

THE IMPORTANCE OF
PRACTICE IN EDUCATION
AS SEEN IN THE MUSIC DEPARTMENT OF
SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE

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When Sweet Briar College was founded as a liberal arts college in 1901, the plans drawn up for the courses of instruction stated that "Thorough courses in music, art and the industrial branches, with practice rooms, studios and well-equipped laboratories, will be provided, so arranged as not to supplant, but to supplement, the literary studies. The intention of the directors, as expressed in their preliminary announcement, is to combine harmoniously literary and scientific studies with 'thoroughly practical training in certain artistic and industrial branches of knowledge.'"¹

Standing for intellectual, cultural and spiritual development, Sweet Briar hoped to achieve its aims by offering practical courses as well as theoretical courses. This philosophy, known as "instrumentalism" or "experimentalism," is especially reflected in the Music Department at Sweet Briar. From Sweet Briar's foundation, practical as well as theoretical and historical courses were given high educational status and they were regarded as serious academic pursuits.

Almost every discipline questions what balance there should be between theory and practice, and the Music Department at Sweet Briar chose to put a large amount of emphasis on practice. Interestingly, Sweet Briar was the first college in the South to recognize the cultural

value of practical music by standardizing these courses and by giving to them college credit."² The importance of applied music in the first few decades of the Sweet Briar College program is reflected in the curriculum, the many student performances of practical training, and the conditions and facilities available to practical music students.

Miss Helen Young, the first music instructor, was instrumental in broadening and developing the Music Department at Sweet Briar and "her interest attracted so many students of both piano and singing that the music department soon grew to three instructors."³ She encouraged active participation in music and generated student interest in practical music involvement. By 1928, The Sweet Briar News reported 23 credit and ten non-credit students of both piano and singing, which was "an unusually large number of talented students."⁴ The Sweet Briar News devoted much of its space to music, encouraging greater attendance at concerts and other musical programs and more student interest in practical music. In 1929 an article appeared in The Sweet Briar News stating that "When an art is as genuinely pleasure-giving as this one called "music," we should all be eager to enlarge its role in the lives of those about us, both by supporting musical enterprises and by indulging our own desires for personal musical expression."⁵

Miss Young desired a more well-rounded music curriculum and favored an increased program of applied music. In 1915 she presented the Executive Committee with an outline of a course in violin to be counted toward the diploma and the motion carried that the course be accepted.⁶ Similarly, Miss Jones asked the Executive Committee to approve the plan of giving academic credit for vocal and instrumental music in 1923 with "three years credit toward the degree, each consisting of two hours practical work with one hour theoretical. She stated that a certain standard of achievement would be required before a student could study for credit -- probably at least one year's work. At the President's suggestion and with an amendment in wording by Prof. McDougale, Miss Jones moved that no discrimination be made in granting credit for vocal and instrumental music. Prof. Czarnomska seconded the motion and it was passed."⁷ Apparently, both of these Executive Committee cases passed smoothly and easily, for the only discussion or opposition recorded in the Executive Committee Minutes was over the wording. The Faculty reaction in these two cases was that knowledge of music was broadened by the experience of music.

In September, 1932, the Music Department asked the Faculty to consider a cello class taught off campus "Due to the fact that the college was unable to secure

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the services of Mr. Joseph Kohler as teacher of cello and that Miss Helen Bean had carefully planned last spring to include cello and Appreciation of Music in her schedule, the Department of Music recommends that Miss Bean be allowed to study with an approved teacher, Mrs. Fenton in Lynchburg. ...The Department of Music wishes to state that it does not approve of establishing a precedent with this case, but feels that these circumstances warrant its justification."⁸ Since the department was not in favor of off campus study, it must have felt that the cello lessons were significantly important in contributing to the student's ability to use her brain, otherwise it would not have recommended that the Faculty approve it. That this course was accepted is an indication of the importance placed on practical as well as theoretical or historical courses to get a full perspective of the art. Upholding the belief that such practical courses were conducive to intelligent understanding of music, applied music courses occupied an important place in the Sweet Briar College curriculum.

