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The Music Lesson: An Analysis of Two Works from Dutch Seventeenth Century

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Introduction

You have practiced hours and hours throughout the week trying to master one piece, or even one section of the piece. Finally, the anticipated day of the week comes where you play for your highly-skilled teacher what you have been tirelessly practicing all those hours. You will either dread or look forward to this day, depending on how prepared you are. You either receive praise on how much you have improved from your admired mentor, or a scolding on how much more you need to practice. But it is also a valuable opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding about how to further your skills on your instrument. This typical scene in the life of a musician is called a music lesson.

I have been studying violin for almost seventeen years, and the number of music lessons I have experienced is more than I can count. These many lessons have not only helped me learn how to play the violin, but they have taught me numerous things that I can use outside of music in my everyday life. Music has helped me develop important characteristics such as discipline, perseverance, analytical skills, how to work with others, and how to convey one's emotions without words. I would not be where I am today in my professional and personal life without the mentorship of my music teachers. There is something very special about the relationship of a student and teacher when learning an instrument. My teachers, personally, opened a whole new world by sharing their love for music with me which in turn grew my love for music.

I chose this topic because the music lesson is a popular scene that has been portrayed in various artistic images throughout many centuries. The seventeenth century is a period where it is seen quite frequently in paintings, specifically Dutch paintings. Major Dutch artists like Gerard ter Borch, Jacob Ochtervelt, Vermeer, and Frans van Mieris the Elder have portrayed various scenes of a music lesson. Genre paintings in the Netherlands during the seventeenth

century were popular because they were known to contain a "hidden message" which was often a moral lesson to teach the viewer. The music lesson scene was such a popular theme in Dutch genre painting because it was a visual way to express the "harmonies of love" or the power of music to seduce.

In this paper I will attempt to bring to light that within these paintings there is a musical aspect that is far more vivid than simply moralizing scenes about love and desire. They are complicated scenes that can also represent the art of music and teaching and portray a striking pedagogical relationship. Nanette Salomon writes in her article titled "From Sexuality to Civility: Vermeer's Women" that "The impulse to read the images realistically is often linked, quite illogically, with the desire to read them as moralizing texts warning their viewers against lust, greed, and various other canonical sins." She then goes on to say that "the positive tone of most of these paintings and prints urges us to find more resonant ways of understanding them."[1]

While there are multiple seventeenth century Dutch paintings with the title *The Music Lesson,* I chose to focus on the works of Gerard ter Borch and Johannes Vermeer. I chose Gerard ter Borch and Vermeer because I think that their representations most resembled what, in my opinion, a music lesson would look like. They are similar in some ways, but they are also both very different in the way each artist constructs the painting and how they represent the undercurrents of a pedagogical relationship in the music lesson.

In the first chapter, I discuss the different aspects of Dutch genre painting in the seventeenth century. Genre paintings were meant to be instructive. However, they are not as simple as they seem, and they can be complex in the way that they convey the underlying

[1] Nanette Salomon, "From Sexuality to Civility: Vermeer's Women," in *Studies in the History of Art*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker, vol. 55, *Vermeer Studies*, Symposium Papers XXXIII (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1998), 313.

message or narrative. I briefly discuss the historical background and how Dutch genre painting developed, and then I go on to analyze how there are different types of genre painting that mean to posit their messages in certain ways. An important text that helped me develop this chapter was Wayne Franits' book titled *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution*. He provides in in-depth overview of the evolution of Dutch genre painting throughout the Golden Age and explains the various emblems and symbols that contained the mysterious "hidden messages" within the paintings.

This leads into the discussion of the theme of musical scenes that were very common in genre painting. The instruments had many different iconographic associations which allowed the painter to convey numerous ideas to the viewer. Thus, understanding the different aspects of genre painting and the historical background will help with the understanding of these two complicated paintings of the music lesson and how they contain different levels of teaching.

Chapter two will analyze *The Music Lesson* by Gerard ter Borch. The emblems ter Borch explicitly places in the painting leads one to think that it could possibly have an underlying moral lesson about love; however, there are multiple underlying messages that can be taken from this painting. Along with communicating to the viewer something about the relationship between a teacher and a student, I also examine the musical culture during the Dutch Golden Age and how music might have been taught to help further our understanding of ter Borch's painting.

There is not a vast amount of writing on how music was actually taught during the Golden Age. This is probably due to the fact that music in the sixteenth century was mainly played in the church, and then in the seventeenth century it was mostly in the privacy of one's home.[2] However, there are scholarly writings on the importance of music during this time and

[2] Janson, "Music in the Time," Essential Vermeer.

also the different instruments and songbooks that were used. Marjorie E. Weiseman's book titled *Vermeer and Music: The Art of Love and Leisure* and also Jan W. J. Burgers' book titled *The Lute in the Dutch Golden Age: Musical Culture in the Netherlands ca. 1580-1670* were both vital to my understanding of the significance of musical culture, the different instruments that were used, and the types of songbooks that people would read the music from. I also used my own experience of taking music lessons to help further my interpretation of both paintings.

The final chapter discusses Johannes Vermeer's *The Music Lesson.* Vermeer is one of the most studied artists from the Dutch Golden Age. Yet, still, scholars and myself always come back to his paintings because they are so complex and nuanced. Interpretations of this painting are primarily about the underlying narrative that is about love, but I believe that it could be more about music and teaching. I attempt to explain how the complexity of his painting goes with the complexities of music and the act of teaching music. Ultimately, my goal for this project is to provide evidence for looking at these popular scenes of the music lesson in a different light.

Chapter One: Genre Painting

The term “genre painting” refers to a depiction of a common scene that occurs in everyday life. These scenes can include domestic settings- like a woman working in her home, street and tavern settings with peasants, palatial settings with aristocratic figures, and even scenes of prostitution. One of the main characteristics of genre paintings is that they present a realistic rendition of the scene. The figures and objects in these small canvas paintings are not idealized like the figures in paintings from the classical period. They take on a much more naturalistic approach. The best examples of genre painting come from the seventeenth century Netherlands, or the Dutch Golden Age. This is seen in the work of great Dutch painters like Johannes Vermeer, Gerard ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch, and Gerrit Dou. Genre paintings are popular today because they illustrate the life and times of the Golden Age of the Netherlands that has since then ceased to exist.

Dutch genre paintings were mainly created to be instructive. However, they are not as simple as they seem, and they work in complicated ways. Genre paintings can have multiple interpretations and cause the viewer to think about the images in different ways. Depending on the person, the lesson that it teaches can also be different than what another person learns from it. This is what sets them apart from other art in the seventeenth century. In this first chapter, I want to explore the different aspects of Dutch genre painting and show just how complicated they can be. Specifically, I want to look at genre paintings of musical scenes and how they can be used to convey multiple things to the viewer.

Historical Background

The Dutch Golden Age, which roughly spanned the seventeenth century, was a time of major political, economic, and cultural development. However, this development into what is

now known as the Netherlands occurred simultaneously with a war against Spain that lasted for about eighty years.[3] This war arose from the people's unhappiness with taxation as well as persecution of the protestants of the reformation. The resulting dislocation of thousands of devoted protestants to the north provided significant cultural and economic incentive for political reform. By 1581, the king had been deposed and the Republic of the Seven United Provinces came into existence. A powerful political union was established based upon self-rule in the absence of a king. When peace was finally realized in 1648, Spain officially recognized the independent north region and the war came to an end.[4]

Author Jan W.J. Burgers writes in his book titled *The Lute in the Dutch Golden Age: Musical Culture in the Netherlands ca. 1580-1670* that "In spite of these internal and international troubles, the Dutch Republic went through an unprecedented economic and cultural boom."[5] The increase in wealth contributed greatly to the cultural upswing. Literature, particularly poetry and plays, thrived and Amsterdam became the main center where International literature was published. However, the most noticeable art form that flourished in the Dutch Golden Age was painting. Paintings in Dutch culture at the time were in high demand and unlike music and literature, Dutch painters, like Vermeer, earned international recognition.[6]

With the increase in immigration from the end of the war, there came more artists from different backgrounds who brought culture and diversity to Dutch painting. The absence of the patronage of the church and the rise of private patronage was another main component in the demand for secular paintings. In the past, scholars have mistaken the ownership of genre

