

## Music & Dancing

### Introduction

Upper-class children learned to dance and play musical instruments as part of their education. They were important social skills, and it was expected that a gentleman or gentlewoman would know music and dance. For example, George Washington was an excellent dancer.

But, everybody loved music, either playing it or listening to it. Remember, before recordings, the only way to hear music was to play it! If you did not own an instrument or know how to play, you could always use the instrument of your voice.

### Dancing

Dancing was one of the few activities that men and women did together, so it gave young men and women a chance to get to know each other. Dances of the 1700s were couple dances, done in long lines (similar to the more modern country line dancing).

Regular people danced at festive occasions like weddings, and learned from each other. Wealthy people hired private “dancing masters” to teach their children.

### Instruments

Like today, instruments were played more commonly by one gender or the other. But... it is often the opposite of today! For example, in the 1700s violins and flutes were considered masculine instruments generally unsuitable for women to play, whereas today there are generally more women than men playing these instruments in an orchestra. Pianos, harps, and guitars were more “feminine” instruments, perhaps because they could be played with voice accompaniment. Wealthy young women commonly played music and sang to guests to display their musical accomplishments.



The following quote comes from a 1722 London publication by John Essex, *The young ladies conduct: or, rules for education, under several heads; with instructions upon dress, both before and after marriage*.

“The Harpsicord, Spinnet, Lute and Base Violin, are Instruments most agreeable to the Ladies: There are some others that really are unbecoming the Fair Sex; as the Flute, Violin and Hautboy [oboe]; the last of which is too Manlike, and would look indecent in a woman’s mouth; and the Flute is very improper, as taking away too much of the Juices, which are otherwise more necessarily employ’d, to promote the Appetite, and assist Digestion. Musick is certainly a very great Accomplishment to the Ladies; it refines the Taste, polishes the Mind; and is an Entertainment, without other Views, that preserves them from the Rust of Idleness, that most pernicious Enemy to Virtue.”

## Songs

Songs that people sang ranged from classical, formal pieces to patriotic songs to silly ones. Many of the songs we know today came after the 1700s, or the words or tune has changed since then.

## Works Referenced:

Essex, John. *The young ladies conduct: or, rules for education, under several heads; with instructions upon dress, both before and after marriage*. 1722

Theobald, Mary Miley. “Myth #138: Women in early America didn’t play the violin or flute because they would have to raise their arms, revealing their elbows,” *History Myths Debunked*, <http://historymyths.wordpress.com/2014/11/16/myth-138-women-in-early-america-didnt-play-the-violin-or-flute-because-they-would-have-to-raise-their-arms-revealing-their-elbows/>



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