In the interest of maintaining an updated curriculum in the Music Department, Miss Wainwright, a music instructor, attended a convention of the Virginia Federation of Women's Music Clubs in Danville where "Dr. J. Jertius Noble spoke of the educational value of music and the general interest being taken in the singing of

better music by groups of singers in America."⁹ The educational benefits of group singing must have become apparant to her after hearing the speech, for two years later Miss Wainwright proposed to offer a course in voice of two to three students with the conditions for credit the same as in individual instruction. Like the earlier proposals, this one passed with no record of dissent from the Faculty.¹⁰ Since the amount of credit given was unchanged, this course offered all of the advantages of solo applied music and it provided opportunities for exchanges between the students in the classroom and more self-confidence in performing.

Students of applied music were expected to demonstrate their achievements in recitals. According to The Sweet Briar News, "the playing of these girls proved that the time spent in practice was not futile,"¹¹ but gave "opportunity for proof of musicianship."¹² Small recitals among the students were held every three weeks and provided training for public performances. Advanced music student recitals were also held periodically and a student presented in this recital was considered to have "reached the apex to which all music students strive."¹³ The reviews written in The Sweet Briar News gave intelligent and educational character to the recitals: "The Bach numbers were well played. All the strength and interpretation which are necessary for the understanding of this

classic composer the pianist gave to her performance of this 'suite.' The 'Scenes From Childhood' were delightfully given. The charm with which these numbers were played proved that the pianist was in sympathy with the composer. The result was an audience which enjoyed every note of the good interpretations of these lovely 'Scenes From Childhood.'¹⁴ Recitals stressed the interrelationship between practice and theory, with the idea that the student who has the ability to sing or play an instrument can build and enrich her musical knowledge learned from theoretical courses, and vice versa. Such performances were required because they caused the applied music student to concentrate on interpretation and translation. Thus, the performance of practical music was seen as a product of the human imagination, similar perhaps to literature or philosophy.

Sweet Briar recognized that adequate practice facilities were essential for students of applied music and directed serious attention toward making proper arrangements for this. It was considered important for practical music students to be provided with good facilities, so much so that "The necessity for buying more pianos nearly upset the college budget one year."¹⁵ But evidently many thought that this high expenditure had worthwhile returns. It is an indication that prac-

tical music was looked upon as having high educational value at Sweet Briar.

A major turning point was when the Carnegie Corporation presented gifts during 1928-1932 of "a library of records and scores and an excellent record player vastly extended possibilities for instruction in music history and appreciation. The Corporation paid the salaries of two musicians to give instrumental instruction and to encourage interest in the ensemble. These additions in facilities and instruction made it possible to offer a major in music."¹⁶ Since Sweet Briar was not located within easy reach of music equipment and instrumental instructors, this endowment for more ample music facilities on campus was enormously appreciated. The old library was transformed into a new music building with offices, studios for instruction and five sound-proof practice rooms. The building was opened for use on January 20, 1930 and was available to students at all times.¹⁷ It was a much more convenient arrangement, and the unlimited use of the practice facilities provided more practice opportunities and emphasized the importance of practical expression.

As seen in the music department, Sweet Briar employed the modern educational ideas of "experimentalism" and "instrumentalism" in its traditional liberal arts program. Sweet Briar upheld that the combination of practice and theory broadened and gave more meaning to

an education. Knowledge was considered to have little meaning unless it could be directly applied. Because Sweet Briar was dedicated to the idea that individuals who applied their knowledge made better contributions to society, it was one of the main objectives of the institution to uphold practical as well as theoretical studies.

FOOTNOTES

¹Board of Directors of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar Institute, p. 15.

²Emilie Watts McVea, "Sweet Briar College-An Interpretation," Bulletin of Sweet Briar College, 25 June 1925, p. 8.

³Martha Lou Stohlman, The Story of Sweet Briar College (Sweet Briar: Sweet Briar Alumnae Association, 1957), p. 73.

⁴"Activities for Fall Outlined By Music Department," The Sweet Briar News, 17 Oct. 1928, p. 1.

⁵"Music in the Air," The Sweet Briar News, 23 Jan. 1929, p. 2.

⁶Executive Committee Minutes, 27 April 1915.

⁷Ibid., 31 May 1923.

⁸Instruction Committee Minutes, 21 Sept. 1930.