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[3] There were a number of sources that talked about the Dutch Golden Age and the war with Spain but this is the source I have chosen to cite: Jan W. J. Burgers, *The Lute in the Dutch Golden Age: Musical Culture in the Netherlands ca. 1580-1670*, Amsterdam Studies in the Dutch Golden Age (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 39-50.
[4] Burgers, *The Lute*, 39-50
[5] Burgers, *The Lute*, 40
[6] Burgers, *The Lute*, 39-50.

paintings to be strictly a middle-class phenomenon. While some patrons were middle class, most were the upper class or elite.[7]

When the French Academy was established in 1648, critics throughout Europe instituted a hierarchy of painting and judged paintings according to their subject matter. One of those critics was artist and writer Samuel van Hoogstraten and in his essay, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst (Introduction to the Elevated School of Painting),* he divided categories of paintings into three "ranks."[8] The lowest rank is still-life painting, the highest rank is history painting, and the middle rank is genre painting. However, the term "genre" did not come into play until the eighteenth century, because it was originally a French word, meaning "kind" or "type." Because seventeenth-century Dutch artists did not use this term, they used titles like "merry companies" or "guardroom pieces" for scenes they depicted. Even though these genre paintings were ranked in the middle, they were produced in great quantities and were in high demand throughout the seventeenth century.[9]

The starting basis of genre painting is credited to Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the sixteenth century. His works depicted scenes of peasant life, landscapes with common people, and village fairs (figure 1). His work became increasingly popular because of his commendable observational skills, his humanistic approach, and they would often pointedly bring to light human folly by illustrating moral sayings or proverbs. These "lessons" or witty

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[7] Wayne E. Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).
[8] Jennifer Meagher, "Genre Painting in Northern Europe," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, last modified April 2008, accessed February 10, 2018, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gnrn/hd_gnrn.htm.
[9] Eric Jan Sluijter, "On Brabant Rubbish, Economic Competition, Artistic Rivalry, and the Growth of the Market for Paintings in the First Decades of the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2009) doi:10.5092/jhna.2009.1.2.4.

messages contained in his works greatly influenced the artists that came after him in the seventeenth century.[10]

During the early seventeenth century, the artists from Haarlem and Amsterdam were crucial to the development of genre painting. Frans Hals and William Buytewech were the most noted among the first generation of Dutch genre painters. Frans Hals became identified with Haarlem, and his students and followers used his level of artistry as an example for them to exceed. He was a fine portraitist and painted military companies, but he also excelled in the world of genre painting. He has a series of the "five senses" but unlike the classical, allegorical style, he made it more naturalistic and used more realistic settings and figures. This is reflective of the now non-existent patronage of the Church and the transition of religious art to secular art that people could relate to. William Buytewech was known for portraying scenes of wealthy people that were often ill-behaved and also scenes of peasant life. These artists were the "pioneers" of the first generation of genre painting that set the bar for the next generation to surpass.[11]

Scenes of wealthy people that were called "garden parties" were a popular theme in early genre paintings. This theme would frequently have sexual references (figure 2). Such references or moral messages in the paintings by these Dutch artists would have been easily understood by ordinary people of the time. Art historian Jennifer Meagher writes in her essay titled *Genre Painting in Northern Europe* that references in paintings would have been understood by the viewer because they "would have had, besides a certain assumed worldliness, access to the many books of emblems and symbolic devices popular during this time."[12] The "lessons" or

[10] Meagher, "Genre Painting," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.
[11] Meagher, "Genre Painting," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.
[12] Meagher, "Genre Painting," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History.

"references" in genre painting were also more accessible and comprehensible to ordinary people because the scenes presented themselves in the context of daily life that was recognizable and relatable. This is why they were so popular.

Throughout the seventeenth century, the popular themes and motifs of genre painting developed and changed due to several reasons: the artist's personal aesthetic interests, pictorial traditions, and most critically, the demands of the market.[13] Hence, the development of genre painting was not linear, but rather shifted from one predominant set of stylistic and thematic conventions to another. The demands of the market greatly influenced the content and style of the works. The artist would modify styles and subject matter to make the paintings more attractive or cost less.[14]

In the mid-seventeenth century scenes of peasantry were popular due to the fact that most of the patrons were elite (figure 3).[15] It has been argued that these scenes were intended to "teach" wealthy people about immoral behavior. However, it turns out that these scenes could have also been popular among the elite because they portrayed peasants participating in activities that a wealthy person would never be associated with doing, thus providing entertainment for the wealthy patrons.[16]

In the article titled "A Republic of Educators: Educational Messages in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting," author Jeroen J.H. Dekker writes that "genre painting suggested how a person obtains an acceptable identity and where things can go wrong in the process of the

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[13] Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century*, 12-16.
[14] Sluijter, "On Brabant."
[15] Jonathan Janson, "A Brief Overview of the Dutch Art Market in the Seventeenth Century," Essential Vermeer, accessed February 5, 2018, http://www.essentialvermeer.com/dutch-painters/dutch_art/ecnmcs_dtchart.html#.Wnicy7rwbIU.
[16] Burgers, *The Lute*, 171-208.

formation of this identity."[17] Dekker is saying that genre painting can portray an ideal representation of what a person should aspire to be, but also the consequences of straying from the path of becoming that ideal person. I think that because immoral acts were associated with peasants in the paintings, it taught wealthy people that the consequence of participating in these things could potentially bring poverty if they waste their money and time on such things which would lead them astray from a prosperous life. However, the activity of looking and figuring out the narrative of these paintings was also entertaining for them.

Towards the end of the century, the elite began to disfavor the condescending and unruly depictions of peasants and started demanding scenes that depicted the Dutch culture as more refined. Marjorie Wieseman writes in her book *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* that "The subjects most in demand were those which illustrated the more favorable aspects of Dutch civilization: conversation pieces, tasteful and/or titilating scenes of love and courtship, and other occupations of the idle rich."[18] These later portrayals of civilized peasants reflected but also shaped more sophisticated sensibilities of the elite class. Later and towards the end of the seventeenth century, as the elite's sensibilities became more refined, they rejected scenes of peasants altogether. All of this sheds light on the effect that the elite's convictions and the on-going social transformation in Dutch culture had on art and genre painting.[19]

Genre paintings also became more explicitly moralizing at the end of the seventeenth century. Edifying scenes like women drawing or washing their hands were more straightforward

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[17] Jeroen J.H. Dekker, "A Republic of Educators: Educational Messages in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting," *History of Education Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 159.
[18] Junko Aono, "Ennobling Daily Life: A Question of Refinement in Early Eighteenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 33, no. 4 (2007/2008): 237-238.
[19] Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century* and also Aono, "Ennobling Daily," 237-238.

in their didacticism. It was more obvious because of the symbols that the artist would strategically place in the painting to create a narrative. For example, the artist would place a religious painting on the wall in the background to make it clear that there was a moral lesson to be learned. Smith writes that "Dutch artists often used pictures within pictures to allude to hidden meanings."[20] Sometimes the meanings were positive and ideal, or sometimes they were negative. Interpreting the symbols behind genre painting or figuring out the narrative was what made them entertaining for the elite, and the symbols were flexible enough to leave room for ambiguity, which was a main factor in genre painting's charm.[21]

From reading literature in the seventeenth century like scriptures or poetry, the viewer would associate symbolism in the literature with objects that were in the painting. This is how they would be able to interpret the painting. In the book titled *The Lute in the Dutch Golden Age*, Jan Burgers writes that "People looking at such representations drew enjoyment from them at several levels: the accuracy of depictions of a familiar, everyday reality; the game of disguising and discovering the message; and certainly also the deeper thought or moral lesson itself, which appealed to the need to feed part of a social, religious, or intellectual group."[22]

Examples of Genre Painting

Genre paintings can be so complex because they portray the lessons or moral messages in different ways. There are multiple examples of genre paintings that mean to posit the underlying lessons or messages a certain way. Meaning that the messages can be humorous, negative, positive, and even ambiguous.

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[20] David R. Smith, "Irony and Civility: Notes on the Convergence of Genre and Portraiture in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (September 1987): 411.
[21] Smith, "Irony and Civility," 407-411.
[22] Burgers, *The Lute*, 195.

