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Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

"Practice Makes…Accomplished": Eighteenth Century Musical Education at Home and "Abroad"

by Helen Wirka and Sarah Coster

Education for women in the eighteenth –century was largely about preparing for marriage. For women, marrying and having a family of her own offered relative security and comfort when compared to the alternative. For well-to-do families, this meant an education that included practical, literary, and ornamental skills. Such as cooking, sewing and household management; reading, writing, arithmetic and French; as well as musical training, dancing, drawing and fancy needlework.

For many gentry families, learning these "ornamental" skills comprised a large amount of a young girl's time. Thomas Jefferson, in 1783, advised his eleven year old daughter Patsy to distribute her time as follows:

from 8 to 10 o'clock practise music.
from 10 to 1 o'clock dance one day and draw another.
from 1 to 2 draw on the day you dance, and write a letter the next day.
from 3 to 5 read French.
from 4 to 5 exercise yourself in music.
from 5 till bedtime read English, write etc

Music and dancing, considered polite ways for women to entertain and socialize with men, may have taken up four hours of young Patsy's day and prepared her for the time she would enter into society in search of a husband.

Like Patsy, the Carter children, tutored by Fithian, studied dance and music. On his first day in the home, Fithian is introduced to Mr. Francis Christian, a dancing instructor who made rounds in the Northern Neck area in the 1770s.

In addition to dancing, the Carter girls studied music. In January of 1774, Fithian writes that he "spent some hours to Day with the Girls when they were practicing Music on the Guitar and Forte-Piano." Guitars, harps, spinets and, later, the piano-forte, are deemed appropriate instruments for women to play. Rarely did a gentry woman play the flute or violin. These instruments required the player to hold their arms up and their elbows out, an unsightly pose for a lady.

Portrait of Sir William and Lady Hamilton by David Allan 1770

Music masters were paid to visit plantations in order to teach the children of the upper class. They were different from dance masters who would teach dance on different days of the week. In order to secure a music master to teach their child, the parents needed to ensure that more than one child was being taught so that it was a worthwhile trip by the music master. Neighbors would send their children abroad to their friends' homes to make sure their children received the benefits of this part of their education in addition to that which they learned at home.

CARLYLE HOUSE

Jim Bartlinski, Director
Sarah Coster, Curator/Educator
Mary Ruth Coleman, Director Emeritus

Philippe Canot The Dancing Master, engraved by Jacques Philippe Le Bas (1707-83),

We have little evidence on the music education of Sarah Fairfax, but looking at contemporary letters from Eliza Lucas Pinkney, we can perhaps piece together how she grew up.

Eliza wrote many letters to her friends and neighbors and kept a diary, and music was one of her true delights. "My Musick and the Garden, which I am very fond of, take up the rest of my time that is not imployed in business, of which my father has left me a pretty good share – and indeed, 'twas inavoidable as my Mama's bad state of health prevents her going through any fatigue."

When John Carlyle married Sarah Fairfax, her mother had passed away a few months earlier, forcing Sarah to take on new responsibilities in the large house at Belvoir plantation. "It Made her uneasey as She Was under Ingagemts With Me to be So Opressed & She at the Same time had Many other offers…" Perhaps she had spent most of her time pursuing interests in music and her own garden prior to her mother's passing when her responsibilities grew quite suddenly. John then brought her into a more manageable situation where she was the mistress of a new, smaller household without already established procedures in place that needed to strictly be followed as Belvoir was a very large and busy estate. In the era leading up to the use of the spinet, the harpsichord was a frequently-used instrument. Eliza Lucas Pinkney wrote in her diary in 1742 that she "had begun to learn musick again with Mr. Pacheble, … and should endeavour to make myself mistress of the Harpsicord. Begged the favour of him to send to England for Dr. Pepashe's Cantantas, Weldon's anthems, Knoller's rules for tuning." Very similar entries to this could have been written in either Sarah Fairfax's or her daughter Sarah Carlyle Herbert's own diary.

John Carlyle's eldest daughter, Sarah (or Sally, as she was often called), was privileged enough to have the benefit of music lessons from a Mr. Stadley, (also called "Stadler") who was teaching Martha Custis Washington's children, and later would teach the Robert Carter family children at Nomini Hall in the Tidewater region of Virginia. Mr. Stadley may have been of German descent and had taught in New York and Philadelphia in addition to Virginia. His lessons included teaching not only the children but also the older members of their families, on the violin, flute and keyboard instruments. Sally Carlyle was at least eight years old when she began taking lessons from Mr. Stadley.

