Any young Gentleman travelling through the Colony, as I said before, is presum’d to be acquainted with Dancing, Boxing, playing the Fiddle, &

⁵ *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie & Dixon, 23 May 1771, 2.

⁶ Jack P. Green, ed., *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, Vol. 2, 21 August 1771 (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1965), 618.

Small-Sword, & Cards.”⁷ It was assumed at the time that the education of a young gentleman would have included such cultural skills as dancing and playing musical instruments.

Musical instruments flowed into the colony in order to satisfy the wealthier classes’ demand for them. At his store, John Prentis advertises for “an exceeding elegant SPINET, in a genteel Mohogany Case, with a Musick Desk, spare Wires [strings], Quills, &c. This Instrument is entirely new, and just imported in the *Virginia*....The lowest Price is twenty two Pounds Currency.”⁸ In addition to keyboard instruments, popular instruments such as the guitar, flute, and violin. Ann Neill “begs Leave to inform the Public in general, and her Friends in particular, that she has opened a Store...near the Market Square, where she purposes to sell all Kinds of European Goods on Commission....She has now on Hand...[a] *German* Flute [and] Guitar.”⁹ In addition, a description by Captain Clark of the arrival of a fleet of shipping vessel to the area means the sale of “Tip-top VIOLINS, with elegant Screw Bows, at five Pounds a Piece.”¹⁰ Notably, many instruments were also made in Williamsburg rather than imported from Europe, demonstrating the high demand for such items. For example, Benjamin Bucktrout advertises for “SPINETs and HARPSICORDS [*sic.*] made and repaired”¹¹ at his carpentry shop in Williamsburg. The arrival of musical instruments in Williamsburg easily made it possible for children to pursue music lessons, and the

⁷ Philip Vickers Fithian to John Peck, 12 August 1774, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, a Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1957), 161.

⁸ *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie & Dixon, 27 May 1773, 2.

⁹ *Virginia Gazette*, ed. Dixon, 14 November 1777, 3.

¹⁰ *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie & Dixon, 16 May 1771, 2.

¹¹ *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie & Dixon, 8 January 1767, 3.

fact that so many instruments were required indicates that music education was an important aspect of culture and society.

In order to accommodate lessons in music, girls would likely have been taught in their own home, while boys could be taught in the home or in a school in town. In 1755, a well-known music teacher in Williamsburg, Cuthbert Ogle, "proposes to teach Gentlemen and Ladies to play on the Organ, Harpsichord or Spinett; and to instruct those Gentlemen that play other instruments, so as to enable them to play in Concert."¹² In 1775, an advertisement announced that "Ladies who are inclined to learn the GUITAR may be instructed on that instrument by a lady lately arrived."¹³ One 1777 paper announces that Mrs. Neill, who also advertised instruments for sale, "is now in Williamsburg, where she purposes teaching the GUITAR at one Guinea Entrance, and one Guinea for eight Lessons."¹⁴

Similar to the musical education of children, proper instruction in dancing was also vital to upholding cultural and social traditions. The refined European couples' dances of the eighteenth and nineteenth century contrasted sharply with the country dances characteristic of smaller farmers and other less affluent sections of society. Naturally, the upper classes in Williamsburg cultivated dancing not only as a means of enjoyment and social interaction but as a way to distinguish themselves from the lower strata of the social order. Numerous schools of dance opened throughout the century. For example, William Dering announces in November 1737 that he has "opened his

¹² *Virginia Gazette*, 28 March 1755, 4.

¹³ *Virginia Gazette*, ed. Pinkey, 30 March 1775, 3.

¹⁴ *Virginia Gazette*, Dixon, 4 July 1777, 2.

School at the College, where all Gentlemens Sons may be taught Dancing, according to the newest French Manner."¹⁵ Similarly, Sarah Hallam announces that she "intends to open a DANCING SCHOOL...for young ladies; she therefore hopes the gentlemen and ladies will be kind enough to favour her with their daughters."¹⁶ It was also very popular for dancing masters to visit the homes of their more prominent pupils, especially those who were girls. For example, the same Francis Russworm who teaches the violin and flute will also "wait upon young Ladies at their own Homes, to teach them to dance a Minuet after the newest and most fashionable Method."¹⁷ The American study of European dancing demonstrates the desire of the colonial elite to maintain the cultural status and elegance that existed in the Old World, and this cultural element remained a key aspect of education.

The many advertisements for dancing and music lessons, as well as the abundance of music teachers in the area, makes it clear that music played a vital part of society as a whole. However, it is also critical to note the role it played within the home itself as well as examine more closely the level of musical sophistication that was reached. The music library of music teacher Cuthbert Ogle yields surprising and valuable information on the kinds of music taught and performed in Williamsburg at the time. Music in common parlor performance would likely have been along the lines of simpler English parlor songs and piano works such as dances, and beginning music students would have had basic, simple material with which to work. However, Ogle's

¹⁵ *Virginia Gazette*, 25 November 1737, 4.