Jan Steen's painting titled *Beware of Luxury ("In Weelde Siet Toe")* (figure 4) portrays what looks like a celebration that has gotten out of hand. He captures each individual's expression and there is so much to look at in the image one could never get bored. There is a young child waving his spoon in the air, a little girl looks like she is mischievously getting into a cupboard, and a little boy is smoking a pipe. There is also a dog on top of the table eating what appears to be a pie and a pig running loose by the doorway. In the center of the image, there is a scandalously dressed woman with a drunken male beside her, a fiddle player in the background, along with a nun and a man that is also wearing religious looking clothing. This chaos has to be caused by the older woman who has fallen asleep, who was probably the lady of the house or the adult in charge. The wide array of characters makes this image quite funny, but it also has a subtle moralizing overtone about the dangers of participating in immoral acts and drunkenness.

A negative example of a genre painting would be a scene of prostitution. Quite a few of these were painted in a vulgar way that condemned such practices to the viewer. Artist Gerrit Van Honthorst has a painting titled *The Procuress* (figure 5). The painting is not very well lit. The only light source is a candle that mainly the woman and her seductively low-cut dress. The front of the male figure is not visible, you can only see his silhouette from the back. There is another figure in the background, perhaps it is the "pimp" and all that is visible is a sheepish grin, it almost looks evil. The lute was known to symbolize the female so that is probably what it symbolizes in this painting. Because of the dark palette, there is a grim feeling to this painting. I would think that this image in a seventeenth century Dutch home would be used as a warning.

Pieter de Hooch's painting titled *The Bedroom* (figure 6) is one of the more positive and pleasant examples of genre painting. This painting is a carefully arranged interior of a home that features a woman doing laundry and her child just entering the room. There are two light

sources, one from the windows on the left and the other from the doorway. They both illuminate the smiling child as he looks at his mother, who is smiling back at him. The lighting and the different shades of red and brown give a sense of warmth and comfort. I think this is a pleasant representation of an ideal Dutch home that represents the nurturing and motherly duties that a Dutch woman has. Everything works together to give a sense of harmony and emphasize a mother's nurturing aspect.

The more ambiguous and mysterious scenes are exemplified in many of Vermeer's paintings. For example, his painting titled *A Maid Asleep* (figure 7) features a young woman asleep at a table that is covered with an elaborate table cloth topped with a dish of fruits and a just of wine. There is another chair at the table that is empty and the tablecloth is wrinkled, so it suggests someone else must have been in the room. However, there is not another figure in the painting. There is a half open door behind the girl that leads to a distant room. The whole scene is mysterious and open to multiple interpretations. Is the maid sleeping? Is it because she is tired from entertaining what could have been a visitor? Or is it because she was drunk? Was she drinking by herself? Perhaps she is not even sleeping and she is in a state of distress, hence the reason she could just be looking down and resting her head on her hand. Maybe she is in distress because she is lonely, and the empty chair suggests a longing for a companion. The cool and earthy tones give the feeling of uncertainty. Every feature in this scene makes it ambiguous and leaves multiple possibilities of what the narrative could be. Vermeer leaves the interpretation open to the viewer.

All of these examples show just how complex genre painting actually is. There is more to it than just a simple scene of everyday life in Dutch culture. Artists were very specific in how they chose to paint something. This could be due to their personal preferences, or the person that

commissioned it. I also wonder if the importance of a painting having an obvious moral lesson was always valued by the buyer or if it was just second nature to some. Did people from that time want paintings in their home just for this? Or could it also have been because they wanted nice decoration?

Scholarly Opinion

Art historian Peter Hecht writes in his article titled "Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: A Reassessment of Some Current Hypotheses" that he has come to the conclusion that not all Dutch genre paintings have a hidden meaning or message. He argues that if the goal of the artist was to create a painting that was realistic then why would there be an unrealistic hidden message? He brings to light an important point that the literature of the time did not specifically mention Dutch artists' paintings and whether or not they included symbols or hidden messages in their paintings.[23]

He uses the example of Frans van Mieris' painting titled *The Duet* (figure 8) and says that the painting is "indeed no more than a convincing portrayal of a man and a woman in a wealthy home, getting ready to perform some music, and I fail to see what else it might have been about."[24] He does, however, note that there is a possibility that seventeenth-century poetry and literature could have influenced how the Dutch viewer would see van Mieris' painting and it would be impossible for the image to not remind them of the metaphors of harmony and love.[25]

I do agree with Hecht that it is hard to see past this scene just being a realistic portrayal of a man and a woman partaking in the act of performing music together. However, because Dutch culture was so involved in education and aspired to be virtuous I find it difficult to believe there

[23] Peter Hecht, "Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: A Reassessment of Some Current Hypotheses," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 21, no. 1 (1992): 85-95.
[24]Hecht, "Dutch Seventeenth-Century," 89.
[25] Hecht, "Dutch Seventeenth-Century," 89.

would not be some kind of lesson or narrative in this image, even though it is not very obvious to me. Perhaps the artist's intention was to make it less obvious, which has been seen in other Dutch genre paintings.

There have been arguments that genre paintings can be deceptive because there seems to be a restricted number of themes or motifs and the artists do not portray realistic scenes of Dutch life. This is seen in artists like Gerard ter Borch and Vermeer's work because they repeat the same scenes or use the same interior in many of their paintings. Art historians like Wayne E. Franits, Lawrence O. Goedde, and Peter Hecht have also discussed the conventionality of Dutch genre paintings in their writings. Hecht writes in his article that "Dutch genre painting can rarely, if ever, be considered faithfully, let alone photographically, render slices of daily life."[26] There are very few scenes that portray what was actually a part of Dutch culture, like dock workers or subjects relating to the flourishing commerce and trade. This is what makes genre painting a "clever fiction" because while it does present observed visual facts, it is accompanied with an array of set themes and motifs. Goedde discusses the importance of knowing and understanding the conventionality of Dutch genre painting so that the contemporary viewer can have a "correct" interpretation.[27]

Leading Dutch iconographer Eddy de Jongh defines Dutch art as being "pseudo-realistic." By this he means that the image is a realistic depiction of something, like figures or an interior, but at the same time is a "realized abstraction" which is most likely a moral message.[28]In a way, this agrees with the argument that Dutch genre painting can be deceptive. At

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[26] Hecht, "Dutch Seventeenth-Century," 86.

[27] Lawrence O. Goedde, "Convention, Realism, and the Interpretation of Dutch and Flemish Tempest Painting," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 16, no. 2 (1986): 139-149.

[28] Smith, "Irony and Civility," 407.

first, it may look like just a normal scene, but if the objects in the paintings are in fact emblems that signify something, then it is not as realistic as it seems.

I do think that genre paintings are deceptive in the way that they represent idealized scenes of Dutch life, especially interiors of the home. The Dutch had very high standards for how a home should be. They were consumed with keeping it clean and uncluttered. However, they were also just human so they realistically could not have kept a home as clean and tidy as the pictures represent, especially if the homeowners had a family with small children. These paintings are in a way deceptive, but I think it was because it offered a model for what people wanted their lives to look like.

Musical Scenes

Dutch genre painting often depicted musical instruments and musical scenes. Just like depictions of peasants, prostitutes, etc., the representation of musical instruments and musicians and perceptions evolved throughout the seventeenth century. Thus, the use of instruments and music playing in paintings was didactic and open to different interpretations.

There were a number of scenes in which the musicians would be looking upward. Usually this would represent religious piety, but there were many secular images of this as well. This is because music in the Dutch era was used as something that could elevate the human soul and could be an uplifting, spiritual experience. Franits swrites that "The theoretical capacity of music to inspire and animate the soul to heights of unadulterated bliss was well known in this era."[29] Hence, musical scenes could be seen as just celebrating the experience and pleasures of music-making. Because music was played with instruments accompanying other instruments, musical scenes could also represent harmony among the people. Informed viewers of the time

[29] Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century*, 50.

would also be able to make connections between painting and music-making, because both involved principles of harmony. There is harmony created by the instruments playing the music, and then harmony created by colors and spacial proportion in the painting. Music and painting also appeal to a fuller engagement of the senses, as they arouse both the senses of sight and hearing.[30] Perhaps this is why so many genre scenes at the time involve music and musical instruments.