John Carlyle, in fact, seems so thrilled with his daughter Sally's new talent that he mentions it twice to his brother George. In August of 1766, he writes, "My Sally is just beginning her Spinnet She Sings Prettyly, but you know I am no judge." Then, whether he forgot he'd already mentioned it, or if he just wanted George to have more details, John again mentions the spinet on October 16, 1766

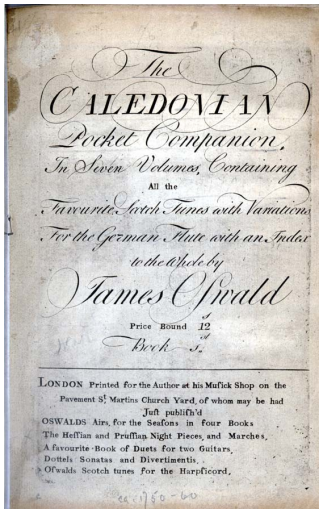
> *"Sally is learning the Spinet She Meets the Master at Coll. Washingtons abt 8 miles of Where he attends the Cols Two Childrun & he is So kind as to Lett Sally Stay Two days the master will not attend for One Scholar, you see we are obliged to take a good deall of Trouble to get our Children Education."*

This is not the first time that John Carlyle complains education in the colonies. In describing his new wife Sarah Fairfax to George, John notes that "a Woman of A Virginia Education I Always Was Afraid Of…"

Despite the difficulty in obtaining a master, Sally seems to do well with her spinet lessons. Lessons at Mount Vernon continued only until Sally was twelve-and-a-half years old in 1769, when her step-mother, Sybil, passed away. She writes to her uncle George in England requesting some new sheet music.

> *"I still have a Master to attend me and have entered into Thro' Bass but find it very difficult. My papa only intends to keep me with the Master this season & I am in want of some agreeable Tunes that I can Learn myself. I see in a list of Musick by one Brimmer in London a book of reals and Country Dances, A Bass for the harpicord vol the 1st price five shillings which I would be glad to have, its called the Calledonian Pocket Companion."*

Her request for the Caledonian Pocket Companion, reflects both her Scottish heritage and the popularity of country dances and jigs in the mid-eighteenth century. The Caledonian Pocket Companion was first published in 1759 by James Oswald, a Scotsman and former



dancing instructor from Dunfermline, and was described as "a favourite collection of Scotch tunes." The entire work extended to twelve parts and in spite of its name "pocket" companion, was the largest collection of its kind to be published.

Ann was not yet eight years old when Sybil died and so she seems to have not had the same opportunity as her older sister, who started her lessons at approximately the same age. Perhaps Sally stepped into the role of music tutor for her sister, although there is no evidence of this.

Sally Carlyle's time and effort spent learning the spinet may have been rewarded in her good match to William Herbert. The talent, perhaps showcased after a dinner the two attended, might have caught the young man's eye and allowed him to linger his gaze on her, a polite form of staring.

As indicated in the following letter to the editors published in the December 22, 1768, *Virginia Gazette*, Anne Geddy, of Williamsburg, the daughter of James Geddy Jr., delighted at least one special admirer when she played on the spinet:

Ah me! Mr. Dixon,
A dear little vixen has caught me! and I could for her die!
Those lines pray set
In your next Gazette,
I'm a friend, Sir, to you and to Purdie

On Miss Anne Geddy singing, and playing on the Spinet:

When Nancy on the spinet plays
I fondly on the virgin gaze,
And wish that she was mine;
Her air, her voice, her lovely face,
Unite with such excessive grace,
That nymph appears divine!
A smile or kiss, or amorous toy,
To me can give but little joy,
From any maid but she;
Corelli, Handel, Felton, Nares,
With their concertos, solos, airs,
Are far less sweet to me!
Ye fates who cause our joy, or grief,
Oh! give my wounded heart relief,
Let me with her be blest;
Oh! Venus, soften the dear maid,
Oh! Cupid, grant thy powerful aid,
And pierce her youthful breast.

The poem was anonymous, so we will never know whether this enterprising poet succeeded or failed in his quest to woe Miss Geddy.

After her father passed away and Sarah Herbert returned to the family home, she continued to own a spinet, although she did not use it as frequently. This is revealed in correspondence between her and Martha Custis Washington where Martha thanked her for the loan of Mrs. Herbert's spinet for her grand-daughter to play. Since Sarah had loaned her spinet, she saw it as being a more worthwhile pursuit for a young relative to learn on it. To be an accomplished young lady, and as a gentleman's daughter, it was important to have skills not only confined to being a good hostess or housekeeper, but to also be able to entertain one's family and friends in closer, more intimate gatherings. Sarah Carlyle Herbert certainly achieved all of this.

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