



## 'THE LADY AT THE PIANO'; FROM INNOCENT PASTIME TO INTIMATE DISCOURSE

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### **Abstract: 'The Lady at the Piano': from Innocent Pastime to Intimate Discourse**

This article will focus on why, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the piano was considered the most appropriate female instrument. Historical sources will be examined, and other practical or pragmatic reasons will be considered as well. Particular emphasis will be placed on the cultural perspective, whereby the image of the piano-playing young woman became a symbol of a whole set of 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas: the bourgeoisie, virtuous conduct, and cultural formation. In addition to these, a piano performance might also be a means of intimate communication between two people and, in relation to this, the special significance of piano four-hand repertoire will be discussed.

## 'The Lady at the Piano': from Innocent Pastime to Intimate Discourse

### Introduction

The piano in the 19<sup>th</sup> century occupies a special place among instruments. It was regarded as the most appropriate instrument for female musicians, particularly amateur performers. Why is this so? Are there any historical reasons for it? Moreover, are there other reasons behind the significance of the piano for female performers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? These are the research questions this article attempts to answer in its examination of the role and function of the piano as a gendered instrument in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

My source materials are etiquette books and theoretical treatises; sources such as Baldassare Castiglione's 'Il libro del cortegiano' (The Courtier's Book) from 1528, and Carl Ludwig Junker's 'Vom Kostüm des Frauenzimmer Spielens' from 1783. In addition, literary works, fiction, photographs and artworks of the time will be touched upon. In particular, I have looked at 19<sup>th</sup>-century Norwegian fiction,<sup>1</sup> where I have examined all references to the piano using the Norwegian National Library's digitized collections. I have located nearly 11,000 books published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, in these, I searched for the keywords: 'piano', 'pianoforte' and 'klaver'. There are more than 1,700 books containing at least one of these words. I then organised the findings into 20 categories and, in this article, I will present examples from two of these categories: the piano as a catalyst of emotions, and the piano in intimate discourse.

Literary sources can be a valuable route of access to the past; however, these sources have yet to be adequately examined. In literature, one finds many records which illuminate an aspect which might be difficult to examine with traditional scientific tools, such as descriptions of moods and feelings, or the importance of a piano in a woman's life.<sup>2</sup> So, in fiction, it might be possible to learn what the music conveys to the participants and which messages lurk hidden in its structure. It is also possible gain insight into questions such as: what might a piece of music mean when presented as a gift?; what was the significance in 19<sup>th</sup> century culture of a woman being a good performer on the piano?; and were the female amateur performers aware of the impression they made in their performances?<sup>3</sup> I will return to these questions but, first of all, I should like to look at the historical reasons why the piano acquired its central role in the musical life of 19<sup>th</sup> century societies.

### The historical viewpoint

The gendered history of musical instruments – the idea that musical instruments are associated with a certain gender – has a long tradition. One of the earliest sources where musical instruments and gender are mentioned in conjunction is the etiquette book 'Il libro del cortegiano' (The Courtier's Book) from 1528, by the Italian Renaissance author Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529). The book is written like a conversation, and the topic during the third evening is ladies' desirable qualities, where the association with musical instruments is suggested.

[...] and thus in dancing I would not see her use too active and violent movements, nor in singing or playing those abrupt and oft-repeated diminutions which show more skill than sweetness; likewise the musical instruments that she uses ought, in my opinion, to be appropriate to this intent. Imagine how unlovely it would be to see a woman play drums, fifes or trumpets or other like instruments; and this because their harshness hides and destroys that mild gentleness which so much adorns every act a woman does.<sup>4</sup>

Here we learn that drums, flutes, and trumpets are unbecoming of a lady. The reason for particularly picking out these instruments as unfeminine is illustrated by another historical source. Dating from 100 years earlier than Castiglione's 'Courtier's Book', we can see a depiction of musical instruments on the cathedral organ in Florence: the beautiful sculpture 'Cantoria' (Singer's gallery) made by the Italian sculptor Luca della Robbia in 1431-38. The panels of the gallery show children singing, dancing and playing musical instruments to praise the Lord. As the texts below each row of panels indicate, these images illustrate Psalm 150:

Praise Him with trumpet sound; Praise Him with harp and lyre.  
Praise Him with timbrel and dancing; Praise Him with stringed instruments and pipe.  
Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with resounding cymbals.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. 'Cantoria' (Singer's gallery), ca 1438.<sup>6</sup>

This sculpture plainly differentiates between boys' and girls' instruments. The boys play trumpets and drums while the girls play small plucked string instruments. The boys' instruments are loud and strong while the girls' are weak and muted. Later music theoreticians confirmed this division and stated more explicitly which instruments are suitable for women and which are not. John Essex, in 1721, dogmatically writes that the most suitable instruments for women are the keyboard instruments:

The Harpsichord, Spinet, Lute and Base Violin, are Instruments most agreeable to the Ladies: There are some others that really are unbecoming the Fair Sex; as the Flute, Violin and Hautboy; the last of which is too Manlike, and would look indecent in a Woman's Mouth; and the Flute is very improper, as taking away too much of the Juices, which are otherwise more necessarily employ'd, to promote the Appetite, and assist Digestion.<sup>7</sup>

Which instruments might be considered appropriate for female musicians was still an issue more than a century after Essex's statement, as can be seen when a concert featuring some of the students took place at Madison Female College, Wisconsin, USA in 1853. The critic John Dwight wrote about the concert and expressed positive remarks about the young ladies playing the piano, guitar, and harp; however, he was quite shocked at '13 young lady violinists (!), 1 young lady violist (!!), 4 violoncellists (!!!) and 1 lady contrabassist (!!!!)'.<sup>8</sup> Through his copious use of exclamation marks, it is apparent, even as late as 1853, how this man's tolerance was inversely proportional to the instrument in question as well as to its size!

The most detailed statement about gender and musical instruments was written some years earlier, in 1784, by the priest, philologist and composer Carl Ludwig Junker (1748-1797). In his discourse 'Vom Kostüm des Frauenzimmer Spiels' he stated in detail which instruments were proper for ladies, and which were not. He included the horn, cello, and bass as particularly inappropriate instruments for women, and had three main arguments in support of his view:

1. The contradiction of body movement (while playing) and ladies' fashion
2. The contradiction of instrumental sound and the character of female sex
3. The impropriety of certain playing postures<sup>9</sup>

The reason for the first argument was that the fashion of the day (corsets, big crinolines) allowed none of the freedom of movement that would be necessary to play some instruments. In Junker's opinion, it just looked ridiculous to see young women playing the large bass; the same was true when a young woman played the violin with fluttering arms or blew the horn while sporting a big, stately hairdo. Additionally, he refers to the feminine nature, and the strong belief of the bourgeoisie and upper class at that time that the female sex was physically too weak to play these instruments.

Lacking any provable quality, the second argument refers to the perception of sound. A strong and loud tone would not go together with the 'dainty and mild spirit' of the fair sex. Here, Junker mentions several musical instruments that are commonly seen in connection with the male world, such as kettledrums and trumpets, given their use as military instruments by the cavalry, or horns in view of their association with hunting.

In the third argument, Junker evokes the supposedly immoral and unfeminine aspects of various performing positions. Certain physical movements or behaviour were considered in bad taste and went against the conventions of the day regarding proper behaviour. When a woman played wind instruments, she had to twist her face; she had to press her lips together and it was noticeable on her body that she had to use her abdominal muscles to support the tone. Such movements were considered inappropriate for a woman and could give the impression that she was not virtuous.

A woman could not play string instruments either; the cello was the worst example in his opinion because it required that she press the instrument to her chest and, in addition, have a straddled posture of the legs. At that time, legs had to be covered to the ankle and kept closed. Moreover, when a woman played the violin, she had to stretch her upper body and her neck in an unnatural position, and if she practised a lot, she could also end up with marks under her chin because of the chin support. Based on this ambiguous and biased theoretical argumentation, keyboard instruments were seen as the most appropriate for women.

### **Practical and pragmatic reasons for the choice of keyboard instruments**

When we arrive at the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there are many reasons for the choice of keyboard instruments as the most appropriate for women. The historical conditions are one aspect; other reasons could be more practical or pragmatic. The piano was a very functional and versatile

instrument. It was relatively easy to produce good sound quality from it, even for amateurs, when compared to wind and string instruments, where one needed years of practice to get the right tone quality. On the piano, one could play both melody and harmonies. This made it suitable for solo pieces, but more importantly, it was the favourite instrument for accompanying songs.

There were also other instruments on which you could play accompaniments, like the lute or the guitar, but you could take these instruments out of the house, maybe to a student meeting or to a tavern. The piano, on the other hand, was stationed in the home and could not easily be moved. Consequently, the women were also 'stationed' in the home. This also anchored the music within the home, and the performance of music at home became a musical sphere of its own.

Publication of songs that dealt with this phenomenon had already begun to appear at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and blossomed particularly after 1750, with titles that say much about their usage and context: 'Songs for the family circle', 'Little songs for little girls', 'Songs for innocent pastime' and 'Melodious songs for the fair sex'. A volume from 1793 by the German composer Carl Friedrich Wiesinger has the telling title: 'Songs sacred to burgherly and domestic happiness, to amiable morality, and to guiltless pleasure'.<sup>10</sup> An important aspect of these collections is that most of the songs compiled within them were published with the accompaniment of a keyboard instrument, meaning that the homes where one would hear them would also have some sort of keyboard instrument. In the preface of some collections it is stated, perhaps surprisingly, that these songs do not need to be sung; instead, they could be played as solo piano pieces.

