



WOMEN AND PIANOS IN 19TH-CENTURY ART AND LITERATURE

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“The woman at the piano” was the subject of many artworks in the 19th century. One of the most famous was Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s oil painting *Femme au piano* from 1876. 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 nearly see-through pink fingers almost barely touch the keys. Her performance looks very effortless, 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 the ideal woman, nearly out of this world, transported to the domestic living room. The image of the woman at the piano is also a favorite topic in the literature of the time. In almost all 19th-century literature, the female heroine plays the piano: Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Otilie in Goethe’s *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, Fontane’s *Effi Briest* and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. In Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, it is no longer the innocence of the piano in the center, as in Jane Austen, but instead, it is a means to the unserious, to coquetry, and indecent behavior. Flaubert is the first novelist who fully grasps the potential of the piano as a dramatic means. In *Madame Bovary*, the piano’s role is an indicator of the soul, to the heroine’s grandness and fall. The piano becomes the heroine’s accomplice, in all her longings, hopes, dreams and desire.

Keywords: Piano, 19th century, Art, Literature.

Introduction: Music and Art – Two Sides of the Same Coin?

There is only one Art; painting and music are only different fields, part of this general Art; one must know the boundaries, but also how it looks from the other side; yes, the painter who is musical, just as the composer who paints, these are the true, genuine artists...¹

The German composer and conductor Carl Friedrich Zelter (1785-1832) stated this in 1783. His statement point to the fact that composers throughout the history of music often have found inspiration in the visual arts, as well as visual artists finding inspiration in music. This connection between art and music is particularly evident in the 19th century and can be exemplified most clearly with the “woman at the piano” theme.

¹ Carl Friedrich Zelter. *Carl Friedrich Zelters Dastellungen seines Lebens*, ed. Johann-Wolfgang Schottländer. (Weimar: Verlag der Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1931): 151. Transl. Stephanie Campbell. Cited in Morton and Schmunk 2000: 1

The Woman at the Piano

The “woman at the piano” was an important theme in both art and literature in the 19th century. The woman at the piano was the subject of hundreds of images, particularly from France and images from both art and literature clearly defined the piano with femininity. The artworks depicted the subject of woman and the piano as typical for the everyday life. In addition to the images found in the high arts, it is also possible to find numerous images on illustrations of sheet music, novels, and magazines. And naturally it became almost a genre of its own in the work of impressionists like Frédéric Bazille (1841-1870), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), Edgar Degas (1834-1917), Édouard Manet (1832-1883), Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894), and Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), who all treated the woman at the piano theme.

One of the earliest Impressionist paintings of the theme was Whistler’s *At the Piano* (1858-1859) a depiction of his half-sister, Deborah Delano Haden, and her daughter, Annie Harriet Haden, sitting next to a grand piano. The painting presents here the typical scene with a woman displaying her female accomplishments, while her daughter, dressed in white, looks at.



Figure 1.² James McNeill Whistler, *At the piano*, 1859, oil on canvas. Taft Museum, Cincinnati.

Cézanne painted his piano painting: *Young girl at the Piano (Overture to Tannhäuser)* in 1869-1870. The painting shows two women, one young girl, Cézanne’s sister, playing an upright piano, and one older woman, possibly her mother, sitting on a chair and is embroidering, listening to the young girl. The young woman playing the piano is wearing a white dress, while sitting stiffly at the piano, looking down at her hands, in a very serious manner, as she plays. The title suggests that she is playing a piano reduction of the *Overture to Tannhäuser* by Richard Wagner. The scene reminds of a chaperone watching her young girl, which also reminds us that the piano often was the place of contact and flirtation between men and women.

Édouard Manet was another artist who painted a piano-playing woman from his own family. His wife Suzanne was an accomplished pianist, admired by many contemporary artists. The artist and close friend of Manet, Edgar Degas, participated in Manet’s musical evenings and in the 1860’s he painted a portrait of the Manet couple: Suzanne playing the piano and her husband dreamingly (or possibly bored?) listening. Degas seems to have been pleased with the portrait, and he presented it to Manet as a gift. However; Manet hated how Degas had painted his wife! And the next time Degas saw the painting, it had been mutilated and tore right through the face of Suzanne Manet at the piano. Mrs. Manet had been sitting in profile, and half of her face was destroyed. Degas got very angry and stormed out of their house and took the destroyed painting with him.

² Whistler, James Abbott McNeill. *At the Piano*.jpg. *Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository*. Retrieved July 23, 2018 from https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Whistler__At_the_Piano.jpg&oldid=256771043.



