Women’s Musical Voices in Sixteenth-Century England

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For nearly two hundred years, there has been continuous multi-media ascription of music and musical activity to the most prominent women of sixteenth-century Britain. From Gaetano Donizetti’s grand Italian operas Anna Bolena and Maria Stuarda in the 1830s through the 2007 Broadway musical extravaganza The Pirate Queen, the female monarchs of England and Scotland have appeared and re-appeared on stage, screen, and endless audio recordings as superb singers in a wide range of post-Renaissance musical styles. Queens Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, and a youthful Princess Mary Tudor dance to period music in the 1970 BBC television series The Six Wives of Henry VIII. The fictitious gentlewoman Viola de Lesseps does likewise to a late-twentieth-century composition meant to evoke an Elizabethan pavane in the 1998 film Shakespeare in Love. The endless fascination with Elizabeth I alone has given audiences over the past sixty years or so at least one superb opera (Benjamin Britten’s Gloriana of 1953) and a ceaseless supply of films and television mini-series that incidentally depict the young princess and the mature monarch as a dancer, auditor, and participant in many musical rituals and ceremonies. A recent trend in historically-informed recordings of sixteenth-century British music has been the compilation of albums whose titles reflect the lives of women, but whose contents generally reinforce the conventions of “great composers” and the public circulation of music.¹

What of the actual musical practices of those who inspired these wide-ranging characterizations and marketing ploys? What of their kinswomen, their maidservants, their ladies-in-waiting? What sorts of musical education
did they receive? What and how did they play or sing or write or dance, and in whose presence? What songs with female narrators or characters might they have known, and how were they addressed in songs by men? With very few exceptions, women were not raised for roles in the public sphere where the most famous and spectacular musical performances took place. Nor in England could they exercise such skills as professional actors or nuns. Nonetheless, both sexes were affected by the cultural and technological changes of the sixteenth century, which, in turn, affected musical education and practice, as well as the transmission of musical materials. The agendas of courtly humanism and the rise of the middle classes helped to make the acquisition of musical performance skills a necessity for the well-rounded individual of literate social strata, with specific gender distinctions laid out in conduct manuals. The Reformation, with its goal of universal access to the vernacular Bible and its replacement of intricate Latin choral works with simpler congregational psalms and hymns in the parish church, encouraged its adherents to learn songs with sacred text as expressions of faith. The rise of the printing press extended to specialized notation, allowing for the mass production and circulation of musical works for those with the skill to read them, and, in many cases, the money for expensive instruments. At court and in such private spaces as the home afforded, women sang, danced, and practiced music from a number of genres as aspects of larger rituals and entertainments with men, and for their own physical and spiritual refreshment and edification. Even more ubiquitously, from church to theater to court to any place that could support the performance of a song or ballad, females from honored saints to fantasy figures became the narrators and subjects of texts set to music, or objects of address by male narrators.

A thorough study of women’s music from sixteenth-century Britain still remains to be undertaken. The majority of information about early modern English women’s participation in music originates in the seventeenth century, from which survives a wealth of material evidence, including memoirs, diaries, portraits with instruments, and musical manuscripts owned by women. Earlier material, especially from the first half of the sixteenth century, is tantalizingly sparse and even harder to verify. Music, like the breath or airy spirits to which it was linked in the era’s neo-Platonic thought, decays and dies with the sounding body that produces it.
Early modern music was highly improvisatory in nature and belonged as much to oral custom as to notational practice, leaving far less distance between auditor, performer, and composer than in later years. Many works were never written down, and a multitude of musicians had no need to read notation or to preserve their own works visually. Nonetheless, there is a rich repository of song whose texts speak to women’s lives, actual or imagined, beginning with the early Tudor era. Until very recently, and even to this day in many genres, Western musical notation served primarily as an aid to memory rather than the prescription for a performance. Sir Philip Sidney, brother of musical patroness and performer Mary Sidney Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke, reminds us that the poetry of his era was inseparable from music. The poet, he says, “cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for, the well enchanting skill of music.” Yet little of the century’s well-proportioned poetry traveled with musical notation in manuscript or print.

Any investigation of women’s voices in sixteenth-century England must start with the reign of Henry VIII, one of the most important musical patrons in the history of Britain. Composer, collector of musical instruments, dancer, lyricist, connoisseur, and performer on strings, winds, and keyboards, the king employed an impressive retinue of musicians from such leading international centers of musical production as Venice and Flanders, as well as from his native country. State occasions he attended at home and abroad literally resounded with ceremonial music, paying acoustic tribute to royal entries, diplomatic negotiations, and other public events. Music was created and performed as part of elaborate court rituals, including tournaments, hunts, royal births, state funerals, May games, religious observances, and a full range of entertainments such as masques, interludes, and pageants. Henry’s cosmopolitan musical taste and the abilities of the musicians in his service were a reflection on the international position of the English court and, by extension, the entire nation, as the medieval world gave way to modernity.

At first glance, women appear to occupy at best a subordinate position in this auditory culture. Of the many acknowledged composers of the era, none are female. Named court musicians are all male. Nothing is known of the musical culture of English convents in the final days before the
Reformation; tragically, documentation was probably destroyed with the dissolution of these institutions. Finally, warnings of the grave moral dangers of music for dutiful women were already being published in the vernacular with the full authority of the leading Classical authors and the ancient Fathers of the church. “And the mynde, set upon lernyng and wysedome, shall not only abhore from foule lust,” says Juan Luis Vives in the 1531 translation of his Instruction of a Christen Woman, “But also they shall leave all suche light and trifling pleasures wherein the light fantasies of maides have delite, as songes, daunces, and suche other wanton and pyvishe plaies.” In spite of such obstacles, women’s musical voices do survive from Henrician England. Evidence further suggests that patterns of performance and representation that lasted through the next century and beyond were already set by the 1530s.