The arrival of the piano into the musical world fitted very well into the upper-class and bourgeois home. The piano was often made out of mahogany or walnut; it had shiny brass hinges and was also expensive enough that one could be proud to own one. It became both a symbol of wealth and a clear indication of proper upbringing. We may say that the piano was *the* 19<sup>th</sup>-century instrument.<sup>11</sup>

Learning to play the piano was also considered as one of the many talents a girl *should* learn, in order to ensure a good marriage. The piano and good manners belonged together, and it can be argued that the ability to play the piano was an indispensable part of good breeding and manners for young women.<sup>12</sup> Piano playing became an important part of the so-called *accomplishments*: a collective term for all that young girls ought to be able to do in order to be attractive in the marriage market: fine embroidery, painting in watercolours, correct attire, polite manners and of course piano playing.<sup>13</sup> Maria Edgeworth published her 'Practical Education' in 1798, Chapter 20 of which 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!'<sup>14</sup>

Piano playing occupies a special place among these feminine accomplishments, as it can best be displayed *while* it is taking place.<sup>15</sup> At the piano, girls could draw attention to themselves, which was more difficult in e.g. embroidery. Demonstrating their skill at the piano also required interaction, often with members of the opposite sex. This interaction took place in a socially accepted framework; within this context one could communicate feelings inspired by the performance but within the limits of respectability. In families, the daughters and mothers addressed the emotional needs of musical intimacy. Sentimentality and warmth were conveyed through songs and piano music; music was meant to move the listeners and to arouse emotions and moods.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, the level of piano performance for the amateur woman should not be too high, since, although the goal of piano instruction was directed towards enjoyment, this enjoyment was



directed towards a male suitor and, eventually, towards marriage and the continued generation of homely entertainment. Instead of encouraging aesthetic value, female piano instruction was directed towards the homely or the moral. Jean Jacques Rousseau mentions the level of female piano skills in the fifth book of his novelistic treatise on education, 'Emile'.<sup>17</sup> Sophie, the wife-to-be of Emile, uses the days to become better in female accomplishments: drawing, dancing, playing the piano and singing. But her skills should not become too deep and should not be turned into art, at which point they would become particularly boring. The goal of cultivating the talents was threefold: to acquire good taste, to open the mind for beautiful things, and to develop moral concepts. Sophie had received piano lessons so that she could accompany herself, but she did not read music. Sophie's mind should instead be focused on how she appeared at the piano (e.g. to make her white hand appear advantageous on the black keys). But this should look natural and effortless, because if one made an effort, it would have looked ridiculous.

### The lady at the piano

Cultural and aesthetic perspectives were central in piano performance. Unlike all other instruments, in order to play the piano, the female performer did not need to twist her face inappropriately; she did not need to turn her body into an unnatural position; and she did not need to move her body in a way that might signal that she was not a chaste and virtuous lady. Piano playing had something innocent and endearing connected to it. The young lady had a graceful and feminine pose, the legs together, and the face either smiling or concentrated. She sat with a straight back and her fingers were stretched out and pressed down the keys without much effort, while the mechanics of the instrument, which were invisible to the audience, made the sound.

An ability to play the piano showed that the young lady could manage to dedicate herself to a task, and at the same time gave her the opportunity to show her skills and entertain her family and guests within her domain, her home. The piano-playing young lady performed in the living room, in the centre of the activities in the home. The piano was above all the instrument of the home, often placed in the centre of the house, in the living room, at the heart of the home.<sup>18</sup> It was an object of social representation since it presented the family to the outside world. The piano was the first thing a guest noticed and, in addition to its central location, it also had a central importance and was in many ways associated with a harmonious home.

Sitting at the piano, the young girl became a symbol; her presence demonstrated that her family could not only afford a piano but also pay for her to take piano lessons. She embodied the proof that her family was cultured, that she was virtuous and that she did not need to go anywhere and, especially, did not need to run after men. She sat there calmly, passively knowing that she made an impression. This impression, the lady at the piano, featured as the subject of many artworks and became a genre of its own in the hands of the impressionist and post-impressionist painters like Frédéric Bazille, Gustave Caillebotte, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and James Whistler, all of whom treated the woman-at-the-piano theme. One famous example is Renoir's oil painting 'Femme au piano' (Lady at the piano) from 1875. Renoir often pictured women in the domestic sphere. This painting's scenario is also the home, with richly decorated thick carpets, tapestry on the walls and luxurious curtains. A beautiful young woman sits at the piano and her almost translucent pink fingers barely touch the keys. Her performance looks very effortless, as delicate as her nearly see-through beauty – as if the visual harmony transfers to a sounding harmony. The

woman at the piano is not the image of an individual; it is rather that of the ideal woman, almost other-worldly, transported to the domestic living room.