Musical scenes had other associations as well, like love and desire. There are many images from the seventeenth century titled *Merry Companies* (figure 9), and they had similar connotations to *Garden Party* scenes. Most of the images represent young people playing music, drinking, and dancing with each other. Playing music was a way to socialize with the opposite sex during this time, so it is assumed that this could lead to love or courtship or something more sexual. Franits says that "As many contemporary texts confirm, the consonance of musical instruments properly tuned and played is a metaphor of the harmony between lovers."[31] Other scenes of peasants playing music for example, allude to prostitution.[32]

Different instruments could be associated with different things in paintings. For example, the lute is seen in so many images because of its ability to produce harmony with a melody, and quite possibly because of the skill it takes to paint it in perspective because of its odd shape. It is also mentioned in much literature from the seventeenth century, especially poems about love. The lute was associated with the symbols of "worldly joys and love."[33] However, while the seventeenth century Dutch had strict morals, they were not prudish. There are poems that are quite explicit that use the act of playing the lute as a metaphor for sex. Burgers says that in Dutch

[30] Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century*, 116.
[31] Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century*, 60.
[32] Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century*, 69.
[33] Burgers, *The Lute*, 171-208.

literature the lute "was presented as a powerful aphrodisiac," and therefore is a common attribute of brothel interior scenes.[34] In some paintings of couples, the lute was also known to symbolize the female sex organ, while the flute represented the male. These sexual references in paintings could be viewed in negative ways, as warnings or moral lessons to the consequences of these acts of worldly pleasure. At the same time, these subtle sexual references in genre painting were also a way that painters could produce sensual and stimulating pictures without being accused of having immoral purposes.[35]

Another purpose for having musical instruments in genre paintings would be to demonstrate wealth and class. Wind instruments were less expensive, and usually associated with being less sophisticated and not as refined as more elaborate instruments. Stringed instruments, like the violin, were more expensive so they were seen as "high class" instruments. Franits writes that wealthy people in the early seventeenth century "preferred depictions of itinerant musicians as repulsive figures bent on deceiving people for personal gain. But as the decades progressed, this imagery underwent substantial changes under the influence of burgeoning wealth and evolving notions of civility."[36] Music playing in genre painting went from being associated with peasants and prostitutes to being a scene that wealthy, high class people were involved in.[37] All of this shows the important role that music and instruments played in seventeenth century Dutch genre painting. It was a way to have a purely visual language to convey numerous things to the viewer.

In the eighteenth century, European composers developed more and more larger works like operas, and pieces that required larger orchestration. Public performances and concerts

[34] Burgers, *The Lute*, 171-208.
[35] Burgers, *The Lute*, 171-208.
[36]Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century*, 199.
[37] Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century*, 217-223.

became increasingly popular. Interestingly enough, musical themes in Dutch genre painting started decreasing and were not as popular.[38] Maybe because people were too busy actually experiencing the live music or music perhaps became too important to be a vessel for decoration or "hidden messages" in paintings.

Education was extremely important in the Dutch society. Genre paintings were a way to teach the viewers something but they were also a representation of teaching itself. Many genre paintings consisting of families and children in the home and women in the home doing domestic work like sewing, cooking, writing, etc. have been widely studied as being educational images that taught the contemporary viewer how they should parent their children, or how women should act. Dekker's article, as mentioned earlier, explains how these scenes of children playing, women doing household chores, or school scenes were meant to have educational messages about educating children and the educational role that the parents, especially the mother, were supposed to take on.[39] However, he never mentions any musical scenes in his article.

Because music played such an important part in the Dutch home, I think musical scenes should be thought of as part of the "educational scenes." A child or young woman being able to play music shows sophistication, intelligence, and discipline. The music scenes in the later seventeenth century consist of young women in upper class interiors playing instruments, and there are multiple paintings by different Dutch artists that feature scenes of music lessons. Perhaps scenes of music lessons became popular because education and refinement was so important to Dutch culture. The art of learning music represents numerous characteristics that one should aspire to, such as intelligence, discipline, self-control, and creativity. In a way, the art

[38] Souren Melikian, "A Musical Enigma in Dutch Painting," The New York Times, last modified July 19, 2013, accessed April 17, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/20/arts/20iht-melikian20.html.
[39] Dekker, "A Republic," 155-182.

of playing music relates to the art of painting. Painting also requires these characteristics and maybe this is why musical scenes were so popular among painters and viewers. In the next two chapters, I want to look at Gerard ter Borch's painting of *The Music Lesson*, and also Vermeer's *The Music Lesson* and further explore the different ways these paintings can convey a message about teaching.

Figure 1- Pieter Bruegel the Elder
The Hunters in the Snow, c. 1565, oil on oak panel, 118 x 161 cm.

Figure 2- Willem Buytewech
Garden Party, c. 1616-17, oil on canvas, 71 x 94 cm.

Figure 3- Adriaen Brouwer
The Smokers, ca. 1636, oil on wood, 46.4 x 36.8 cm

Figure 4- Jan Steen
Beware of Luxury ("In Weelde Siet Toe"), ca. 1663, oil on canvas, 105 x 145 cm.

Figure 5- Gerrit Van Honthorst
The Procuress, ca. 1625, oil on panel, 71 x 104 cm.

Figure 6- Pieter de Hooch
The Bedroom, ca. 1658, oil on canvas, 51 x 60 cm.

Figure 7- Johannes Vermeer
A Maid Asleep, ca. 1656-57, oil on canvas, 87.6 x 76.5 cm.

Figure 8 – Frans van Mieris
The Duet, 1658, oil on panel, 31.7 x 24.7 cm.

Figure 9- Gerrit van Honthorst
Merry Company, ca. 1623, oil on canvas, 123 x 153 cm.

Chapter Two: Gerard ter Borch's *The Music Lesson*

Scenes of music being played and taught have been portrayed in a great number of Dutch genre paintings. Major Dutch artists like Gerard ter Borch, Jacob Ochtervelt, Frans van Mieris the Elder, and Johannes Vermeer all focused attention at one point or another on depicting the moments during which a teacher conveyed ideas about music to a student. In this chapter, I want to analyze the way in which Gerard ter Borch portrayed this scene and also explore specifically how this genre painting of *The Music Lesson* (figure 1) teaches on different levels; whether it be the viewer, the painter, or the figures in the painting. There is something quite peculiar about each version of this subject because they display a kind of "double teaching." Genre paintings are anticipated to teach the viewer a moral lesson. At the same time, the scene of the music lesson is clearly communicating something about the relationship between a teacher and student. This specific subject has been assumed by many art historians to signify a message of harmonious love and seduction, but I would like to explore how it could also simply be about teaching *per se*. Before looking more closely at this subject, however, we must briefly look at the important aspects of music culture during that time and how music might have actually been taught.

Seventeenth-Century Dutch Music

While the seventeenth century was a time where the visual arts flourished, Dutch music did not. This was mainly because there was no significant aristocratic or church patronage. Calvinist doctrine, which dominated religious thought at the time, disapproved of music being played in the church. However, while there were no major artistic innovations in Holland for music during this time, it was still an important part of Dutch culture and it developed secularly

in the privacy of the Dutch home.[40] Songs about love, romance and various secular topics emerged. In the book titled *Music and Painting in the Golden Age,* author Louis Peter Grijp writes:

> As we see it today, the strength of Dutch art lies not so much in its history pieces as in still-lives, landscapes marines, portraits, and genre painting and suchlike. Similarly the strength of Dutch music lies not in the intricate polyphonic or Baroque compositions, but in that simplest of all genres - the song, that enjoyed an incomparable bloom here. This musical strength lay in the sheer delight in singing found among people of all classes, in an appetite for music that was fed and stilled not so much by composers as by poets. And it was the same people who were consumed by a desire for paintings and who bought them for their homes.[41]

Music was a burgher phenomenon. Burghers were just comfortable, middle-class citizens of the town. Therefore, there were no wealthy patrons and no well-known composers, and music was practiced and enjoyed throughout all classes. Jan Burgers says that "In all layers of society, people sang enthusiastically and played musical instruments. The Golden age was a musical age."[42]

Knowing how to play music was highly valued socially in Dutch culture, because it was a way people spent time together and was a vibrant, ongoing social activity. To know how to play the instrument or sing correctly, a person had to have music lessons. There is not much information on precisely how music was taught or what a music lesson would be like in the seventeenth century, but what we do know is that the music and the instruments that were played tend to be different depending on whether you belonged to the upper or lower class.[43]

Typical lower-class instruments included the fiddle, the hurdy-gurdy, the "rommelpot" and the "bomba," both of which are percussion instruments. Wind instruments like the flute were

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[40] Janson, "Music in the Time," Essential Vermeer.
[41] Louis Peter Grijp, "Dutch Music in the Golden Age," in *Music and Painting in the Golden Age*, eds. Edwin Buijsen and Louis Peter Grijp, The Hague/Zwolle, 1994, p. 78.
[42] Burgers, *The Lute*, 42.
[43] Burgers, *The Lute*, 209-220.

also associated with the lower class. This is because the materials were cheaper and there were probably not extravagant details like engravings or inscriptions on the materials. In the painting titled *Two Boys and a Girl Making Music* (figure 2) by Jan Miense Molenaer, we see a scene consisting of three children who are clearly from the lower class, based on their common attire as well as the fact that one of the boys is not wearing shoes. One boy plays the fiddle while the girl in the center is using silverware to create a beat on a soldier's helmet, and the other boy is keeping time with a homemade rommel pot.