Figure 2.³ Paul. Cézanne, *Young girl at the Piano (Overture to Tannhäuser)*, oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

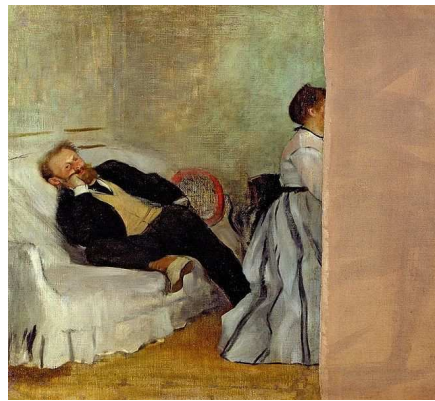


Figure 3.⁴ Edgar Degas, *Monsieur et Madame Edouard Manet*, oil on canvas, Kitakyūshū Municipal Museum of Art.

Some time later the art dealer Ambroise Vollard wanted to know about this:

VOLLARD: Who slashed that painting?

DEGAS: To think it was Manet who did that! He thought that something about Mme. Manet wasn't right. Well . . . I'm going to try to "restore" Mme. Manet. What a shock I had when I saw it at Manet's. . . I left without saying goodbye, taking my picture with me. When I got home, I took down a little still life he had given me. "Monsieur," I wrote, "I am returning your 'Plums.'"

VOLLARD: But you saw each other again afterward.

DEGAS: How could you expect anyone to stay on bad terms with Manet? Only he had already sold "Plums." What a beautiful little canvas it was! I wanted, as I was saying, to "restore" Mme. Manet so that I could return the portrait to him, but by putting it off from one day to the next, it's stayed like that ever since.⁵

³ Cézanne, Paul. *Young girl at the Piano (Overture to Tannhäuser)* Retrieved July 27, 2018 from <https://www.wikiart.org/en/paul-cezanne/girl-at-the-piano-overture-to-tannhauser-1869>

⁴ Degas, Edgar. *Monsieur et Madame Edouard Manet* .jpg. Retrieved July 23, 2018 from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edgar_Degas_-_Monsieur_et_Madame_Edouard_Manet.jpg

⁵ Retrieved May 22, 2018 from <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/22/arts/art-degas-and-mrs-manet.html>.

Degas took the painting to his home, however, he never got around to repair it. So it remains today a strangely destroyed painting. We don't know what made Manet so angry, and what he did not like with the painting. But whatever it was that he did not like, he decided to make a better version himself. He called the painting *Madame Manet at the Piano* (1868). He took away his own body from the painting and concentrated only on his wife. He painted his wife in the same position at the piano, but if he found Degas' version unflattering, his own painting might not have done her better justice. Manet paints his wife as a bit heavy and not very flattering. And her hands rest at the piano, not so much being active at the keyboard. This is a trait I will return to. The painting seems to be very private: a painting of and to his wife – not meant for public display. It was showed at an exhibition only once, otherwise, it remained in Suzanne's care until her death in 1906. This was actually the only time Manet painted the topic woman at the piano.



Figure 4. ⁶ Édouard Manet, *Mme Édouard Manet au Piano*, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay.

In 1876, at an impressionist exhibition, Pierre-Auguste Renoir's famous *Femme au piano* (1875) was exhibited. 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 nearly see-through pink fingers almost barely touch the keys. Her performance looks very effortless, 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 the ideal woman, nearly out of this world, transported to the domestic living room.

Renoir was the most active painter in the woman at the piano genre. He used this subject throughout his whole career. Of all the painters painting the theme, it was probably Renoir who was mostly dedicated to the theme. He used the theme more than eleven times, six of these are the series of two girls at the piano from 1892. A very idealized picture of young femininity, that all show the same scene: a pair of young girls at an upright piano, with only some differences between the images. The six images vary slightly in color and where they turn their faces. But they all show the same image: a young blond girl touches the piano keys with her right hand and turns the pages with her left hand. Another girl with brown hair is standing next to her and leans towards her. They both seem to look at the music at the piano: one girl is playing, the other listening. That the famous painter Renoir spend so much time with this motive, shows a seriousness to the genre. The whole image of the girls in this domestic sphere shows his ideas of this sphere: he has painted the paintings with very soft colors. These images were displayed at exhibitions, which also said that this genre was a serious and important one.

⁶ Degas, Edgar. *Monsieur et Madame Edouard Manet* .jpg. Retrieved July 23, 2018 from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%C3%89douard_Manet_-_Madame_Manet_ou_Piano.jpg



Figure 5. ⁷ Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Femme au piano*, oil on canvas, Art Institute, Chicago.



Figure 6. ⁸ Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Jeunes filles au piano*, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay.

