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The Virtuous Virtuosa

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WHEN I ARRIVED AT UCLA IN THE FALL OF 2003 to begin graduate work in the Department of Musicology, I had no idea what I wanted to study. In fact, I was torn between two different historical areas. Both attracted me, but I wasn't convinced that either would hold my interest on its own. The first was music making among female amateur keyboardists of the middle and upper classes in late Georgian-era England. I loved turn-of-the-nineteenth-century England as a historical period, but I wasn't particularly drawn to the relevant repertoire—works by composers such as J. C. Bach and Ignaz

Pleyel, whose pieces seemed somewhat dainty to me. My heart was in the virtuosic piano music of the next generation, the powerhouse works by composers like Franz Liszt and Frederic Chopin. But I wasn't sure that I had anything new to say about their music.

Over the next three years, as I immersed myself in course work and independent research, I began to uncover connections between my two areas of interest. I had never imagined that amateur pianists had ties to virtuoso performance. Women keyboardists in Georgian-era England had

been discouraged from pursuing virtuosic status as performers. Conduct books and moralizing literature recommended that they undertake musical study as they did their other female accomplishments; women ought to be diligent in their study, but their end goal should be intermediate skill only. Because of these stipulations against female virtuosity, I had always assumed that the repertoire that women studied was demonstrably of the amateur sphere, both technically and musically simple, “such as ladies can execute with little trouble,” as composer W. T. Parke put it. Likewise, I’d assumed that women keyboardists, who were as ubiquitous in middle- and upper-class drawing rooms as cups of tea, did not excel beyond intermediate-level skill at the pianoforte.

My research told a different story. Despite the rules forbidding female virtuosity, many of the works that women amateur pianists studied were the same pieces performed by professionals on the concert stage. I uncovered one such example by examining a published catalogue of works in Jane Austen’s collection of sheet music. The author owned a copy of the “Storm

Rondo” by Daniel Steibelt, who was a touring virtuoso performer during Austen’s time. Steibelt performed his rondo in illustrious public venues, including at a victory concert for Napoleon after a decisive military battle. It was considered one of the formidable virtuoso works of the early nineteenth century, yet amateur parlor pianists played it too.

I decided that I wanted to study this period in detail, and so I declared my dissertation topic and set off to spend my fourth year of graduate school in London. Based in an apartment in the north of the city, I spent the next several months exploring the music collection at the British Library and taking frequent trips to archives all over England. My first research trip took me to Austen’s home, where I examined the author’s collection of musical works. Some of the pieces in her music notebooks were written in her own hand; Austen had borrowed sheet music from friends and relatives and copied out the works for future use. As I traveled to town halls and county collections around the country, reading diaries and letters of late Georgian-era women and looking at their collections of sheet music, I came to the conclusion

that many female amateurs had taken their activities as pianists seriously, undoubtedly achieving a high level of proficiency and artistry at the keyboard. In other words, women claimed control of their musical educations, determining for themselves what place music held in their lives.

Yet, all the while, they were subject to the watchful eyes of their governesses, family members, and friends, and aware of their culture’s notion of the accomplished woman. It would be a mistake to assume that by pursuing a high level of ability at the keyboard, women whole-heartedly turned their backs on their society’s ideals of feminine nature and propriety. In fact, while they studied pieces like Steibelt’s “Storm Rondo,” female amateurs also played works of a more traditionally feminine sensibility: character pieces, nocturnes, Scottish songs, and dance tunes among them. These works tended to embody the ideal woman in their musical affect; they are lyrical, gracious pieces, with beautiful melodies and simple accompaniments. Yet the more I focused on the act of playing these pieces, the more I realized that they, too, had ties to the virtuoso world.

For instance, one type of work common to the musical collections that I examined were Scottish folk songs, scored for voice and piano. These pieces did not seem particularly musically or technically complicated, until I considered that the woman singing often served as her own accompanist. It is not difficult to play the piano accompaniment to most of the Scottish song settings that I looked at, nor is it challenging to sing the tune, but doing both simultaneously demands a very specific and refined skill set. Even when an accompaniment partially doubles a melodic line, performing the independent left-hand material while paying attention to breath support and vocal delivery is no easy task.

In other words, performing these songs called for sophisticated musical abilities but didn't broadcast those abilities as such to the listener. In contrast to the "Storm Rondo," the end goal of performing a Scottish song was to make the piece sound easy. By choosing pieces like these songs to perform, young women did not fight their culture's rules about female music making overtly; instead, they subverted them, undermined them, challenged them from within. They

appeared to embrace the "feminine" repertoire allotted to women pianists, yet found ways of developing as serious musicians by studying those pieces.

Moreover, women infiltrated the public sphere with their musical values. The notion of disguising a piece's technical elements would flourish in virtuoso, public works of the next generation, particularly in pieces by Franz Liszt. Liszt made numerous solo-piano settings of Schubert songs, many of which are lyrical and serene in character. Like playing and singing simultaneously, these works demand that the pianist perform something of a juggling act; she has to play both hands of Schubert's piano accompaniment as well as the singer's line at the same time. These works are challenging, but their difficulty is at odds with their serene sensibility. Here again, the pianist strives to make these pieces sound effortless.

Liszt's Schubert transcriptions are at once virtuosic and a break from the explicit showmanship of many of his piano works. I came up with a term to characterize them; they are examples of the anti-bravura: a style of writing in which the performer is called upon to mask the difficulty of the

piece she is playing. Having identified the roots of the anti-bravura in drawing-room performances by women at the turn of the nineteenth century, I began to trace a host of connections between private musical culture in England and the virtuoso's place of prominence on public stages throughout Europe in subsequent decades. I shaped my dissertation around these connections, devoting three chapters to the musical activities of late Georgian-era women and a final chapter to the legacy of those women as embodied in the development of virtuosity. The relationship between amateur female keyboardists in late-Georgian England and the towering concert pianists of the mid-nineteenth century may seem like an unlikely alliance, but it was a tremendously fruitful one.

Elizabeth Morgan is teaching in the Department of Music at UC Santa Cruz. She received CSW's Mary Wollstonecraft Dissertation Award earlier this year for her dissertation entitled "The Virtuous Virtuosa: Women at the Pianoforte in England, 1780–1820."