Herdsman and military instruments like bagpipes were, according to author Ian Finlay in his article titled *Musical Instruments in 17th-Century Dutch Paintings*, "entirely restricted to the lower classes."[44] The bagpipes are seen in numerous paintings by Peter Brueghel the Elder and also in some of Jan Steen's work, like his painting titled *The Egg Dance* (figure 3).These folk instruments are seen in numerous paintings by Jan Steen, but Vermeer and the other Dutch painters mentioned earlier, depicted instruments that were more appreciated by the upper class. These were instruments like the virginal, viola da gamba, the lute, and the citterns.[45] These instruments usually had intricate patterns or paintings on them, especially the virginal, so painters probably preferred to paint these because they required more skill to paint the details.

Certain instruments were known to be played more by men and other instruments were known to be played more by women. For example, the violin, according to Finlay, was played more often by men, as well as the viola da gamba.[46] In multiple scenes of music and in different versions of *The Music Lesson* (including ter Borch's) there is an unattended Viola da gamba, and the woman is already playing an instrument, so it must belong to the male figure. In Frans Van

[44] Ian F. Finlay, "Musical Instruments in 17th Century Dutch Paintings," *The Galpin Society Journal* 6 (1953): 59.
[45] Janson, "Music in the Time," Essential Vermeer.
[46] Finlay, "Musical Instruments," 52-69.

Mieris the Elder's painting of *The Music lesson* (figure 4), the male is playing the violin. The harp, harpsichord, virginal, and other keyboard instruments are played more often by women. Finlay says that "In every case but one we find these keyboard instruments played by ladies, and the 'Lesson' is a very common form of representation, usually with a male teacher and a young eligible female pupil."[47] Keyboard instruments, especially harpsichords, were primarily found in the homes of the wealthy. This was mainly because these instruments also functioned as decorative furniture with their elaborately painted lids and inscriptions on the wood.[48]

The harpsichord was too big to store away in cases like the violin, so it was always on display whether it was being played or not. Often there would be elaborate paintings on the lid of the harpsichord or virginal, or the instrument would be decorated with patterns and inscriptions. For example, this virginal by Hans Ruckers the Elder (figure 5) is covered with decorations and patterns. When opened, the inner surfaces have painted patterns and at the bottom is an inscription of a Latin phrase that translates as "sweet music is a balm for toil." One of the two keyboards has two gilded medallions, which are profile portraits of Philip II of Spain and his wife Anne of Austria. The inside of the top lid is an elaborate scene of a garden party, that was a popular genre scene of the earlier seventeenth century; the painter of the lid is unknown because he was probably an artisanal or decorative painter.[49]

Not only were these instruments meant to be heard, but they were also to be seen and looked at. It is interesting how these instruments include painting, which adds an additional artistic experience or appreciation to the object. Many painters included these elaborately detailed instruments in their Dutch paintings, including Gerard ter Borch and Vermeer. The

[47] Finlay, "Musical Instruments," 61.
[48] Finlay, "Musical Instruments," 52-69.
[49] Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Hans Ruckers," The Met.

artistic way that these instruments were created not only enliven the paintings, but also the instrument itself, and it adds another level of depth and showcases the artist's skill. This brought together visual and aural art, which created multiple layers of experience for the senses.

While music did spread throughout public life in Dutch culture, music was mostly found in the home. It was played for holidays and family celebrations and was also a regular part of education for children and young adults, especially females. For many women, the ability to play music was seen as an attractive quality to have. In the book titled *Vermeer and Music: The Art of Love and Leisure,* author Marjorie E. Wieseman writes:

> By and large, music in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic was an active and not a passive experience: a 'concert' did not indicate static listening in a large hall, but active participation in the communal act of making music, usually in a domestic environment. In all its manifestations, music was on of the most popular forms of relaxation and social interaction throughout the period.

From the lowest classes of society to the most elevated, musical gatherings were not only a delightful way to relax and get away from the hardships of life, but they were also an appropriate way to socialize with the opposite sex.[50]

Because instruments were expensive, the people from the lower-class primarily used their voice as their main instrument. The songs they sang were simple, and straightforward. Most songs were simply new words written to pre-existing melodies from French, Italian, or English tunes. This made it easier for lower-class people to learn music, because it did not take as long and required no professional instruction since they probably could not afford it. Music teaching in the homes of the lower class was usually within the family, and the parents would teach their children well-known songs.[51]

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[50] Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Vermeer and Music: The Art of Love and Leisure* (London: National Gallery, 2013), 14.
[51] Burgers, *The Lute*, 39-50.

The higher classes had access to learn more elaborate pieces, usually singing with an accompaniment. They were able to learn these pieces because they could afford the expensive songbooks and a professional to come instruct them privately. Upper-class people could also afford expensive instruments, like the harpsichord or the lute. Playing music for the higher class was not only a way to socialize, but it was also a way to impress their guests. Knowing how to play an instrument, especially for women, demonstrated that they were well-rounded and refined members of the culture.

It is important to note that in the seventeenth century, generally women would be discouraged from having professional music careers, so music was not typically an "official" public performance like you would attend in a modern setting. Author Barbara Garvey Jackson states in her book titled *Musical Women of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* that "The various activities of women in music are well documented in Italy, France, Germany, Austria, and England (there especially as performers), although they may have been active in other regions where records have been lost or are still inadequately studied."[52] Women in convents (mainly in Italy) were active as musicians, and if a woman was born into a musical family, then there would be opportunities to have a more extensive music education. Otherwise, musical life for women in seventeenth century Dutch culture was alive and well, but mostly in the home. It was not until the eighteenth century that women started having musical careers and were involved in public performances.[53]

The Music Lesson

[52] Barbara Garvey Jackson, "Musical Women of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *A History* (n.p.: Indiana University Press, 2001), 136.
[53] Jackson, "Musical Women," 135-142.

Gerard ter Borch's *The Music Lesson* (figure 1) depicts a man and a woman in the middle of a music lesson. The woman is elegantly dressed and she is seated at a table in front of sheet music while playing a two-headed lute. The man is standing behind her and holding out his hand, probably to help the woman keep time. There is a dog sleeping in a chair beside the two figures, a viola da gamba on the table, a bed in the background against the wall, and the door to the room is partially open. There is also a small wooden box on the floor in the bottom left corner, which was used as a foot warmer.[54] Because of the satin fabrics, the woman's fur jacket, and the instrument, it is assumed that the figures are wealthy. After all, ter Borch was known for capturing the refinement of the wealthy burghers.

The woman is in the center of the painting, so the viewer's attention is immediately drawn to her. Her satin dress, pale skin, and blonde hair also set her apart from the other objects in the painting. The room is not very well lit, and the background is dark, which adds a mysterious effect. The only thing lighting up the image is the woman's satin dress. The satin tablecloth is also reflecting some light. The man's clothing is dark and almost blends in with the background. He is wearing a hat that creates a shadow on his face. This hat also suggests that he must be a visitor, or someone that is only going to be there for a short time. The two figures seem to be so focused on the task that they are doing that the viewer feels like they cannot be disturbed. The woman is looking at the music, and the man is looking down at the woman.