The women and girls portrayed on all of these paintings mentioned so far were always situated in the home, they were amateurs and it was not important for them to play the piano on the painting, more important was their feminine appearance. Most of the time their hands were still at the keyboard, and not positioned in a way that would signal that they were actually playing. The women's hands and fingers were most often stretched out, placed over the keys, but did not signal any sort of playing or action. For women: playing the piano was a way to express their femininity and social class, refinement, upbringing, and culture. They conformed very much to the society's expectations of femininity. These images also say how common the piano was in domestic settings, that it was mainly girls and women who played the piano, and that it was an important element in the development of bourgeois feminine identity (Eyerman 1984:12).

⁷ Renoir, Pierre-Auguste. *Femme au piano* Retrieved July 27, 2018 from <https://www.wikiart.org/en/pierre-auguste-renoir/young-woman-at-the-piano-1876/>

⁸ Renoir, Pierre- Auguste. *Jeunes filles au piano* jpg. Retrieved July 23, 2018 from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Renoir23.jpg>

The Ideal Femininity

What is the ideal femininity of the period? It seems to be a decorative woman at the piano, and very many piano images were displayed at various settings and were very popular throughout the 19th century. In 1802, they patented and invented the upright piano, which brought the piano to the home, to the domestic interior. The piano became an important piece of furniture in the middle and upper-class homes, and was very often portrayed and photographed, as to show that it was a part of the daily life. The images were shown on sheet music, fashion plates, advertisements etc. These images have all one thing in common: the person seated at the piano was nearly always female.

You know that pianoforte playing, though suitable to everyone, is yet more particularly one of the most charming and honorable accomplishments for young ladies, and, indeed, for the female sex in general. By it we can command, not only for one's self, but for many others, a dignified and appropriate amusement...⁹

And the girls and women playing were amateurs. The performers were expected to remain amateurs, which was linked to the home. As a professional, they would have had to cross over to the public sphere, outside the home.

It is possible to claim that the woman at the piano became an icon, became the symbol of the whole 19th-century culture: female propriety, the bourgeois, the proper upbringing, the culture, the accomplishments – all of this was embedded in the image of the woman at the piano. The image became very refined, and always showed a poised young woman at the piano, in fashionable dress, often white, and they always looked decent and refined.

In this domestic sphere, the woman at the piano was perhaps more ornamental in its function, than a real alive active performer. Therefore; it might not have been necessary to depict her visually as an active performer. As mentioned above, the hands are therefore most often relaxed, poised over the keys, it does not look like she is making an effort to play, it does not look strained.

It is possible to claim that the piano provided a cultural framework where women could appropriately display themselves. One of these meeting places were the piano lessons, which might be one of the few places where men and women could meet and provided a possible courtship situation. There are numerous images with the piano playing girl and her male teacher. At many artworks and drawings, the male piano teacher leans over the piano playing girl; it is easy to see that the teacher has other intentions. It was a typical stereotype at the time that piano teachers' main purpose was to steal the virtue of the young pupil. Common of these paintings was the fact that these paintings were the product of the dominant male gaze, which looked at the woman as an object. All these paintings show the woman turning away from the viewer. In this way, the viewer can look at the woman, without being viewed himself, and can enjoy the view of a young woman doing an appropriate feminine activity.

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.¹⁰

Woman at the Piano in 19th-Century Literature

Learning to play the piano was one of the many talents a girl should learn in the 19th century, in order to ensure a good marriage. Playing the piano well was a good way to get married, to get a marriage proposal.

⁹ Carl Czerny. *Letters*, quoted in James Parakilas 1999:144.

¹⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), quoted in Harrison, 2005:3.

The philosopher Rousseau talks about piano skills in his book *Emile* (Rousseau 2013). Sophie, his wife to become, used the days to become better in her accomplishments: drawing, dancing, playing the piano and singing. But her skills should not become too deep and should be turned into art, then they became particularly boring. The goal of cultivating the talents was threefold: to get a good taste, to open the mind for beautiful things, and to develop moral concepts. Sophie had received piano lessons so 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 it should look natural and effortless, because if one made an effort, it looked ridiculous.

And the fact that the performer should look natural and unstrained, was an important cultural perspective in the art of playing the piano. Because, 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 would signal that she was not a chaste and virtuous lady. The piano playing had something innocent and endearing connected to it. The young ladies had a graceful and feminine pose, the legs together, 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 was invisible to the audience, made the sound.

The piano-playing young lady performed in the living room, in the center of the activities in the home. And she became a symbol: of her family could afford a piano and that she could take piano lessons. She became a symbol of her family having culture, that she herself was virtuous and did not need to go anywhere, did not need to run after men. She sat there calmly, passively knowing that she made an impression.

However, no matter how cozy or innocent the image of the woman at the piano might seem, the image could also include hidden, implied and under-communicated feelings, including erotic and forbidden. There could be a contradiction between the exposed and the obscured or hidden. The young piano-playing women could include both strong feelings and flirtation in their performance. It is possible to claim that the only way they could communicate this, was through the music, where it was possible to speak the unspoken. This could manifest itself for instance in an erotic teacher-student relationship, or play a duet with a young suitor. She and her teacher or a friend or suitor could play four hand piano, and there were some erotic possibilities present when fingers, hands and bodies touched. Piano four hands represented a safe space in which touching and nearness 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.