Henry ascended to the English throne as the ideal of the medieval poet-knight gave way to the early modern courtier; in both idealized roles, men were expected to demonstrate a range of musical skills and to entertain women with stylized songs of love. The discussions at the court of Urbino that took place around this time and were immortalized as Baldessare Castiglione’s influential and widely-circulating book on courtly conduct emphasized the extraordinary effects of music on the human body and soul. The ideal courtier, according to the dominant view among Castiglione’s interlocutors, should be able to read musical notation and play several instruments well, especially lute and viol to accompany his own singing. Such skills are especially to be exercised in the presence of women, says Signor Federico Fregoso, because the sight and sound of the comely male performer “sweeten[s] the mindes of the hearers, & make[s] them more apte to be perced with the pleausantnesse of musike, & also they quicken the spirites of the verye doers.” In other words, accompanied song was thought to arouse both the female auditor and the male performer, making it particularly suitable for courtship or seduction.

The most famous of the few surviving manuscripts of secular music from Henry’s reign, British Library Add. MS 31922 (which is also known as Henry VIII’s book), was probably compiled in 1522/23. Extremely eclectic and thoroughly international in its contents, the collection includes a number of songs by the King and other composers that evidently date from the time of his courtship of Catherine of Aragon. The texts in English or French are
simple and formulaic, professing the narrator’s eternal and exclusive devotion or presenting the object to whom they are addressed as the extrinsic cause of his suffering. As such, they are recognizable to any student of late medieval or early modern courtly lovesongs. Those by the King especially tend to have brief, straightforward texts and music suitable for amateur performance.

Among these stand the smooth four-voice chanson “Hélas madame,” whose melody is derived from a Franco-Flemish model and whose harmonies suggest an exercise in compositional part writing. Its rhythms suggest the *basse danse*, whose stately gestures were performed by rows of couples. The narrow vocal ranges, metrical regularity, and straightforward rhythms are eminently suitable for amateur performance of the sort recommended by Castiglione’s courtiers. In keeping with sixteenth-century practice, performers would have a range of choices beyond the obvious group of unaccompanied voices. The top two parts are melodic enough that either could be sung by a soloist who might play the other part, on a viol, or all three on lute or keyboard, or be accompanied by two or three additional performers on viols or recorders. The text is set in a predominantly syllabic and homophonic style to allow the clear expression of the words:

Hélas ma dame, celle que j’aime tant
Souffrez que sois votre humble servant
Votre humble servant serais à toujours
Et tant que je vivrai aultr’ n’aimerai que vous.

(Alas, my lady, you whom I love so much
Suffer me to be your humble servant
Your humble servant shall I always be
And as long as I live I shall love only you.)

The message of the work is transparent. “[Music is honest and praiseworthy] principally in Courtes,” says Castiglione’s Count Lodovico da Canossa, “where . . . many thynges are taken in hande to please women withal, whose tender and soft breastes are soone perced with melody and fylled with sweetnesse.” Since courtly women are especially pleased by music, it becomes an especially powerful tool for moving their affections.
In the stylized games of love and fealty at Henry’s early court, it was not only the King and his male courtiers who addressed idealized female figures to pierce their breasts with melody and fill them with sweetness. Another song in the Henry VIII manuscript addresses the King in the voice of a woman for whom he is “soverayne lord”—presumably Queen Catherine. In conventional carol form, with an alternation between a recurring burden (the refrain repeated after the verses in this musical-poetic genre) and a number of musically-identical verses with changing text, the narrator describes the “lord of puissant power” competing publicly “for [her] poor sake” with sword and spear in a ring. The epitome of manly virtue, a king without equal, “He hath [her] heart and ever shall” in the most conventional female version of the courtly love lyric. The context of the song is clearly a tournament, either actual or imagined. But it poses a mystery: the music for its recurring burden “Whiles life or breath is in my breast / My sovereign lord I shall love best” is attributed to court composer William Cornysh. Yet its six verses lack any indication of melody, harmony, or number of voices. Was the music meant to be improvised, or was it lost before the manuscript was compiled? Were the words framed to a pre-existing tune too well known to need notation? Was the piece written for an actual tournament, as part of some other entertainment, or merely to evoke the knightly ideal of England’s king? Were the verses sung by Catherine herself or by another or others in her narrative voice? If the latter, was her part taken by a woman, boy, man, or chorus, an amateur or a professional? Surviving documentation gives no indication as to the musical taste or training of Henry’s first wife, but it is inconceivable that her parents, Ferdinand and Isabella, did not include musical skill among their daughter’s educational curriculum. Their own court was certainly a center for musical production.