Ter Borch paid great attention to the details of this interior. The viewer can see the tiny nails in the floorboard, the buttons on the side of the chairs, and ter Borch even took the time to paint music notes on the page. The instruments seem to be very carefully painted. The smooth wood texture of the viola da gamba makes it realistic and the strings on the lute are even visible

[54] J. Paul Getty Trust, "The Music," The J. Paul Getty Museum.

against the woman's elaborate clothes. There are many different textures in this image that give it life and make it realistic. He carefully painted the woman's hair where the curls look as if they could bounce if she moved. The fur on her coat is visibly soft and it contrasts with the smooth satin of her undergarment and the satin table cloth. Ter Borch was known for the way he realistically painted fabrics, especially satin.[55] Numerous paintings including this one show his skill in painting the satin fabric in such a way that it reflects the light. All of these details make the scene realistic and help the viewer feel that they are looking into an actual scene of a music lesson.

The color palette in this image is fairly limited. The artist uses different browns, some whites, red, and a subtle blue. Apart from the red, the overall tone seems to be cool and creates a quiet and reflective mood. Ter Borch demonstrates skill in the way he subtly transitions from one color to the next, all creating a harmonious effect and a sense of unity to the painting. Marjorie Wieseman says in her book *Vermeer and Music: The Art of Love and Leisure* that Dutch artists sought to express "one sensory experience (hearing) by means of another (sight)."[56] The unity and harmony that ter Borch creates in this painting are meant to emit the harmonious sound that the woman must be making with her lute.

From the sensitive use of colors and the many different textures, ter Borch successfully creates a richness in the painting that makes it a realistic looking scene. There is also something peculiar about the way he painted this scene; the exquisitely painted woman draws the viewer in but at the same time, the man in the background and the dark colors in the painting make the viewer feel they could possibly be intruding on this scene of concentrated music making or

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[55] Alison Mcneil Kettering, "Gerard ter Borch's Portraits for the Deventer Elite," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 27, no. 1 (1999): 46-69.

[56] Wieseman, *Vermeer and Music*, 10.

romance. Gerard ter Borch set the stage for this type of genre painting where the figures are fully self-absorbed that influenced later Dutch painters like Vermeer.[57] He shows immense sophistication in the way that he handles colors, textures, light and the way he subtly creates a narrative of this music lesson.

As we have previously discussed the symbolism of instruments and musical scenes in genre painting, it is easy to assume that this painting must be a scene suggesting love and desire. There is a bed in the background, which suggests that there could be lustful desire between the two figures. The woman is playing a lute, which has been recognized as a signifier of sex, or, with its oval body, the female sex organ or womb. As discussed in the first chapter, there are writings of the lute being a metaphor for sex or representing the female sex organ.[58] The foot warmer that is on the floor next to the woman's foot could possibly signify the "fires of love" and the passion between the two figures. The dog sleeping on the chair could symbolize fidelity, and the fact that he is sleeping through the music that is being played could mean "fidelity sleeps," and the woman being taught is being seduced by the teacher.[59] These symbols or emblems can all lead to the conclusion that this is a moral narrative to teach the viewer about seduction and to advise caution when one is with the opposite sex.

Author Richard Helgerson discusses in his article titled "Soldiers and Enigmatic Girls: The Politics of Dutch Domestic Realism, 1650-1672" that Dutch genre paintings are often mistaken as innocent domestic scenes and he uses Gerard ter Borch's *Paternal Admonition* (figure 6) as one of his examples. He says that "Wherever possible, we have wanted to find in these paintings images of a powerfully comforting domestic intimacy, images of family life at its

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[57] Jonathan Janson, "Eight Dutch Masters: Gerrit ter Borch," Essential Vermeer, accessed December 12, 2017, http://www.essentialvermeer.com/dutch-painters/masters/terborchbase.html#.WjAExPmnHIU.
[58] Burgers, *The Lute* and also Helgerson, "Soldiers and Enigmatic."
[59] J. Paul Getty Trust, "The Music," The J. Paul Getty Museum.

most warmly engaging. Nor, despite the best efforts of a generation of iconographic reinterpreters, are we always disappointed."[60] The painting consists of two women, one sitting and one standing, and one man sitting down.

Ter Borch's *Paternal Admonition* has been interpreted as a scene between a girl and her mother and father. Helgerson believes this interpretation is incorrect and is a scene portraying an act of prostitution because the man in the picture cannot be a father. However, he does question the uncertainty of whether or not the woman is just a modest daughter or wife. He then goes on to discuss other paintings by ter Borch and how the images do include emblems that could have erotic implications but there is still so much uncertainty. Helgerson says that "Fruit, wine, and bed can imply the erotic, but each could also figure as part of a quite ordinary domestic scene."[61] I think that the uncertainty and ambiguity of these paintings is what ter Borch intended, and it is up to the viewer to ascertain the lesson or narrative in these paintings. This is one of the things that makes them entertaining.

While *The Music Lesson* contains emblems that could have erotic implications, there are other observations that lead to the conclusion that this also portrays a scene of a music lesson for its own sake and in a way teaches the seventeenth-century Dutch viewer the activities a refined person should be pursuing. This is supported by the intense concentration on the girl's face, as she must be focused on getting the piece right. Her mouth is partially open, so she is probably singing along. The way the woman's fingers are placed on the lute and the calmness of her facial expression suggest that she is not a beginner and has probably been learning how to play for quite some time.

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[60] Richard Helgerson, "Soldiers and Enigmatic Girls: The Politics of Dutch Domestic Realism, 1650-1672," *Representations*, no. 58 (Spring 1997): 49.
[61] Helgerson, "Soldiers and Enigmatic," 49-51.

The man looks like an instructor by the attentive way he looks at the girl, and his gesture suggests that he is merely trying to help the girl play the piece correctly. Ter Borch also painted this in a way that creates a sense of calmness. There is no sense of danger. The door is also open so that must signify that nothing immoral could happen. If the door was closed on the other hand, it would seem like the scene could lead to something immoral.

The foot warmer has been known to be an emblem for the "fires of love" or relating to love and desire.[62] However, in looking at another painting by ter Borch titled *A Woman playing a Lute to Two Men* (figure 7), the woman is using the foot warmer to help her hold the lute properly. Author Robert Spencer writes in his article titled "How to Hold a Lute: Historical Evidence from Paintings" that the lute was "end-heavy, needing more support, and we see the use of a foot-warmer as a footstool in the ter Borch painting."[63] In looking at *The Music Lesson*, perhaps the foot-warmer was there just in case the lute that the woman was holding became too heavy and she needed more support.

The man's facial expression seems pleasant. Some might say that his facial expression is filled with admiration or desire. However, as a teacher, one wants to be supportive and encouraging so that the student can be motivated to perform well. The male could have a loving look, but it does not have to mean it is the sexual kind of love. His mouth is also partially open, and he is holding his hand out so it looks like he is giving her instruction in a gentle manner.

While there is much scholarship on genre paintings' function as lessons or examples for women's conduct, this painting could also be an example for male conduct. Not only were seventeenth century Dutch women concerned with their self-image, but men were as well. There

[62] J. Paul Getty Trust, "The Music," The J. Paul Getty Museum.
[63] Robert Spencer, "How to Hold a Lute: Historical Evidence from Paintings," *Early Music* 3, no. 4 (October 1975): 353.

were even conduct books from the seventeenth century that discussed how a male should strive to act. Dutch painter and theorist Samuel van Hoogstraten produced a translation of a contemporary French conduct book which was titled "The noble art of making oneself honored and esteemed by one and all."[64] Dutch artists and patrons desired to show the sort of gentleman that the conduct books describe, and it is seen throughout their paintings.[65]

According to author Alison Kettering, the Dutch had an "ideal of gentlemanly decorum that valued proportion, modesty, dignity and, above all, moderation."[66] Perhaps this scene of the music lesson could also be a lesson for the man. The man in this painting is not dressed extravagantly, but rather modestly. He is wearing all black except for his neck tie and cuffs. Kettering discusses in her other article titled "Gentlemen in Satin: Masculine Ideals in Later Seventeenth-Century Portraiture" that artists would collaborate closely with male sitters to create the desired aesthetic. She said that the images conformed to the "assertive-yet-controlled visual effect of many of these portraits: black, restrained clothing; upright postures; and self-contained bodies conveyed the control, while the frequent arm akimbo bespoke a certain obvious virility."[67] Music requires self-discipline and self-control, and if this is also a moral lesson about love and desire, the man must practice self-control so that nothing immoral happens.