To turn pages for someone (a man turn pages for a lady) could also be a form of pre-marital musical cooperation, which included a form of intimacy, although the man did not need to have any musical background. A piece of music as a gift could also be something more than an innocent gift: it could also 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 an ulterior motive that this could end with a 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 attracted to Mary 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,... (Macmichael 1836:68-69).

Mary's performance was successful since they soon thereafter 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 of a woman. It is possible to conclude that piano skills were perhaps one of the most important possibilities a girl had to get married.

The author Jane Austen mentions the piano in very many of her books. She was herself a very accomplished pianist. In her novel *Emma* (Austen 1816), 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 reference to this could be through the music, through the piano, since this could not possibly be a proper conversation topic.

Another example from an intimate discourse is from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in the novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*), Goethe's third novel (Goethe 1809). The main characters are Eduard and Charlotte, an aristocratic couple, who lives an idyllic and seemingly boring life in the countryside. They invite Ottilie, the beautiful orphan teenage girl to live with them. When Ottilie and Eduard perform a duet, she on the piano and he on the flute, it can from an outsider's point of view look like a conventional musical activity. But Ottilie has in all secret practiced this piece to prepare herself for such an eventuality. Her skills and her sympathetic way to accompany the less successful soloist implies that these two performers might have something to do with each other in the future, which ultimately leads to the breakup of his marriage.

Blurred Borders – Blurred Bodies

In these intimate discourses, the borders between music, piano playing and body become blurred. The young women's beautiful small hands, beautiful lips – in other words, her looks bring forward bodily and visual elements: the female body, more than the music, becomes the focal point and the topic for the aesthetic evaluation. The borders between "woman" and "music" dissolve as femininity achieves an abstract equivalent to music aesthetic beauty.

The German composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt (1752-1814) writes for instance in the preface of his song collection *Gesänge fürs schöne Geschlecht - Songs for the fair sex -* (Reichardt 1775), that these songs are rather unimportant. However, if they are sung with a woman's beautiful lips they will become thousand times more beautiful. The aesthetic beauty the performer will bring to these songs becomes a part of the aesthetic evaluation. The bodies become blurred, the borders between woman and instrument become blurred. Analogies of the piano is being used in connection with women, beauty, and whiteness: where for instance the woman's white hand is compared to the white keys of the piano.

In novels of the time; about every fiction heroine in the 19th century plays the piano: Elizabeth Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Ottilie in Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* and in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. In William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (Thackeray 1968), is no longer the innocence of piano playing in the center, like at Jane Austen, but is viewed as a means to the unserious, to coquettish, indecent behavior. Thackeray shows this with his two heroines; Amelia Sedley, who plays the piano, but only in the domestic setting. On the other hand, is Becky Sharp, with her green eyes, half French, and whose parents are artists, and who is a very good pianist. Her rapid fingers, levity, shamelessness, routine, sensuality – everything blends together. A person who plays the piano well becomes per definition no longer a moral person.

Gustave Flaubert is the first novelist who fully realizes the potential of the piano as a dramatic means. In *Madame Bovary*, from 1857, the piano's role becomes the sole's indicator for the heroine's greatness and fall. The piano becomes the heroine's accomplice, in all her longings, hopes, dreams and desires. She is a very good pianist, which was a part of her education at a convent school. And at the beginning of her marriage, she performs for her husband, who is impressed by her skills.

But Flaubert also instruments the dissolvent of the marriage by means of the piano. She desires a career as a concert pianist, but that was not possible in the society she lived in. She stops playing, and the

silent piano is an accusation against her husband's complacency, against the sadness of the marriage, against faith. But after a while, she picks up again the piano playing, but she is not satisfied with her stiff fingers. She needs lessons, she says to her husband. And her husband treats her lessons at a well-known female piano teacher once a week. But this eagerness to practice is just a smokescreen. She does not take any lessons, but instead, she meets up with her lover. So how about the role of the piano here? It becomes a sort of an accomplice, or maybe a victim – both the husband and the instrument are being betrayed just as much. At Flaubert, the piano is in the center of tenderness, passions, drama, and decay.

Conclusion

In the course of the 19th century, the piano had many functions: a pastime, a means to get married to being the goal of aesthetic pleasure and a means of an intimate communication between two people. A woman playing the piano, might in many ways be seen as a symbol of the whole 19th century's ideas, such as the bourgeoisie, virtuous conduct, and formation. "The woman at the piano" was an admired image and an aesthetic object in itself, and became a notable genre of its own in the hands of the impressionists.

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