Queen Catherine, or possibly some fictive lover of the lord of the realm, was far from the only woman given voice in early sixteenth-century English vernacular art song. The era’s surviving musical manuscripts are populated by a range of females, courtly and common, some in dialogue with men. For every “lady,” “dame” or “queen” addressed or given voice in the lyrics, there is a “Besse,” “Joan,” or “dairymaid” whose very different sort of life is likewise presented. The full range of gender implications of the many works in the secular music manuscripts of the first third of the century have yet to be considered.
The anonymous carol, “Hey trolly lolly lo,” whose title syllables comprise a popular nonsense refrain in art song from the era, presents a dramatic dialogue between a gentleman (which we know because the female interlocutor addresses him as “sir”) and a maiden on her way to milk her cow. The situation is an old one from lyric literature: using courtly language for erotic conduct (he plans to gather her “flowres both fayer and swete,” for instance), a knight attempts to seduce a comely commoner who ultimately bests him and retains her honor. The work, alternating in modified carol form between a through-set (composed with continuity of musical thought) verse and varied burden, is a complete drama in miniature, taking place entirely through its music. The maiden’s part is simple and dance-like, repeating both her insistent refusal to “melle with” him out of fear that her mother might see, and her desire to return to her humble task. The man’s part is rhythmically and metrically more complex, reflecting his greater rhetorical skill and erotic experience as well as the sophistication expected of a higher-class gent. Set for three voices, the song opens with the lower voices taking the man’s part and the higher voices the woman’s, but, as the piece progresses and each speaker becomes more insistent, all three are used together for both characters. Musically, “Hey trolly lolly lo” is demanding enough that it would be more suitable for professional performers or for more skilful amateurs than “Hélas madame.”

In contrast to such songs of carnal wit stand a number of nonliturgical works that evoke female holy figures or Christian moral dilemmas, bringing together the sacred and secular in the years leading up to the English Reformation. Among these is a lovely carol by Richard Pygott, composed for four voices to an alternating English and Latin text whose ungrammatical burden has been described as “dog Latin”:14

Quid petis, o fili? Mater dulcissima ba ba
O pater, o fili, michi plausus oscula da da

(What’s the matter, o son? Sweetest mother [nonsense]
O father, o son [bad grammar referring to the narrator wanting kisses, further nonsense])
But wait. Let’s not presume that the poet was a poor Latin scholar. A closer look at the grammatical infelicities of the burden reveals at the ends of the second and fourth lines the first phonemes uttered by babies learning to speak: “ba” and “da”—the missing “ma” is clearly present within the person of “mater dulcissima”—sweetest mama. As to the horrible syntax of the final line—“Michi plausus oscula da da”—it’s imitation babble, just what one might have imagined a Latin-speaking Virgo Maria repeating to her Child in private: “Me want kisses, da da.” The three vernacular verses describe the Virgin and Child in alliterative language that may be older than the very au courant early sixteenth-century musical setting. The complete text therefore evokes a strong sense of the old fashioned, the simply nostalgic, eminently suitable for the Christmas season. The changing textures of the piece, the long melismas (groups of notes sung to one syllable of text) to emphasize important words, and the musical skill required to hold one’s own part through polyphonic (nonchordal multipart) passages help to emphasize the wonder of beholding Mary with the infant Jesus. They also indicate that this lovely carol was probably written for professional singers, perhaps the boys and men of the Chapel Royal, who frequently entertained at court.

Another piece that combines Latin and the vernacular as a narrator relates to a woman’s private musing is the anonymous “Up Y arose in verno tempore (springtime).” The strophic song (consisting of a series of stanzas) is set for two high voices and one low in a predominantly homophonic (chordal) style that emphasizes its text. The narrative begins with an individual who overhears a maiden lamenting under a tree. The remainder of the song is presented in the maiden’s words, so that the listener, like the unnamed and presumably unintentional voyeur, identifies with her plight. She feels a child quicken inside her body, fathered by a cleric with whom she lay, and she is afraid to tell her parents or presumably her lover, facing an understandable dilemma about her pregnancy. Nothing less than her immortal soul is at stake. The division of each line into English and Latin sections emphasizes the young girl’s hapless position, caught between her own inner voice and the powerful authorities around her, the expedient solution and its eternal consequence. Like vernacular medical manuals that name diseases or shameful body parts in Latin, the things she fears are...
voiced in the formal language of church and law: her parents, her lover, the rods and sticks with which the former will beat her when they learn of her condition, the multitude in front of whom she will be chastised, her choices of what to do, and, perhaps most importantly, the life eternal she would forfeit by killing the baby. Since simple young maidens were unlikely to have been taught Latin, the linguistic divide is probably more for dramatic effect than for representational accuracy. Her dilemma is not resolved during the course of the song’s four stanzas. The woman’s ultimate course of action is therefore left to the audience, who must consider her choices and select the one that each would—or should—make. This poignant song comes from a manuscript most likely compiled for a provincial religious establishment, perhaps Exeter Cathedral, whose singers would have been called upon for many kinds of civic and religious occasions. For what sort of occasion and for whom was such a song meant? Young girls, seminarians lacking the proper temperament for their vocation, mothers responsible for daughters’ moral education, writers of sermons, or any and all human beings who must make choices that affect their immortal souls? The upper parts, suitable for boys’ voices, would suggest the maiden herself, while the bass would emphasize adult male authority.

Although the professional musicians of church and court were necessarily male, early sixteenth-century Englishwomen were not relegated to musical auditorship, or to serving as objects of address or stock character voices in songs. Castiglione not only emphasizes the effects of music on female listeners, but also assigns them a set of performance skills. The lady courtier, says his Magnifico Giuliano de’ Medici, ought to sing, dance, and play instruments “with the soft mildnesse that . . . is comlie for her.” She must perform only when cajoled, “with a certain bashfulness that may declare the noble shamefastnes that is contrayre to headinesse.” Her choice of instruments must likewise help to display “the sweete mildnesse which setteth furth everie deede that a woman doeth” through their technical demands and the ways in which they display her body. For practical purposes this meant keyboards and plucked strings, instruments associated with women as well as with men in early Tudor England. The lutenist assigned to Henry VIII when he was Duke of York also evidently taught his sister Mary. His sister Margaret is reported to have played both this
instrument and the clavichord in the company of her future husband on her formal progress to Scotland in 1503. Among the Marquis of Exeter’s servants in 1538 was one Anne Browne, aged 22, whose primary skill is listed as needlework but who was also remarked for her ability to play well on the lute and virginals.