Figure 2. Pierre-Auguste Renoir: 'Femme au piano', oil on canvas, 1875. Art Institute, Chicago<sup>19</sup>

The lady at the piano became an icon and a key symbol of the whole of 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture. Female propriety, the bourgeois ethos, a proper upbringing, the equating of culture with status, the flaunting of one's womanly accomplishments – all of these were embedded in the image of the woman at the piano. The image became highly stylised, and always showed a poised young woman seated at the instrument, in fashionable dress, often white, and always looking decent, demure and refined. In this domestic sphere, the iconography of the woman at the piano was perhaps more ornamental in its function, rather than depicting her as a real live active performer. Therefore; it was not entirely necessary to depict her in the obvious act of performing. The hands are therefore most often relaxed over the keys; it does not look as though she is making an effort to play, nor does she look in any way strained. The most important thing was the aesthetic image.

Writing about women and piano-playing in England, Paula Gillet mentions how this pastime became an important prerequisite in the marriage market, as it allowed unmarried women to show themselves in front of men without undermining their air of chaste modesty.<sup>20</sup> As important as the auditory element of a performance, then, was the visual expression. Jodi Lustig notes that the performer and piano became decorative objects in themselves; this aesthetic appeal of the piano and of piano playing was largely responsible for its popularity.<sup>21</sup> According to Blom and Sogner, music could also be a tool to enhance women's beauty and their music thus made them more 'feminine'.<sup>22</sup> The young woman's beautiful small hands,

beautiful lips – in other words, her looks – brought forward bodily and visual elements: the female body, more than the music, became the focal point and the topic for the aesthetic evaluation.<sup>23</sup> The borders between ‘woman’ and ‘music’ dissolved as femininity achieved an abstract equivalent to music’s aesthetic beauty. The German composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt (1752-1814) wrote in the preface of his song collection, ‘Gesänge fürs schöne Geschlecht’ (‘Songs for the fair sex’), that these songs were rather unimportant. However, if they were sung with a woman’s beautiful lips they would become a thousand times more beautiful. The aesthetic beauty the performer would bring to these songs became a part of their own aesthetic evaluation.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to artworks, the lady at the piano motif can be found in many photographs from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The young women being photographed are often situated next to a piano, either playing themselves or just posing beside it. Since the piano is included in very many photos, we might conclude that the instrument was something of which they were proud, something they wanted to show. I have examined photographs from Norway from this period, and one of my discoveries is a family portrait of the children of dentist Christian Jahn from 1880-90.



Figure 3. Photograph, family portrait, courtesy of NTNU Universitetsbiblioteket, Trondheim, Norway.<sup>25</sup>

In the picture, Jahn’s five children are portrayed, one of his daughters playing the piano. As a composition, it is interesting to see how the photograph is built up: it is divided into two halves and, in the middle, we get a glimpse beyond into the dining room. In one half is a group



of four children, sort of pushed into the corner. In the other half is a girl at a grand piano, getting as much space as all of the other children combined. Another contrast is that of darkness/light: the four children all have rather dark clothes on, while the piano-playing girl is dressed in white. It appears that the girl is performing for her siblings and mother, while her hands look very poised at the keyboard.

### The piano as a catalyst of feelings and memories

But what did it mean for women amateurs to play the piano? Were they aware of the kind impression they made at the piano, and how did they use their piano skills, both to make an impression and as a vehicle for artistic expression? In literature around this time, you find many utterances and descriptions of personal experiences. Many 19<sup>th</sup>-century authors include scenes in their novels where women play the piano and where they also try to explain what it means to them; most often their explanations include the expression of emotions. In this way the piano becomes one of the few legitimate channels for personal expression. The English priest and author Hugh Reginald Haweis (1839-1901) was very interested in music and wrote several books about violin playing, but his most famous book is 'Music and morals'. There, he stated that a good session at the piano has often been a replacement for a good cry in the bedroom.<sup>26</sup> If we turn to Norwegian fiction, in several works, the piano is assigned the role of a trusted friend and companion in women's emotional life. In the story 'Naar tante spiller piano' (When Auntie Plays the Piano), the Norwegian author Helene Lassen<sup>27</sup> gives a somewhat poetic description of an old aunt, whose stiff fingers gradually become more attuned to the music, after which the memories of her life appear more and more clearly. The story opens with the following:

If you can immerse yourself in a mood, if you can follow it and enjoy it, then lie down on the sofa as darkness falls, when the moon is up to its old tricks, casting its quietly flickering light over everything and everyone - and then ask your aunt to play the piano.<sup>28</sup>

And the music gets better and better:

Now she will soon strike the innermost reaches of the song, those which lie above the memories of youth and give the most beautiful sound she knows. [...] – the joy of youth directs the rhythm, while her upper body sways lightly, as in those days, oh, those days - - - - We close our eyes and become a part of it.<sup>29</sup>

Here the piano takes on the role of a catalyst of memories: the feelings and memories of the aunt's youth return: 'Bravo, aunt, play about joy! Play the natural joy and finely scented romance of your happy days into our spoiled contemporary minds!'<sup>30</sup> She creates images for her audience, who can thus perceive her entire history.