¹⁶ *Virginia Gazette*, Pinkey, 17 August 1775, 3.

¹⁷ *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie & Dixon, 16 May 1771, 31.

collection reveals that he himself was knowledgeable of the true masterworks written at the time and that he also probably possessed considerable musical ability and scholarly interest. On Ogle's death in 1775, an inventory totaled the contents of his music library. Among books of songs, method books, and sheet music containing ballads and catches, much more numerous were more serious symphonias, concertos, oratorio excerpts, and sonatas by composers, such as Corelli, Alberti¹⁸, and Handel.¹⁹

Probably the most vivid and detailed accounts of home music-making and education in the eighteenth century are contained in the diaries of the well-educated tutors who supervised the education of some of the most elite families' children. For example, the diary of John Harrower paints an interesting picture. Harrower was a poor Scottish merchant who was forced to sell his services as an indentured servant in order to travel to the British colonies in America and establish a more successful life in Virginia. His services as a tutor were purchased by Colonel William Dangerfield, the head of a prominent Tidewater family who had relocated farther north along the Rappahannock River.²⁰ Although Harrower's story does not unfold directly within the vicinity of Williamsburg, his situation and proximity to the area make his account an invaluable one for exploring education and music in the period. Harrower describes what seems to have been the typical, frequent musical activity of the time: members of the household gathering to play instruments, such as the fiddle, sing, and dance

¹⁸ N.B. In eighteenth century Williamsburg, there was a music teacher named Francis Alberti. However, the works in Ogle's library were most likely composed by the more renowned Venetian Rococo composer, Domenico Alberti.

¹⁹ "Inventory of Estate of Cuthbert Ogle 1755 September 15," *Past Portal* Digital Archive, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 14 March 2004, <<http://www.pastportal.com/Archive/Probates/Html/PI0349.htm>>.

²⁰ Edward Miles Riley, Introduction to *The Journal of John Harrower: An Indentured Servant in the Colony of Virginia, 1773-1776*, ed. Edward Miles Riley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), xiii-xvi.

together.²¹ In addition, Harrower tells of slaves providing music for the entertainment of the household.²²

Similar to Harrower's diary are the journal and letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, the tutor to the children of Robert Carter of Nomini Hall located on the Northern Neck of Virginia. On May 16, 1761, Carter and his family took up residence in Williamsburg, dividing their time between the town and their country estate.²³ Both in Williamsburg and at Nomini Hall, Fithian tutored Carter's three existing children and observed their day to day lives. The Carters must have maintained similar routines and schedules in their lives at both places, making the entire journal valuable and informative of the Carters' musical lives regardless of which location they occupied at the time. Fithian's journal and correspondence are extremely detailed and provide a valuable view of life in Williamsburg as well as educational conventions of Colonial life from July 1773 to October 1775. Fithian describes the musical education of the children under his tutelage. In a letter to Reverend Enoch Green, Fithian describes Carter's eldest of five daughters, Priscilla, "employed two days in every week in learning to play the Forte-Piana[sic.], and Harpsicord[sic.]"²⁴ On December 7, 1773, Fithian notes that "Mr Stadley Miss Priscilla's Music Master arrived this morning—He performed several peices [sic.] on the Violin" and that the following day "Miss Priscilla [was] with her Music Master, they

²¹ John Harrower, *The Journal of John Harrower: An Indentured Servant in the Colony of Virginia, 1773-1776*, ed. Edward Miles Riley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 120.

²² *Ibid.*, 89.

²³ Helen Bullock, "Robert Carter House Historical Report, Block 30-2 Building 12 Lot 333-334-335-336" (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library, 1992), originally entitled "Some Historical Notes on the Saunders-Dinwiddie House" (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Report Series, 1932), *Past Portal* Digital Archive, 30 March 2004, <http://www.pastportal.com/cwdl_new/archive/research%20reports/html/rr1606.htm>, 3.

²⁴ Fithian to Reverend Enoch Green, 1 December 1773, Farish, 26.

performed together to day.”²⁵ Later that week, Fithian also records that “Miss Nancy [Anne Tasker] is beginning on the *Guitar*.”²⁶ Fithian illustrates the importance of the girls’ musical training in that, in July, Miss Nancy is asked to perform on the guitar after dinner,²⁷ and Fithian mimics their father by saying, “Well, Nancy, I have tuned your Guitar; you are to practice to Day with Priscilla, who is to play the Harpsichord, till twelve o Clock.”²⁸

Fithian also illustrates the importance of dancing in the Carter children’s education. In December 1773, Fithian is required to dismiss his pupils for several days “on account of Mr Christian’s *Dance* [lessons].”²⁹ No doubt this was in preparation of many balls and dance parties to be held for the Christmas holiday.³⁰ Fithian’s journal also details the Carters’ obligation to hold a social ball in honor of their new house. He writes,

It is a custom here whenever any *person* or *Family* move into a *House*, or repair a house they have been living in before, they make a *Ball* & give a *Supper*—So we because we have gotten Possession of the whole House, are in compliance with Custom, to invite our Neighbours, and dance, and be merry.³¹

No doubt in order to exhibit the finery and luxury of a new house, the organizing of balls and dancing illustrates the importance of dancing and music as a means of asserting wealth and power. Dancing lessons would have been a vital part of the Carter children’s education so that they would have been able to participate in this social

²⁵ 7-10 December 1773, Farish, 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁷ 6 July 1774, Farish, 132.