A letter from Catherine of Aragon to her daughter Mary during their separation at the time of Henry’s divorce proceedings against her recommends that “for your recreation use your virginals, or lute, if you have any.” Mary’s Privy Purse accounts between 1536 and 1544 record that she received instruction on the lute from court musician and Groom of the King’s Privy Chamber, Philip van Wilder. She also took lessons on the virginals from one “Mr. Paston” and from court keyboard player Simon Burton, a Gentleman of her own Privy Chamber; two other known musicians were among her “gentleman waiters” in 1533. The 1547 inventory of Henry VIII’s collection of instruments notes that a lute and its case had been loaned to Mary since 1543/44. Much earlier, on July 2, 1520, it is recorded that Mary welcomed “the French gentleman” with “pleasant pastime in playing at the virginals.” At the time, the prodigious princess would have been four and a half years old, a fine age for acquiring musical skill. What might she have played then, or five years later when her curriculum of study instructed her “to passe her tyme most seasons at her Verginalles, or other instruments musicall”?

Unfortunately, no keyboard manuscripts associated with noble amateurs of either gender survive from this period, nor is it known whether Mary would have read music, played by rote, or improvised at the age of four or even nine. It has recently been suggested quite plausibly that the famous “Henry VIII’s book,” British Library Add. MS 31922, may have been copied in 1522/23 as a pattern book to help the young princess learn how contemporary music from across Europe was constructed, so that she could judge that of others if not create her own. Even small hands could easily play such simple instrumental pieces as her father’s unnamed Consort II, which is also free of “those hard and fast divisions that declare more counninge then sweetnesse,” that would have rendered it unsuitable for women according to Castiglione. It is not known whether Mary composed original music as did her father. It is certain that, as Queen, her skill
as a keyboard player and especially as a lutenist impressed the Venetian ambassador Giovanni Michele. She also had the taste and knowledge to seek the latest and most expressive international Catholic music for her chapel. Her music-loving father had never let her lack for instrumental training or for entertainment appropriate to a young woman who might some day represent his country on the international marriage market.

Any consideration of English women musicians of the early sixteenth century must include Anne Boleyn. Like other aspects of her biography, her reputed musical skills have been subject to so much speculation from her day to ours that it is difficult to sort fact from fiction. Even otherwise careful scholars have seized on spurious evidence so that she has emerged as the unique woman composer of sixteenth-century England and as the intended recipient of at least one music book that was not commissioned for her. The source of the most-cited tribute to her musical ability has never been verified and may be completely apocryphal. In its original cultural context, what has been universally accepted as praise emerges as more hyperbolic or downright chilling than approbatory: “Besides singing like a siren, accompanying herself on lute, she harped better than King David.” The sixteenth-century siren or mermaid was a soulless creature, hell-bent on her own pleasure and the destruction of men and was certainly used in England as a term for a courtesan or common prostitute. Anne’s sometime-reputed paramour, Sir Thomas Wyatt, metaphorically embodies the dangers of secular delights as “mermaids and their baits of error” in his translation of Psalm 6. To play the harp better than King David would be equally unnatural even if it were possible. More important, by the early sixteenth century the harp was outmoded as a courtly amateur instrument in northwestern Europe. It was replaced by the lute and plucked-string keyboards of the sort played by other royal women of the early Tudor court. This account therefore probably insinuates more about the supposed unearthly power of a woman who faced charges of sorcery than it accurately describes her musical practices.

A number of more trustworthy sources do portray Anne as a singer, dancer, and accomplished lutenist; she probably acquired these skills at the court of France, where she resided for much of her youth in the retinues of Mary Tudor and Queen Claude. “She knew well how to sing and dance...
[and to] play lute and other instruments to drive away sorrowful thoughts,” reminisces Lancelot de Carles, Bishop of Riez in his 1545 poetic “Letter containing the criminal trial brought against Queen Anne Boleyn of England.”35 There are more surviving indications of the music that she may have actually performed than for Catherine of Aragon, Margaret Tudor, or for either Mary Tudor. However, these facts have also been obscured by fantasy and spurious scholarship. The anonymous song “O Death, Rocke Me Asleep” has been popularly attributed to Anne since the eighteenth-century music historian John Hawkins purchased a copy of the poem from a “judicious antiquary lately deceased” who claimed that it had been written “either by, or in the person of Anne Boleyn.”36 In spite of challenges to this highly speculative attribution since 1790, the complete song—music as well as text—has come to be widely ascribed to the unfortunate queen at least since 1912.37 On this basis, Anne earned a place in the 1994 New Grove Dictionary of Women Composers and in the 2004 Historical Anthology of Music by Women.38 The intensely dramatic piece survives in several versions and multiple arrangements from the mid-sixteenth century to the early seventeenth, none of which indicates the poem’s author or music’s composer.