In looking at other paintings by Gerard ter Borch, we see many similar musical scenes like *The Music Lesson.* In his painting titled *The Music Party* (figure 8) the woman looks very similar to the one in *The Music Lesson* and also in *A Women playing a Lute to Two Men.* According to multiple sources, ter Borch frequently used his sister, Gesina, as a model for his

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[64] Allison McNeil Kettering, "Gentlemen in Satin: Masculine Ideals in Later Seventeenth-Century Dutch Portraiture," *Art Journal*56, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 59.
[65] Kettering, "Gerard ter Borch's,"41-42.
[66] Kettering, "Gerard ter Borch's," 59.
[67] Note: This information is from Kettering's article "Gentlemen in Satin" but she cited the source she obtained this information from: Jonathan Spicer, "The Renaissance Elbow," in A Cultural History of Gesture from Antiquity to the Present Day, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 90-91.

paintings.[68] In the book titled *Shifting Priorities: Gender and Genre in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*, author Nanette Salomon discusses the conventions and the way Gerard ter Borch and other contemporary Dutch artists painted men and women. She says that the "sameness of the woman, like the sameness of the man in Olis's painting, works to make her a universal statement about womanhood in general, as a sign that supersedes the differences of class. She becomes the fulcrum for discourses of the civilizing process and is closely associated with table manners and proper social deportment, concerns that were especially strong in ter Borch's time."[69] It seems that because ter Borch used his sister as a model in many of his paintings, perhaps he admired her and saw her as a great example for Dutch women and an ideal representation of the refined upper class elite in Dutch society.

Ter Borch moved to Deventer in 1654 and *The Music Lesson* was painted around 1670, while he lived in Deventer. During this time, the town of Deventer was going through economic distress and the population declined. This turned out to be a great environment for ter Borch, because there was no artists' guild so he was under no restrictions. Furthermore, there was not a significant amount of competition from other artists. Therefore, ter Borch had an extensive wealthy clientele and mainly did portraiture for them.[70]

Most of his sitters belonged to Deventer's political elite. These portraits, according to Alison Kettering, "allowed sitters to claim an elevated social identity and allowed sitters to claim an elevated social identity and simultaneously, removal from a specific time and place."[71] These

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[68] This was seen in numerous sources throughout my research including: Salomon, *Shifting Priorities* and Surh and Wheelock, "Musical Company," *The Leiden Collection*.
[69] Nanette Salomon, *Shifting Priorities: Gender and Genre in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 36.
[70]Kettering, "Gerard ter Borch's," 46-69 and also David Kunzle, "The Soldier Redeemed. Art and Reality in a Dutch Province at War 1650-1672: Gerard Ter Borch in Deventer," *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 27 (2000): 269-98.
[71] Kettering, "Gerard ter Borch's," 53.

people wanted to portray themselves in a way that would not remind them of the difficult times that they were experiencing. Ter Borch created an image of the client that they wished to see. In a time where there was economic and political strife, the upper class of Deventer wanted to be seen as a confident and unified class; and ter Borch gave them that through his paintings.[72]

Not only did ter Borch paint a great deal of portraiture, but he is also known for painting the Dutch officer class during the time when Deventer was in distress. The officers in the army had become "marginalized, demoralized, and politically emasculated."[73] However, ter Borch painted them in a refined manner. Author David Kunzle said that the idealized images served to "reassure a public confused, if not alarmed by the signs of degeneration of a once glorious institution."[74] It appears that a lot of ter Borch's paintings served as a way for the people of Deventer to have images of themselves that they wanted to see and that displayed them a certain way, whether that was actual reality or not. Kettering says that "ignoring any hint of economic decline or political dissension, ter Borch gave the burgomasters the image of themselves that they most wished to see: conservative, in full continuity with their past, while exhibiting the perseverance and solidarity required for good government in the present."[75]

Because *The Music Lesson* was painted during this time, and possibly in Deventer, it seems as though it could just portray a scene of an enjoyable music lesson. The woman is wealthy enough to be able to afford a music teacher, which presumably was quite pricey, to come and give her a lesson in the comfort of her own home. She is playing on an extravagant two-headed lute, in a furnished room, with her pet sleeping at her side. Perhaps the painting was commissioned by the woman because she wanted to hang a picture in her home that represented

[72] Kettering, "Gerard ter Borch's," 65.
[73] Kunzle, "The Soldier," 270.
[74] Kunzle, "The Soldier," 270.
[75] Kettering, "Gerard ter Borch's," 57.

a life of leisure and wealth. If her family was going through a time of distress, this picture would allow her to be reminded of the better times.

There are so many possibilities of what this painting could mean. It often seems like people focus so much on the idea that all this painting is about is “desire and love,”but there could be much more. Author Christopher Brown writes in his article “Gerard ter Borch at the Hague and Munster” that “Ter Borch realized perfectly well the importance of suggestion in his art, the need to stimulate the spectator’s imagination, and to attempt over-elaborate literary, emblematic or iconographical ‘explanations’ of his work is to deny this.”[76]This painting could simply be a painting of a music lesson that ter Borch witnessed. But there is not any writing on his intentions, so we can never know. All we can do is study the literature and culture from that time.

This painting could simply be a way of teaching the artist himself. He could have chosen to paint this music lesson scene because of the skill it takes to master the detail of the fine instruments. Whatever he may have intended, it also teaches the viewer. It teaches the modern-day viewer how a music lesson scene might have looked, though we may never know for sure how it actually was. For the Dutch viewer, it has multiple ways it teaches. It may be a moral lesson about love and desire, or how a virtuous Dutch woman or man should conduct themselves. Regardless, this painting does have an undercurrent of a pedagogical relationship and the act of teaching.

Ter Borch seems to explicitly place emblems or symbols in the painting for the viewer to create their own interpretation of this musical scene. His sophisticated use of color, texture, light, and subtle narrative influenced other artists, like Vermeer. However, what will be discussed in

[76] Christopher Brown, "Gerard ter Borch at The Hague and Munster," *The Burlington Magazine* 116, no. 854 (May 1974): 291.

the next chapter is that Vermeer took this music lesson scene a step further and is much more nuanced and complicated in the way he portrays the scene. Ter Borch paints in a way that tells a story of the music lesson. The viewer can pinpoint a time and place. Vermeer's painting seems almost timeless, and the viewer can never quite come up with a conclusion to the story, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Figure 1-Gerard Ter Borch
The Music Lesson, c. 1670, oil on canvas, 63.6 x 50.4 cm.

Figure 2- Jan Miense Molenaer
Two Boys and a Girl Making Music, 1629, oil on canvas, 68.3 x 84.5 cm

Figure 3- Jan Steen
The Egg Dance, c. 1670, oil on canvas, 110 x 135 cm.

Figure 4- Frans van Mieris the Elder
The Music Lesson, c. 1650, oil on panel, 33.5 x 27.5 cm.

Figure 5- Hans Ruckers the Elder
Double Virginal, c. 1581, Medium: pine, beech, poplar, mahogany, paint, gesso, metal, parchment, brass

Figure 6- Gerard ter Borch
Gallant Conversation (Known as Paternal Admonition), c. 1654, oil on canvas, 71 x 73 cm.

Figure 7- Gerard ter Borch
A Woman Playing a Lute to Two Men, c. 1667, oil on canvas, 67.6 x 57.8 cm.

Figure 8- Gerard ter Borch
The Music Party, c. 1675, oil on panel, 58.1 x 47.3 cm.

Chapter Three: Vermeer's *The Music Lesson*

Johannes Vermeer's painting of *The Music Lesson* (figure 1) depicts a sunlit room with a man and a woman in the middle of a music lesson. The woman is standing at a virginal with her back facing the viewer. The man is standing beside her with one hand resting on the virginal and the other hand resting on a stick, or a cane. Similarly to Gerard ter Borch, it seems from the positions of the figures that the male must be the teacher in this music lesson scene.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Dutch genre paintings of music making or music lessons like Vermeer's and ter Borch's have often been interpreted as having a hidden narrative alluding to love and desire, or seduction. However, I would like to continue my exploration with Vermeer's painting of this music lesson scene and how it has other possibilities of simply being about teaching. However, the act of teaching itself is not so simple. It demonstrates many values already on its own. Mastering an instrument requires discipline, concentration, ambition, creativity, and also a love and passion for music. Being able to teach it also requires these values as well. There is a sort of interdependence between the teacher and the student because they share these qualities. This relationship is quite complicated and I think it goes with Vermeer's portrayal of the music lesson.