The effect of the piano as a medium for bringing forth memories is also seen in the novel 'Kunstnerner' (Artistic Natures) from 1895 by the Norwegian author John Paulsen.<sup>31</sup> Here we become acquainted with Ole, whose mother has taught him to play the piano, and who is studying music abroad. In his childhood home stands an old piano, owned by his mother since childhood. She is a single mother looking after Ole and her daughter Lise and has supported Ole's music studies financially. But this has left them with very little money, and she has therefore sold off a number of household items, except for one thing: the piano.

To cover the expenses of the moment, one valuable object after another disappeared - but the piano still stood there in its prominent position of honour with its old sheets of music and its yellowed keys. This piano was the sacred object of the living room.<sup>32</sup>

Mother and daughter would rather starve and freeze for a whole winter than get rid of the instrument on which Ole had played his first tunes, and which had also given the mother and daughter so much enjoyment.

Yes indeed, how much joy and benefit Mrs. Strand had derived from this blessed piano! When she felt sad and lonely in Ole's absence abroad, Lise had unassumingly played for her mother the pieces she knew she loved the most, and then the tears would come, quietly and without bitterness, the sadness had dissolved into mild sobs, in pleasant memories of old.<sup>33</sup>

The mother was not a practical person, and probably did not have good financial sense either, since '[...] her younger days at home had been spent on playing the piano, embroidery, and reading novels, and now misfortune attacked her delicate nerves twice as strongly'.<sup>34</sup> She regularly sends off money to Ole, while he, unaware of his mother's financially straitened circumstances, sometimes wastes the money. When she hears of this, she forgives him, since he is *the artist*. But the mother must eventually take the tough decision to sell the piano to support her son. What, then, does the piano mean to the mother? Implicitly, her whole identity is linked to this instrument. She had played on it ever since she was a little girl, and then throughout her adult life, and she had passed on her pianistic skills to her two children. The piano had always been in the living room, in the centre of the home, in the centre of life. As she sold off all her possessions one by one, the living room became more and more empty, and in the end, only the piano was left. And when that, too, disappeared, so did her will to live. She withered away and eventually died. For her, the piano was life itself.

### The piano in intimate discourse

However, no matter how cosy or innocent the image of the lady at the piano might seem, it could also include hidden, implied and under-communicated feelings, including the erotic and forbidden. There could be a contradiction between what is exposed and that which is obscured or hidden. Young piano-playing women could include both strong feelings and flirtation in their performance. It is no exaggeration to claim that the only way they could communicate this was through the music, where it was possible to speak the unspoken.<sup>35</sup> This could manifest itself, for instance, in an erotic teacher-student relationship, or in the frisson of excitement induced when a woman played a duet with a young suitor. She and her teacher or friend/suitor could play four-hand piano, and there were erotic possibilities present when fingers, hands and bodies touched.

In discussing four-hand piano, Adrian Daub argues that this kind of music-making is a visual spectacle – 'four hands, two people on one instrument; this configuration requires and rewards close scrutiny and careful interpretation, whoever the onlookers may be'.<sup>36</sup> And he also refers to the intimacy this type of performance requires: '...hands and bodies interlock and interweave constantly in the process of playing four-hand'.<sup>37</sup> Daub also discusses the fact that four-hand playing was semi-private: it mediated between the domestic and public spheres. The music that was played very often took the form of transcriptions of operas, symphonies and other large works, which then translated this public music into the private sphere.<sup>38</sup> The piano thus became the link between the private and public spheres.

Piano four-hands represented a safe space in which touching and proximity were permitted or even desired – something that was unusual at the time. Composers, well aware of the situation, took advantage of the forced intimacy by crafting pieces that caused the hands to overlap and interlock, generating as much contact as possible. 'A four-hand piece allows us reveries together with our beloved, provided she plays the piano', said Robert Schumann.<sup>39</sup> This connection between the erotic and four-hand piano was typical for the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and

many couples started their relationship at the piano playing four-hand. The Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg said that he first understood his love for Nina, his wife-to-be, after they had played a four-hand transcription of Schumann's First Symphony together.<sup>40</sup>

In literature, there are many examples featuring four-hand piano playing, including Fritz Anders' novel 'Skizzen aus unserm heutigen Volksleben':

Playing together their hands found each other. Eva, who had at first been reluctant to play together, but then had gotten a taste for it, had giggled and blushed, and the rest followed quite quickly. By the end of the lesson they presented themselves to her horrified mother as fiancées.<sup>41</sup>

Four-hand piano made two bodies combine and blur; not only did the music blend but also the performer's bodies. Hands touched, feet crossed with the use of pedalling, as well as there being occasional brushings of shoulders, arms, hips, thighs, legs – not to mention the playing partners feeling each other's breath right from the start.