Anne’s name actually does appear in period penmanship along with her father’s motto on an internal page of an early sixteenth-century music manuscript now in the Royal College of Music in London. The work is an enigmatic collection of Franco-Flemish art-music, mostly Latin motets by the leading Continental composers of the day, along with three French chansons. The book was once believed to have been compiled for Queen Anne between 1533 and 1536 by court keyboard player and dancer Mark Sme[a]ton, one of the men executed for presumed adultery with her.39 In an unpublished 1997 dissertation from the University of Maryland, Lisa Urkevich demonstrates that the manuscript was more likely commissioned during the years 1500–1508, long before Anne met Henry.40 It was certainly compiled in France, possibly for the betrothal of either Louise of Savoy or her daughter, Marguerite d’Alençon. The book may have been given as a gift by the latter to young Mistress Boleyn some time before 1529, perhaps for her own short-lived betrothal to James Butler in 1520 or 1521.41 Most important, the collection preserves what has to be identi-
fied as women’s repertory from the early years of the sixteenth century. Its compositions, by such luminaries connected to the French court as Josquin des Pres and Jean Mouton, largely invoke the Virgin, female saints, and classical goddesses, including Juno and Pallas. Its sacred and secular texts are scattered with references to women’s gender roles, such as sister, daughter, wife, and hostess. Most telling, the musical settings are arranged for equal and near-equal voices (voices of the same or similar kind, such as two sopranos or soprano and mezzo-soprano), indicating that they could be performed by an *a cappella* ensemble of women. Among these works stands Claudin de Sermisy’s exquisite setting of Clement Marot’s poem, “Jouyssance vous donneray.” In addition to being a particular favorite of Marguerite’s, the song is legibly depicted in several sixteenth-century French paintings in which it is shown being performed by women. Its text has the flavor of yielding to a suit, a hoped-for response and a cure for a lover’s erotic melancholy:

   Jouissance vous donnerai
   Mon ami, et vous menerai
   Là où pretend votre espérance
   Vivante ne vous laiserai
   Encore quand morte serai,
   L’esprit en aura souvenance.

   (Pleasure will I give you
    my beloved, and I will lead you
    wherever your hope aspires.
    While I live I will not leave you
    And even when I am dead
    My spirit will remember.)

It is indeed the sort of song, as musicologist Edward Lowinsky speculates, that Anne may have sung to the accompaniment of the lute for Henry’s pleasure. One can as easily imagine a small group of young women singing it alone together, dreaming of true romance while exercising the musical skills deemed appropriate to their high social status. The narrow vocal
ranges of each part are eminently suitable for amateur singers, as are the predictable intervals between notes. The polyphonic play between parts and the ornate melismas on several key words keep the setting interesting and would provide a satisfying challenge for experienced performers.\textsuperscript{45}

Under the influence of the English Reformation, as more voices joined the printed controversies over religion and women's proper upbringing, native writers increasingly echoed the Church Fathers on whom Vives had built his warning against “all suche light and trifling pleasures” as songs and dances for young Christian females. In an inversion of Castiglione’s objectification of the susceptible female auditor, a number of English writers from the 1560s well into the seventeenth century link women’s performance to the seduction of men and to the performer’s own passions run rampant. Music is repeatedly associated with “shameless curtezans” and similarly negative female figures.\textsuperscript{46} “[I]f you would have your daughter Whorish, baudie, and uncleane, and a filthie speaker, and suche like, bring her up in Musicke and Dancyng, and my life for yours, you have wonne the goale,” says Phillip Stubbes in a typically hyperbolic passage.\textsuperscript{47} On the other hand, the great Elizabethan educational theorist, Richard Mulcaster, names singing and instrumental music, along with reading and writing, as the four requisite subjects for girls to study.\textsuperscript{48} “Musicke is much used, where it is to be had, to the parents delite, while the daughters be yong,” he adds in a passage that applies as well to the first two Tudor monarchs as to his own contemporaries.\textsuperscript{49}

Greater information and far more material survive concerning women’s musical practices from the second half of the century, undimmed by graphic warnings about the art’s potential to induce moral depravity. Women’s alternately tender and unyielding hearts continued to serve as subjects of courtly art song, and Elizabethan broadside balladry encompasses a veritable catalogue of female types. In an era of increasing controversy about performance, spectatorship, and leisure activities in general, women and their guardians had to negotiate every aspect of participation in music with the utmost care. Thomas Salter’s 1579 conduct manual for women, \textit{The Mirrhor of Modestie}, like its earlier Italian model, claims that music “beareth a sweete baite, to a sowre and sharp evill” for young females. “Therefore I wish our Maiden, wholie to refraine from the use
of Musicke [because] it openeth the dore to many vices,” he concludes. He does, however, make an exception “For those that bee overworne with greef, sorowe, trouble, cares, or other vexation, and have neede of recre-ation, as Agame[m]non had in Homer and Saule in the holie Scripture, by the Harpe and sweet synyng of David.”

It is easy in context to recall the claim that Anne Boleyn had sounded her lute and other instruments to divert sorrowful thoughts. In fact, for many women from the Elizabethan era through the seventeenth century, the domestic solo performance of music on virginals and on plucked-string instruments of the lute family became not merely acceptable but strongly encouraged. Repeated references to this sort of activity for mental refreshment raises questions about previous assumptions that melancholy and its treatment were primarily associated with men.

Perhaps most famous among Elizabethan women who are known to have played solo instrumental music alone in their private chambers is Boleyn’s daughter, the future Queen Elizabeth. One of the leading patrons of cutting-edge art music of her era, Elizabeth probably received a musical education to rival Henry’s other children. Like her sister Mary, Elizabeth played the virginals in the presence of a diplomat who responded favorably to the performance. Unlike Mary, Elizabeth felt compelled by her generation’s social norms to stop when she realized that she had an audience. The evening after she had learned from Scottish ambassador Sir James Melvill that her cousin Mary of Scotland played the lute and virginals “reasonably [well] for a Queen,” she evidently staged an opportunity for him to overhear her. “[M]y Lord of Hunsdean drew me up to a quiet Gallery. . . where I might hear the Queen play upon the Virginals,” reminisces Melvill. “After I had hearkened awhile,” he continues, “I took by the Tapistry that hung before the door of the Chamber, and stood a pretty space hearing her play excellently well, but she left off immediately, so soon as she turned her about and saw me. She appeared to be surprised to see me, and came forward, seeming to strike me with her hand, alledging she used not to play before Men, but when she was solitary to shun melancholy.”

