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## **[Review of] Fine-Tuning Gender Construction of the Old South by Sheila Phipps**

**Abstract:** Book Review

Candace Bailey. *Music and the Southern Belle: From Accomplished Lady to Confederate Composer*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010. xiii + 255 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2960-1.

Since Anne Firor Scott's seminal work that defined the "Southern Lady" in 1970 (*The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*), several scholars have successfully studied gender construction to develop a complex picture of women's place in the Old South relative to class.[1] In *Music and the Southern Belle*, Candace Bailey fine-tunes our understanding of the gendered limitations and expectations of southern elite womanhood by focusing on their relationship to music. She accomplishes this by combining impressive research with her background in music. She finds that genteel women were expected to please, but not overly impress, private company with musical accomplishments. These expectations were stretched, however, during the American Civil War, when some women combined their talents with patriotism to publish their names on musical compositions intended to further nationalism for the war effort and for the new nation.

Bailey finds that, rather than studying music because of an earnest desire, young women of the antebellum South learned how to play an instrument (usually the piano) or to sing as a cultural obligation, to maintain their family's status and to make them more marriageable. Either through tutors, or in a female academy, their fathers invested in musical instruction for their daughters, who practiced their skills dutifully. Ambition beyond private entertainment, however, was out of the question for women of this class. Public display of their musical talent would have tarnished their reputations; in fact, women who had the talent for writing music did not even put their names on their published compositions.

Bailey sorts out the subtle details of demure southern womanhood for her readers. Women were taught to play or sing just good enough to avoid criticism. They were expected to perform for visitors when asked, without false modesty or begging off because of feeling ill. In conversation, they were expected to be conversant about popular musical trends and of various operas and performers, and even attend public performances, but the closest they came to public performances themselves were school recitals. They collected sheet music of the most appropriate genre for their parlors and performed them without appearing to be a performer.

The fullness of this work benefits from Bailey's research. Besides studying young women's music collections and, when possible, their diaries to find out their individual thoughts about pieces they played, Bailey delved into their family backgrounds to clearly portray their status. She studied the availability of public performances in such cities as Raleigh, Charleston, and New Orleans, and provided biographical information about performers. She located merchants who sold sheet music and instruments and described the trends in music popularity--changes, for instance, from the appeal of English musical theater to Italian. In addition to researching the curricula of female academies to learn the emphasis on musical instruction at those institutions, she also located details about some of the music instructors.

*Music and the Southern Belle* benefits a great deal from Bailey's own musical background. Because she teaches piano as well as music history and literature, she brings a unique perspective to this work. In fact, one of the most fascinating aspects of her study is her analysis of musical scores relative to antebellum gender restrictions on both behavior and fashion. Tight-fitting bodices over constrictive corsets left women physically restricted from playing demanding pieces. For instance, Bailey argues that "the fact that the armhole (where the sleeve joins the bodice) was cut so low that arms could not be lifted too high further complicates the physical gesture and suggests that playing lengthy figurative passages that extended the entire keyboard, weighty octave playing (as might include the use of the upper arms and even back) and cross-hand sections would not have been played in mixed company" (p. 101).

As promised, Bailey provides a wartime comparison of women's public musical presence. She argues that, along with the other ways women found to be useful, they performed publicly for wartime fund-raisers, in contrast to their exclusively private performances before the war. Additionally, similar to wartime novelists, most women who composed patriotic pieces for the South allowed their names to be published on sheet music. She believes that the desire for public recognition in their musical skills came from more than just the turmoil of war disrupting gender restrictions. She sees it as a need for recognition of their patriotism for the Confederacy, for a way to be viewed as "soldiers" for the cause.

Some readers might wish that Bailey had expanded the last chapter of the book to detail more of the changes in musical recognition brought about by the war. Even without that, however, this is an impressive study of antebellum southern society, gender construction, and women's public patriotism.

#### Note

[1]. See, for instance, Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books,

1982); Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).