The piano was in the centre of love, intimate communication, romance and marriage. And everything associated with piano playing could be a sign of romance. Pianos were often given as wedding or engagement presents.<sup>42</sup> To turn pages for someone (especially where a man turned pages for a lady) could also be a form of pre-marital musical cooperation, which embodied a form of intimacy, and one in which the man did not necessarily need to have any musical background. A piece of music given as a present could also be something more than an innocent gift: it could be a symbol of deeper feelings and could signal the beginning of a relationship. Secrets were conveyed through the music; pieces of music, songs and lyrics became a part of an intimate discourse. A piano performance might have the outer frame of being mere entertainment, but there could be the ulterior motive that this could end in romance. This happens for instance in the story 'The School-Fellows' by the American author Mary Macmichael from 1836, which tells about how the male character, Eugene, is first attracted to Mary on seeing her at the piano:

With a fond glance she seated herself unhesitatingly upon the piano-stool, and after a slight accompaniment, sung with exquisite pathos, a plaintive air. There was a natural beauty in her voice – a profound melancholy in its intense sweetness that could dissolve the soul of the listener. Eugene was entranced; all that was dear to him in the memory of the past; the joys of home and childhood; the tenderness and truth of his first friendship – every cherished hour – every endeared spot; all that he had loved and lost upon earth – his gentle mother, seemed again to live and again to fade, as he listened to the strains, [...].<sup>43</sup>

Mary's performance was successful, since soon thereafter they became engaged. This connection between music and proposal meant that music was a serious matter; to be well married and to start a family was the most important task for a woman. It is possible to conclude that piano skills were perhaps one of the most important assets a girl had in her quest to get married.

The intimate discourse generated through and around the piano is seen in many novels of the time. Almost every fictional heroine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century plays the piano: Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice', Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre', Otilie in Goethe's 'Die Wahlverwandtschaften', Theodor Fontane's 'Effi Briest' and Emma in Gustave Flaubert's 'Madame Bovary'. Jane Austen mentions the piano in many of her books, and she was herself a very accomplished pianist. In her novel 'Emma' (1815) the suitor, Frank Churchill, asks the young lady Jane Fairfax to play a waltz, which they had danced the previous night. Just as the dance gave a form of intimacy that was usually forbidden, the only subsequent reference to this

intimacy had to be through music alone, through the piano, since direct reference to it could not possibly be a proper conversation topic.<sup>44</sup>

But it was not just blissful feelings that were conjured up at the piano: the instrument could also be a locus of rivalry, spiteful comments, tensions and conflicts. An example of this kind of more complex and equivocal intimate discourse comes from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in the novel 'Die Wahlverwandtschaften' ('Elective affinities'), his third novel, published in 1809.<sup>45</sup> The main characters are Eduard and Charlotte, an aristocratic couple living an idyllic and seemingly boring life in the countryside. They invite Otilie, the beautiful teenage orphan girl, to live with them. When Otilie and Eduard perform a duet, she on the piano and he on the flute, from an outsider's point of view it may look like a conventional musical activity. But Otilie has secretly practised this piece to prepare herself for such an eventuality. Her skills and her sympathetic way of accompanying the less successful soloist imply that these two performers might have something to do with each other in the future, which is indeed the case and ultimately leads to the breakup of Eduard's marriage.

Finally, I should like to conclude with an example from Norwegian fiction: Sven Moren's novel 'Paa Villstraa' ('On the Wrong Track') from 1898, where the piano-playing girl is described almost as a seductress, and where the novel contains evocative descriptions of enticing piano playing.<sup>46</sup> Øystein is the oldest boy on the farm and has tried his luck away from home but has returned after becoming homesick. In the local church, he meets the young girl, Aslaug, and falls in love with her. But one day he has to go to town to borrow money from his uncle, as his father has financial problems. In his uncle's living room sits his second cousin Ellen, who is back home from studying the piano in Leipzig. His first encounter with Ellen is described as follows:

There was something heavy and mature about her, as she sat there with her big bosom bent over the keys. Her face was pale and showed a certain weariness; her neck was white and round, her hair was ample, black and shining. Her playing was also somewhat heavy and mysterious – like a hidden undercurrent of suffering, sensual love. Her hands played along the keys like white moonbeams. Her head with its coal black hair was bent forward over her bosom – rocking in time with the tones in the shade of the palm trees; her eyes burned darkly under her eyelids . . . His thoughts circled more and more around her. He became weak and irresolute before her. It felt so comforting to be there [...] It was nice and quiet, safe and beautiful . . . And the tones played in soft, gentle changes between flowers and grandeur, covered the floor and walls with spirit and splendour, conjured thoughts and questions into comforting, shining dreams.<sup>47</sup>

Here the sexual tension is clearly more prominent than the appreciation of the music. This becomes even more evident in descriptions from the final evening that Øystein is alone with Ellen. She sits at the piano and asks him to turn the pages for her.