What sort of music might she have played? Nothing is known of any collection of music she might have possessed, and the earliest anthologies of keyboard music intended for women’s performance belong to the next century. Based on
keyboard collections for amateur domestic performance from her century and the following, her repertoire was likely to have been similar to her sister’s so many years before: abstract contrapuntal pieces and arrangements and variations of pre-existing tunes.\textsuperscript{54}

The Psalms of David in metrical English settings make up another genre increasingly associated with women throughout the sixteenth century. As early as the 1530s, in the preface to the first published collection of English metrical psalms, Myles Coverdale states that “yf women syttynge at theyr rockes, or spynnynge at the wheles, had none other songes to passe theyr tyme withal, then [psalms such as Biblical women had sung], they shulde be better occupied, then with hey nony nony, hey troly loly, & such lyke fantasies.”\textsuperscript{55} From their introduction, then, metrical psalms were strongly associated with women’s domestic performance. A profession of Protestant faith as well as musical skill, the popularity of private psalm singing with or without instrumental accompaniment must have been boosted tremendously by the delight expressed by King Edward IV at hearing Thomas Sternhold, his Groom of the Robes and one of the co-authors of the most popular collection of English metrical psalms, sing such works.\textsuperscript{56} Lady Grace (Sharrington) Mildmay recounts in her memoirs that, as a young girl at mid-century, her governess and kinswoman had set her to singing psalms and sometimes doing needlework “when she did see [her] idly disposed.”\textsuperscript{57} As a teenaged Elizabethan bride whose husband was often away, she shunned her generation’s equivalents of “hey tolly lolly lo” and “Jouissance vous donneray” at court in favor of singing psalms and setting five-part arrangements to her lute at home.\textsuperscript{58}

Of the many publications offering arrangements of the familiar English metrical psalm tunes of the era, only one is dedicated to a woman and places the “common tune” not in the tenor part, but in the treble: Richard Allison’s \textit{Psalmes of David in Meter} (1599), presented to “The right Honorable and most virtuous Lady, the Lady Anne, Countesse of Warwicke.” The composer’s settings range from simple to moderately challenging, and are sometimes quite inventive in spite of the clear presentation of the familiar Sternhold and Hopkins melodies. Allison provides numerous choices for potential performers, stating that works may “\textit{be sung and plaide upon the Lute, Orpharyon, Cittern or Base Violl, severally or}
altogether, the singing part to be either Tenor or Treble to the Instrument, according to the nature of the voice, or for fowre voices.”

The top three parts are fairly close in register, and would therefore fit most women’s voices comfortably. The texted bass lines not only suit the lowest viola da gamba, but many fit a low contralto voice, especially if the singer has enough skill to change octaves for certain notes or phrases. Women could easily perform these psalms with each other in multiple aesthetically-pleasing arrangements. One of the most striking pieces in Allison’s book is not technically a psalm, but the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father Which in Heaven Art,” which helps to reinforce the tone of private meditation and prayer that dominates the entire collection. The composer’s setting reflects the richness of Elizabethan part writing while preserving the simplicity of the original tune and allowing the text to be clearly expressed.

There were also several other genres suited to small-scale domestic performance and to the edification or healthful refreshment of the performer or auditor associated with Elizabethan women. Ballads, presumably both broadside and traditional, were almost universally condemned by moralists from one end of the century to the other. However, the contested contexts were most often public spaces. There is some indication that female servants sang narrative ballads and told old romantic tales to entertain each other and their masters’ families in their places of employment. The seventeenth-century historian John Aubrey fondly recalls that he first learned the entirety of British history from the ballads of his old nurse. He further suggests that, in the days before literacy, it had been women who had taught these national stories to their daughters through song.

At the other end of the social spectrum, a number of late Elizabethan publications in the two pre-eminent secular art-song genres, madrigal and ayre, were dedicated to women. The madrigal was originally an Italian import adapted to English taste during the 1580s and 1590s. Native composer and music theorist Thomas Morley considered it to be the most delightful and artificial of secular genres, “full of diversity of passions and airs.” Most often written for three to six voices from mezzo-soprano to bass, the majority of English madrigals require men in order to be performed as written. In fact, as many recordings and concert performances attest, they can easily be performed without women. The two complete
exceptions are collections of canzonets, a lighter madrigalian form, dedicated by Morley in 1593 and 1595 respectively to Lady Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, and to Lady Periam, born Elizabeth Bacon and, as Lady Nevell, the recipient four years earlier of the earliest extant English keyboard manuscript known to have belonged to a woman.63 Both women came from extended families noted for their patronage of music; the Countess of Pembroke was also an extraordinary poet and sibling to one of the pre-eminent literary figures of the day, Sir Philip Sidney. Both collections dedicated to them can be completely sung by women, and are written for only two and three unaccompanied voices. Nothing is known of Lady Periam’s musical training or skill, and Morley’s dedication gives no indication as to whether she might have sung his canzonets or whether pairs of her ladies or maidservants (who had recently included Morley’s wife, Suzan) might have sung them for her enjoyment.64 In contrast, the composer praises the Countess’s “heavenly voice,” presumably meaning that she has skill to sing these moderately intricate pieces.65