⁹"Miss Wainwright Attends Convention of Music Club," The Sweet Briar News, 9 May 1928, p. 1.

¹⁰Instruction Committee Minutes, 21 Sept. 1932.

The Sweet Briar Catalogues maintain that the Choir and the Glee Club gave opportunities for choral singing, but they were not credited courses for the Sweet Briar degree.

¹¹"Music Department Presents Students in Recital," The Sweet Briar News, 28 Nov. 1928, p. 1.

¹²"Three Seniors Will Give Piano and Violin Recital," The Sweet Briar News, 13 March 1929, p. 1.

¹³"Music Recital to be Given Friday Night," The Sweet Briar News, 16 Nov. 1927, p. 1.

¹⁴"Miss Copeland Gives Short Piano Recital," The Sweet Briar News, 4 April 1928, p. 1.

¹⁵Stohlman, p. 73.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 167.

¹⁷"Old Library Transformed into New Music Building," The Sweet Briar News, 6 Feb. 1930, p. 1.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Board of Directors of Sweet Briar College. Sweet Briar Institute, p. 15. Sweet Briar College Archives, Room 2, right wall bookshelves, among the miscellaneous pamphlets on the fourth shelf from the top.

Gives a prospectus of what the aims of Sweet Briar Institute were to be.

Executive Committee Minutes of Sweet Briar College. M.S., holograph 1916-1965, mimeograph 1966-present. October 27, 1911-1966 (excepting 1952-1964, which are contained in folder "Executive Committee 1948-1965"). Sweet Briar Archives, Room 1, right wall bookshelf, bottom shelf closest to door. The Executive Committee was formed to make decisions on academic matters. I read the Executive Committee Minutes from 1911-1935. There is some recorded discussion. One drawback is that the Secretaries record only the things that they felt were important. The Executive Committee Minutes cannot be relied upon as an historical source, but they are very useful when used with other sources.

Faculty Minutes. M.S., holograph. Sept. 1906-May 1957. Sweet Briar College Archives, Room 1, right wall bookshelf, bottom shelf closest to door. The Minutes from 1906-Oct. 1911 contain records of decisions made on academic rulings, approvals and refusals of petitions from both students and faculty, social regulations and some traditions. On Oct. 27, 1911, the Executive Committee took over all of the academic matters. I read the Minutes from 1906-1911. With regard to academics, these Minutes discuss courses, issues arising within the departments and new developments, but the Secretaries often record the decisions without mentioning whether or not there was any discussion or debate held. It is possible that there was discussion at the meetings and the recorder left them out of the Minutes. This is a rather biased source.

Instruction Committee Minutes. M.S., mimeograph. 1926-1950, 1958-1959, 1967-1971. Sweet Briar College Archives, Room 1, right wall bookshelf, bottom shelf closest to door. These Minutes discuss issues arising with academic courses. They mention what the pros and cons were with many of the issues which is extremely helpful. I mainly concentrated on the Minutes from 1926-1935.

McVea, Emilie Watts. "Sweet Briar College--An Interpretation," Bulletin of Sweet Briar College, Vol. VIII, No. 6 (June 25, 1925), p. 8. Sweet Briar College Archives, Room 2, left wall bookshelf in a box labeled "2nd President Emilie Watts McVea." It gives the President's view of what the college should stand for.

Stohlman, Martha Lou. The Story of Sweet Briar College Sweet Briar: The Alumnae Association of Sweet Briar College, 1956, p. 73 and 167. A useful book, but it is not very well-documented. A story book more than a history book.

Sweet Briar College Catalogue. 1906-date. Sweet Briar College Archives, Room 2, right wall bookshelves, second shelf from top. The Catalogue indicates what academic courses were available to the students. It contains a list of courses offered, gives a brief description of each, and tells the amount of credit for the degree. I looked over the catalogues from 1906-1935. There is little or no bias, for there is little or no room for interpretation in this source.

The Sweet Briar News. 1927-1968. Sweet Briar College Archives, Room 2, right wall bookshelf, second shelf from the top closest to the window. Written by the students, the News reports on all aspects of general interest at the college. They contain many articles on music. These articles reflect the views of those on the staff and are not necessarily those of the majority of students. I found this source enormously helpful.