The tones arose, cautiously, quivering like sighs from yearning breasts. He stood bent over her; and her high, white neck shone warmly towards him between her curls and velvet collar. She had the scent of mature flowers; her hands played along like white cats, and her bosom, which he glimpsed under her silver brooch, rocked in heavy rhythms in the tones.<sup>48</sup>

The music stops and they are drawn towards each other. The music and her playing have opened the floodgates, have opened Øystein up to her approaches. Aslaug is forgotten, and he can no longer resist. Ellen and her playing seduce and entice him. In this discourse the borders between music, piano playing, and body melt together and become blurred. Moren gives the piano clear sexual connotations, where it embodies female sexuality. Here, the piano and the

playing are used as an erotic symbol, and one can argue that women's sexuality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century could thus be expressed by the piano. The piano worked as a fetish, a site for a woman's sexual expression that allowed her to remain innocent and her body to remain chaste, while her desires were communicated or conveyed through her music.<sup>49</sup> Placing female sexual desire in the piano – outside the body but within the domestic sphere – gave women access to it, allowing them to arouse and manipulate their male admirers through a kind of sexuality by proxy and to seduce without physical contact. The piano thus enabled representations of women's active sexual desire and legitimized the expression of these feelings by incorporating them into an accepted social structure.

### Coda

As has been seen, during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, painters, photographers and novelists showed in their artworks and novels the piano's many functions: as a pastime, as a means of getting married, as a vehicle for fulfilling the goal of aesthetic pleasure and as a means of intimate communication between two people. The lady at the piano might, in many ways, be seen as a symbol of the whole 19<sup>th</sup>-century's ideas about female propriety. But the piano could also be a catalyst for strong emotions and became a legitimate place to express one's inner emotional life and one's true self, demonstrating the importance of owning a piano for many women. In this way, the piano could start a process of self-awareness. The piano was significant for the female performer but had larger ramifications in terms of its significance as a cultural phenomenon in the domestic sphere.



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- <sup>1</sup> The function and role of the piano in earlier research addresses only fiction from England or New Zealand: see for example Burgan 1986, Solie 1994, Gillett 2000, Vorachek 2000, Weliver 2000, Fuller and Losseff 2004 and Lustig 2004. The piano in Norwegian fiction has been mentioned in Herresthal et al. 1999, Herresthal 1993 and Kjeldsberg 1985; however, only a few canonized authors are mentioned.
- <sup>2</sup> See Eva Öhrström, Eva, *Borgerliga kvinnors musicerande i 1800-talets Sverige*, (Göteborg: Graphic Systems AB, 1987)
- <sup>3</sup> Earlier musicological research has been centred on the social meaning of the piano and of piano playing in general, as seen in Loesser 1954, Leppert 1985, Bowers and Tick 1986, Leppert 1988, Leppert 1993, Steblin 1995, Koskoff 1995, Christensen 1999, Parakilas 1995, Parakilas 2002, Plantinga 2004, Solie 2004, Ellsworth and Wollenberg 2007 and Raykoff 2014.
- <sup>4</sup> Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1903), p. 179
- <sup>5</sup> Bible Hub. <http://biblehub.com/psalms/150.htm>.
- <sup>6</sup> *Cantoria* (singers' gallery), actually a balcony for the 1438 organ of the Duomo. Decorated with relief panels with children singing, dancing and playing music, illustrating inscribed Psalm 150 (Laudate Dominum). Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy. Marble. Luca della Robbia (Italian, 1400–1482) (Wikimedia commons).
- <sup>7</sup> John Essex, *The Young Ladies Conduct: Or, Rules for Education under Several Heads; with Instruction upon Dress, Both before and after Marriage. And Advice to Young Wives*, (London: John Brotherton, 1722), pp. 84-5 [Microfilm, New Haven, CT: Research Publications, 1975]
- <sup>8</sup> John Dwight, 'A Monster Concert by Young Ladies', *Dwight's Journal of Music*, 3 (6 August 1853), p. 142
- <sup>9</sup> Carl Ludwig Junker, 'Vom Kostüm des Frauenzimmer Spielens', in *Musikalischer und Künstler-Almanach auf das Jahr 1784*, (Freiburg, 1784), p. 86
- <sup>10</sup> See Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos. A Social History*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1954), p. 56
- <sup>11</sup> Kovács, Tibor, *The piano – its role and development in the nineteenth century*, p. 1  
<http://tiboresque.wordpress.com/2013/06/08/the-piano-its-role-and-development-in-the-nineteenth-century/>
- <sup>12</sup> See Bernt Hagvet & Gorana Ognjenovic, eds, *Dannelse tenkning, modning, refleksjon*, (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag AS, 2011)