The lute ayre, born as the century died, was associated from its inception with privacy and personalized confession, qualities connected strongly with virtuous womanhood.66 One of the early collections of the genre, which also includes madrigals, was dedicated by gentleman composer Michael Cavendish to his second cousin, Lady Arabella Stuart, in 1598.67 Lady Arabella’s extremely musical extended family included her uncle and sometime guardian, Gilbert Talbot, the seventh earl of Shrewsbury.68 She developed and maintained a general reputation as a patron and participant in the arts.69 Cavendish’s dedicatory remarks “To the Honourable protection of the Ladie Arabella” do not specifically name any musical skills among her “rare perfections in so many knowledges.”70 However, nine years later, composer John Wilbye remarked on her “particular excellency in this of Musicke” in the dedication to her of his second set of madrigals.71 The vocal lines of the ayres in Cavendish’s collection have the narrow range and predictable melodic intervals typical of a genre that was marketed to literate amateurs; nor are the lute parts particularly demanding. “Wandring in This Place” is typical in its structure, and was also set as a five-voice madrigal to conclude the same collection.72 Its anonymous text particularly emphasizes the reflection and interiority that typify the lute-ayre genre
by blurring the boundaries between the emotive and the confessional, the sacred and the secular, original English and borrowed Latin. Narrated in the first person, the poem moves from a personal expression of abiding sorrow to a quotation from Lamentations 1:12, associated liturgically with Palm Sunday. The scriptural words are not presented in the official English of the Great Bible or the Geneva version of the Elizabethan era, but in the older Latin of St. Jerome’s Vulgate:

Wandring in this place as in a wilderness,  
no comfort have I nor yet assurance,  
Desolate of joy, repleat with sadnesse:  
wherefore I may say, O deus, deus,  
on est dolor, sicut dolor meus.

(O God, God, / there is no sorrow, like my sorrow.)

In the musical setting, the lute echoes the singer’s preliminary “wandering” even as it widens, and the repeated phrase “desolate of joy” descends each time it is sung. The vocal “sadness” is illustrated through a carefully prepared and resolved dissonance, mixing the bitter with the sweet, and the most extended syllables of the melismas are on the self: the “I” who suffers, and the “meus” to whom the incomparable “dolor” applies. This highly personal yet comfortably familiar meditation on abiding sadness would be as suitably sung and played by a woman as by a man in the private chamber or closet.

In conclusion, women participated in many kinds of music and to many ends in England during the sixteenth century, only a few of which have been shown here. Sometimes women simply served as stock characters created and envoiced by men, occasionally with surprising sympathy. Elsewhere, women were singers, dancers, auditors, patrons, or recipients of performances and collections of music. Especially during the second half of the century, women had to negotiate numerous cultural strictures placed on appropriate venues and audiences. As performers, most Tudor women were confined to domestic space, but in those varied locations they played, sang, and listened to many genres, from early sixteenth-century French and...
Flemish part-songs to metrical psalms, ballads, Anglo-Italian madrigals, lute songs, and various genres of instrumental music by the end of the century. For them, as for their male contemporaries, music offered healing and refreshment for both body and soul.

Notes


12. Garrett Mattingly’s biography of the Queen claims that Isabella of Castile saw to it that her daughter’s education included music, among other subjects; see Mattingly, *Catherine of Aragon* (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), 8–9.
13. For a musical setting in modern notation, see Stevens, *Music at the Court of Henry VIII*, 95–8. For an historically-informed recording, see I Fagiolini and Concordia, *All the King’s Men*, track 1.
18. Ibid., sig. CCi.
20. Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, 268–9. Records indicate that Henry VII provided lutes and musical education to all four of his children, and that Margaret’s lute teacher not only accompanied her on her progress to Scotland, but remained there permanently in her service after her marriage; see Pearsall, “Tudor Court Musicians,” 55, 67, and 139–41.
22. As quoted in Pearsall, “Tudor Court Musicians,” 76, with reference to the source as British Library MS Arundel 151, fol. 194. See also Frederic Madden, *Privy Purse Expenses of Princess Mary, Daughter of King Henry the Eighth, afterwards Queen Mary* (London: W. Pickering, 1831), cxxxix–cxl, which refers to the same piece of material advice. A later letter from Queen Catherine Parr additionally indicates Mary’s pas-
sionate fondness for music, ibid., cxxxix.

23. Ashbee, “Groomed for Service,” 188–9 and 194; and Pearsall, “Tudor Court Musicians,” 73. On July 4, 1546, Prince Edward wrote to thank his father for sending the same Philip van Wilder to help him “become more expert in striking the lute”; see Ashbee, “Groomed for Service,” 194.

24. See Pearsall, “Tudor Court Musicians,” 261. The same had also been borrowed by Edward, and a virginals by Elizabeth.


26. Frederick Madden, Privy Purse Expenses of the Princess Mary, xli. This pastime, along with her other studies and forms of recreation, was supervised by her “ladie governesse” the Countess of Salisbury while the young princess was settled in her house at Thornbury in Gloucestershire.


28. Castiglione, The Courtier, sig. CC1. For a musical setting in modern notation of Consort II, see Stevens, Music at the Court of Henry VIII, 41. For an historically-informed recording of the piece performed on the sort of keyboard instrument Mary may have played, see Sirinu, All Goodly Sports, track 7.