²⁸ 7 July 1774, Farish, 133.

²⁹ 17 December 1773, Farish, 32.

³⁰ 18 December 1773, Farish, 33-34.

³¹ 31 December 1773, Farish, 43.

custom. Fithian describes the Carter children during a dancing lesson at Nomini Hall as moving "with great ease and propriety," and Fithian comments, "It was indeed beautiful to admiration, to see such a number of young persons, set off by dress to the best Advantage, moving easily, to the sound of well performed Music, and with perfect regularity."³² Dancing clearly was a convention of the social order in which the Carters belonged; the journal and letters are full of descriptions of the Carters' having dancing parties with other wealthy families in the area. The most vivid account is that of a social ball held at Lee Hall, a plantation just outside Williamsburg. Fithian explained that the ladies and gentlemen present danced "first Minuets one Round; Second Gigg; third Reels; And last of All Country-Dances; tho' they struck several Marches occasionally – The Music was a French-Horn and two violins."³³

Fithian also makes it clear throughout the course of his journal and correspondence that music is one way of maintaining class distinctions and is an integral part of upper-class and plantation life. For example, he relates "charming Music" to "rich & I may say luxurious entertainment."³⁴ In addition, Fithian includes musical education and instruction in dancing in his ideal of a genteel young lady; he admires a Miss Washington visiting Nomini Hall, noting that she moves "with propriety when she dances a *Minuet*....She plays well on the Harpsichord, & Spinnet; understands the principles of Musick, & therefore performs her Tunes in perfect time, a

³² 18 December 1773, Farish, 33.

³³ 18 January 1774, Farish, 57.

³⁴ Fithian to Elizabeth Beatty, 21 December 1773, Farish, 36.

Neglect of which always makes music intolerable."³⁵ Perhaps one of the most compelling indications that music played such an important role in social rank is in a letter written by Fithian to Nancy Carter during the Revolutionary War, after he had left the Carter household. On the hardships of war, he writes, "No Dances, and but little music! You will begin to ask what is the world coming to? – No Tea, nor Gause, nor Paris-net, nor lawn, nor lace, nor Silks, nor Chintzes; Good Sirs – Good Sirs!....I want to know how you and the Guitar agree yet."³⁶

One beneficiary from the link between affluence and musical education was Thomas Jefferson. As a student at William and Mary, Jefferson made strong political connections using the musical activities of Williamsburg's elite. He later recalled that his mentor, Wythe, invited him to dinner with Governor Fauquier "to make it a *partie quarra*,"³⁷ for the purpose of playing chamber music in the governor's home. He notes, "The Governor was musical also, and a good performer, and associated me with two or three other amateurs in his weekly concerts."³⁸ It is fascinating to conclude that, as a result of these musical invitations, Jefferson more than likely made an impression on the governor and secured political and social influence for himself. In addition to gaining power and respect, Jefferson also benefited from these soirées in knowledge, and these evenings must have had a profound impact on formulating his philosophies on education, knowledge, and culture. He writes, "At these dinners I have heard more good sense, more rational and philosophical conversations, than in all my life besides.

³⁵ 24 June 1774, Farish, 123.

³⁶ Fithian to Ann Tasker Carter, 13 October 1775, Farish, 215.

³⁷ Jefferson to L.H. Girardin, Monticello, 15 January 1815, Lipscomb, vol. 14, 231.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

The were truly Attic societies."³⁹ In playing music and discussing ideas of philosophy with Williamsburg's elite at the home of Governor Fauquier, the idea must have been cemented that cultured, classical music was inherently associated with lofty ideas and enlightened, educated minds. This no doubt greatly strengthened his own ideas on the necessity of proper education in music as part of a program of intellectual, moral, and cultural development, and the link between refined music and socio-political affluence is apparent.

As evidenced by accounts of musical activities in mid-eighteenth century Williamsburg, music played a key role in the day-to-day lives of some of the most elite members of society. This music served several functions, for it provided a pastime that unified family structure, linked families within a social network, and was included in the means of education of both boys and girls. By using the model of European customs in music and dance, the political and social strata of Virginian society distinguished themselves from their less refined neighbors. Age-old customs of deference and patriarchalism functioned within this society, and no doubt superiority in taste and knowledge of music was one way in which the ruling classes asserted their authority and power over the rest of society.

³⁹ Jefferson to L.H. Girardin, Lipscomb, vol. 14, 231.

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