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- <sup>13</sup> Anders Linde-Hansen & Jan Olof Nilsson, eds, *Nationella identiteter i Norden: Ett fullbordat projekt? Sjutton nordiska undersökningar*, (Eskildstuna: Nordiska Rådet, 1991), p. 150
- <sup>14</sup> Loesser, p. 282
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 268
- <sup>16</sup> See Ida Blom & Sølvi Sogner, eds, *Med kjønnsperspektiv på norsk historie*, (Oslo: Cappelen akademisk forlag, 2005)
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- <sup>22</sup> Blom & Sogner, p. 90
- <sup>23</sup> See also a discussion of 'the male gaze' in Regula Hohl Trillini, *The Gaze of the Listener: English Representations of Domestic Music-making*, (Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi, 2008) and in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989)
- <sup>24</sup> Preface to Reichardt, Johann Friedrich, *Gesänge fürs schöne Geschlecht*, iii-v. (Berlin: Friedrich Wilhelm Birnstiel, 1775)
- <sup>25</sup> Black and white, format 18 x 24 cm. Photographer: Erik Olsen (1835-1920). Year: 1880-1890. Trondheim, Norway. Text on the photo: Jahn, dentist, and Mrs. Elisabeth, b. Wexelsen, interior with family. Owner: Trondhjem Historiske Forening.
- <sup>26</sup> Rev. Hugh Reginald Haweis, *Music and Morals*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1876), pp. 346-7
- <sup>27</sup> Lassen 1894/1900. Helene Lassen (1858-1931) was an author who also wrote articles on literary and other topics. She translated children's books from German and English, was active in the suffragette movement and in feminism, giving many talks on literature, family life and politics. <http://www.sollia.net/nytt-fra-bygd-og-fjell/helene-lassen-en-halvglemmt-stemmettsforkjemper-15.03.19>.
- <sup>28</sup> Lassen, p. 65. This, and the following quotes from Norwegian fiction, is translated by Heidi Ødegård, Semantix
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 67
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> As a curiosity, it may be mentioned that the author John Paulsen (1851-1924) travelled with Edvard Grieg to Copenhagen, where the two artists lived for a few months.
- <sup>32</sup> John Paulsen, *Kunstnerner*, (København: Gyldendal, 1895), p. 17
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 19
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 44
- <sup>35</sup> Leon Plantinga, 'The Piano and the Nineteenth Century', in *Nineteenth-century piano music*, R. Larry Todd, ed., (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), p. 2
- <sup>36</sup> Daub, p. 9
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 10
- <sup>39</sup> Robert Schumann, *Gesammelte Schriften über Musik und Musiker*. Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1891, 2: 204. As cited in Daub, p. 16
- <sup>40</sup> Ernest Lubin, *The Piano Duet*, (New York: Grossman, 1970), p. 3

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- <sup>41</sup> Fritz Anders, *Skizzen aus unserm heutigen Volksleben*, Die Grenzboten 62, no. 2 (1903), p. 421. As cited in Daub, p. 16
- <sup>42</sup> This can be seen in Norwegian literature in e.g. Nikoline Harbitz' novel 'Brydninger: Fortælling' (Conflicts: A Story) (Harbitz 1894), and there are many examples in English fiction: in Jane Austen's 'Emma', Jane Fairfax is given a small piano as a present, in Thackeray's 'Vanity Fair', Amelia Sedley is also given a piano, bought at an auction by an admirer, and in Gissing's 'The Odd Women', the bride's wedding present is a piano. (Burgan 1986), pp. 51-2)
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- <sup>44</sup> See Plantinga, p. 2
- <sup>45</sup> Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Die Wahlverwandschaften*, (Tübingen, 1809) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2403/2403-h/2403-h.htm>
- <sup>46</sup> Sven Moren, *Paa Villstraa: Forteljing*, (Elverum: Alfarheim Bokhandels Forl., 1898). Moren (1871-1938) focused particularly on descriptions of the everyday lives of country people in the late 19th century. He was the father of the author Halldis Moren Vesaas.
- <sup>47</sup> Moren, pp. 57-8
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 61
- <sup>49</sup> Laura Vorachek, 'The instrument of the century: the piano as an icon of female sexuality in the nineteenth century', *George Eliot – George Henry Lewes studies*, vol 38-39 (2000), 26-43, p. 27