29. See Madden, Privy Purse Expenses, cxxxix, which quotes Michele as being particularly impressed with the speed of her fingers and the quality of her performance (“la velocità della mano, et...la maniera del sonare”) on the lute.


35. “Elle sçavoit bien chanter, & dancer /...[et] Sonner de lucz, & daultres instru- mens / Pour diverter les tristes pensemens,” from Epistre contenant le process criminal

36. Sir John Hawkins, A General History of the Science and Practice of Music, vol. 3 (London: T. Payne and Son, 1776), 30–2. It must be pointed out that Hawkins presents “O Death, Rocke me on [sic] Slepe” as one of two poems claimed to be “written either by, or in the person of Anne Boleyn” in a section on “poetical compositions” of the later Middle Ages and early Tudor era; the work is not presented with music or any reference to musical settings. For further information on the history and plausibility of various attributions of the text and music of this song, see Philip Brett, Consort Songs, Musica Britannica vol. 22 (London: Stainer and Bell, 1967), 177, which points out that the same poem is mentioned in Shakespeare’s Henry IV, part 2, 2.4.211 and that Ritson (Ancient Songs, 1790, 120–2) questioned the attribution to Anne Boleyn and put forward the name of her brother George, Viscount Rochford. J. W. Hebel and H. H. Hundson have suggested Richard Edwards, which Brett finds plausible; see Hebel and Hudson, Poetry of the English Renaissance (1929), 920.

37. The earliest publication of any of the extant versions of the piece in modern notation is Arnold Dolmetsch, ed., Select English Songs and Dialogues of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, vol. 2 (London and New York: Boosey, 1912), 1–3, in which it is “ascribed to Ann [sic] Boleyn” on the basis of “a Tradition mentioned in Hawkins’s ‘History of Music,’ and which nothing disproves, as far as I know, that this song was written by the unfortunate Queen Anne Boleyn, whilst in prison, waiting for her execution” (Preface). This highly questionable attribution became widely accepted from this point without verification; see, for example, Marcel Bijlo, “Anna Boleyn en Hendrik VIII: Aanbeden en versmaad,” Tijdschrift voor oude muziek 14 (1999): 19; Knispel, “Abschied von dieser Welt,” 25 and 28; and Janet Pollock, “Anne Boleyn,” in New Historical Anthology of Music by Women, ed. James Briscoe (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 39–44.


41. See ibid., 120–6, 211–40, and 244–50. Dumitrescu questions the evidence by which Urkevich ascribes specific ownership to either Louise or Marguerite, but agrees that the book is of French provenance from the early part of the century and finds further evidence that it was in England and used by English performers at an early date; see The Early Tudor Court and International Musical Relations, 151–2.


43. Ibid., 202.


49. Ibid., 178.

50. Thomas Salter, A Mirrhor mete for all Mothers, Matrones, and Maidens, intituled the Mirrhor of Modestie (London: Edward White, [1579]), sigs. C6v–r. This book is clearly modeled after Giovanni Michele Bruto’s La instituzione di una fanciulla nata nobilmente/L’institution d’une fille de noble maison (Antwerp: Jehan-Bellere, 1555), which was translated into English nearly two decades after Salter’s book appeared.


60. Ibid., sigs. C5r–C6v; a contrasting setting of the Lord’s Prayer is also given on sigs. R2v–R3r. For an historically-informed recording of the latter by soprano soloist with three viols, see Circa 1500, *A Handefull of Pleasant Delites: Elizabethan Ballads & Dances* (Gaudeamus/ASV Ltd., 1997), track 11.


63. Tomas Morley, *Canzonets or Little Short Songs to Three Voyces* (London: Thomas E[a]st for William Byrd, 1593), dedicated “To the most rare and accomplished Lady the Lady Marye Countes of Pembroke; and Morley, *The First Booke of Canzonets to Two Voices* (London: Thomas E[a]st, 1595), dedicated “To the most Vertuous and Gentile Ladie The Ladie Periam.” Modern editions of both collections are included in *The English Madrigalists*, ed. Edmund H. Fellowes, revised by Thurston Dart (London: Stainer and Bell, 1956), vol. 1, parts 2 and 1 respectively. Recordings of select works from both books, almost invariably sung by men, are widely available. For further information about Lady Periam and the famous manuscript of William Byrd’s keyboard music known as *My Ladye Nevells Booke*, see John Harley, “‘My Lady Nevell’ Revealed,” *Music and

64. Morley’s dedication offers the works “like two wayting maydes desiring to attend upon you; destined by my Wife (even bee before they were borne) unto your Ladieships service . . . that these therefore with their presence should make good & supply that hir absence,” presumably because of pregnancy; see The First Booke of Canzonets to Two Voices, dedication.

65. “Receive then (most worthy Lady) these simple gifts. . . to which if at any time your Ladiship shall but vouchsafe your heavenly voice; it cannot be but they will so returne perfumed with the sweetnesse of that breth. . . .”; see Morley, Canzonets or Little Short Songs to Three Voyces, dedication.


68. Price, Patrons and Musicians of the English Renaissance, 103–5.


70. Cavendish, 14. Ayres in tablaturie to the lute, dedication.


72. A modern edition of this work is given in Songs Included in Michael Cavendish’s Booke of Ayres and Madrigalles (1598), The English School of Lutenist Song Writers, ed. Edmund Horace Fellowes, second series, vol. 7 (London: Stainer and Bell, 1925), 24–27.

73. For an historically-informed recording, see Julianne Baird and Ronn McFarlane, Greensleeves: A Collection of English Lute Songs (Dorian Recordings, 1989), track 10.