Vermeer's painting seems to be consistent with other typical genre scenes of music. However, his painting is much more nuanced and complicated in the way he paints the scene. He does not create a clear narrative that allows the viewer to make easy affirmations about the image. Vermeer's music lesson scene is much more complicated than what is simply there on the canvas. I would like to explore in this chapter what makes his scene different than ter Borch's and also how the scene includes different levels of teaching, because it is a scene of something

being taught, and it also teaches the contemporary Dutch viewer the modern day viewer, and the artist himself.

Description and Analysis

The music lesson is taking place in a large room of a Dutch home, towards the back of the room on the right side. The woman's face is not visible to the viewer because her back is turned and the male's face is only partially visible because he is looking at the woman. It is surprising that the woman is seen only from the back. Her reflection in the mirror is barely visible. In most of Vermeer's paintings, the woman's face can usually be seen by the viewer or she is looking directly out at the viewer, but in this one she is not. They seem to be intent upon their music and are not aware of the presence of a viewer or spectator. Neither of the figures are looking out at the viewer. The man is focusing intently on the woman, probably listening carefully to see if the woman is playing the right notes. Both of the figures seem quiet and almost like statues. This accords with the feeling of an actual music lesson; the notes on the page are measured and it takes focus and restraint to play them correctly.

There is a large table covered in a colorful tapestry in the foreground, which provides contrast to the figures because it makes the figures seem inaccessible to the viewer. This is something that sets Vermeer's painting apart from the others. Because of the placement of the figures and objects in the painting, he makes the scene seem far away. Just like the objects and placement of things that make it hard for the viewer to get to the scene of the music lesson, there are obstacles that a musician faces to play a piece well. Having the scene take place towards the back of the painting also asks us to be a different kind of viewer. Most genre paintings place the scene in the foreground, where the viewer can feel like they are part of the scene. In this painting, the viewer may try to come closer to to the painting to get a good look at the music

lesson taking place in the back. The scene draws the viewer in, but the picture plane still keeps them at a distance.

There is a white vase on top of the table, its shape almost mimics the shape of the woman, perhaps to draw the focus back to her. Next to the table is an empty chair with an instrument, viola da gamba, resting beside it. The empty chair and unattended viola da gamba which presumably belongs to the teacher. He could have been accompanying her and then stopped to help her with part of the piece. The left wall of the interior features windows with sunlight coming through, and on the back wall there is a mirror that shows a little of the woman's reflection, and then to the right is a painting on display. The windows are letting a little bit of light come in, but the outside world is not visible. This creates a sense of privacy for the lesson. There are no distractions. Just the figures and their music. The unattended instrument and the empty chair, the hint of the woman's reflection in the mirror, and the painting in the background all add to the mood of the painting and draws the viewer in. In a way, it seems mysterious because the narrative of the painting is not so obvious. Just like a modern stage or movie director would use objects situated a certain way, and reproductions of images to evoke a mood or create a certain environment for the narrative to take place in, Vermeer does this same in his painting. Everything is purposefully placed the way Vermeer wanted it to be.

The perspective system seems complicated in this painting. Because of the table in the foreground and the complex floor pattern, it is hard to determine where the vanishing point is. There are also some inconsistencies in the structure of the interior; the lines of the wood panels in the ceiling seem to slant when they move towards the right side of the painting. The focal point seems to be the woman standing at the virginal. One can determine this from the orthogonal lines of the table and the shadow of the light coming in from the window which

converge at the back of the woman. The man's gaze also draws the viewer to focus on the woman. This complexity in the composition of the painting adds to a sense of mystery or a feeling of uneasiness. It is almost like the girl could be under stress to play her piece perfectly.

In looking at Vermeer's painting technique, one notes that he outlines the objects and figures with soft lines. He represents textures very clearly. This is seen in the on the surface of the wall to the left of the painting where he uses texture to show the effect of light. The folds in the woman's dress and on the tapestry draped over the table make it more realistic. This scene is so vivid and the variations of textures from the marble floors, the porcelain vase, and the furniture contribute to this vividness. He also used linear, smooth brushstrokes to depict the wood of the viola da gamba and the chair legs. Vermeer's brushwork hides the pictorial effect of the objects and figures in the painting and creates smooth transitions between the light and dark. These soft transitions that he created with his brush unify the composition. Compared to the other Dutch artists of the time, Vermeer is most successful with these effects.[77] However, the realism of the objects and figures contrasts with the peculiarity with the perspective system, which in turn creates tension between each other. This also affects the mood of the painting and adds a sense of mystery or uneasiness.

Vermeer is very clear in the way that he chooses his color palette to create the mood of the painting. The most vivid object in the painting is the tapestry draped over the table. It has a mixture of orange, red, and brown tones. The other colors in this painting are soft yellows, grey, white, and blue tones. The only visible light source is coming in from the windows. It gently flows against the back wall and illuminates the two figures. This is interesting because in the

[77]Found in multiple sources but the one I am citing is: Nicola Costaras, "A Study of the Materials and Techniques of Johannes Vermeer," 1998, in *Vermeer Studies*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 145-167.

other scenes of music lessons, like ter Borch's, the man always seems to be in the shadows because he is wearing a hat, but in this scene his face is fully illuminated by the light and he is not wearing a hat. This makes the man seem friendlier and in a way makes the relationship between him and the young woman more personal. The light can also be seen on the vase sitting on the table, the instrument on the floor, and it is reflected on some of the floor tiles. The shadows around the objects contrast in a subtle way with light and gently creates depth in the painting.

It is very interesting how complicated Vermeer's painting is when compared to Gerard ter Borch's and other genre paintings of the music lesson. The colors, the shadows, and the way the objects and figures are positioned create a mood that seems somewhat cool and almost fragile. There is a subtle intensity about the scene. A music lesson can be intense. There are a lot of rules to follow and a certain pressure to play a piece correctly. This feeling that Vermeer created contributes to this.

The neatness and perfectly ordered composition of the interior that Vermeer painted also gives the viewer a sense of rules and discipline. When I think of a typical Dutch home, I would like to think they were similar to modern day people and their homes had to have been cluttered, especially if an entire family lived in the home. This interior that Vermeer painted therefore seems very idealized, and free of any traces of actual living. The pristineness of the scene could also represent harmony and peacefulness that could be represented with the music that is being played. When the space that you live in is uncluttered and clean, it is easier to live in a state of harmony and peace, and also practice your instrument.

Maybe Vermeer painted a real scene of a typical upper-class home, but Jonathan Janson has said in his analysis of Vermeer's painting that the interiors of many of Vermeer's paintings

did not reflect Vermeer's personal situation of living and the objects that appear in Vermeer's interiors would only be found in the wealthiest of Dutch homes. However, Janson goes on to say that "In general, the density of furnishings in Dutch homes must have been much higher than what ever appeared in Vermeer's paintings." [78] I therefore believe that it could possibly be an idealistic representation of what a Dutch interior should look like. This goes back to the way that this painting teaches. The interior could be an idealized depiction of how a proper Dutch home should look, and what should be included in it, such as elaborate instruments and furniture.

As discussed in the previous chapter, instruments in genre paintings usually have some sort of iconographic significance. Here, the woman is playing a virginal. The name for the virginal may derive from the Latin word *virga*, meaning rod, which refers to the jacks, or wooden shafts that rests on the ends of the keys. However, the word virginal also means "having a young, pure, and innocent quality."[79] Perhaps this why the instrument was considered more feminine and often times only women would be depicted playing it in paintings.[80] This is seen in paintings by many other Dutch artists like Jan Steen, Frans van Mieris, Gerard ter Borch, Gerrit Dou, and Gabriel Metsu. Because this was depicted in so many scenes, this shows just how important a woman's ability to play and instrument was in Dutch society. It was a way to represent the family's wealth, and also the woman's refinement and skill.[81] According to Arthur Wheelock, this again, teaches the contemporary Dutch viewer how an upper-class gentlewoman should conduct herself, and the type of skills she should acquire.

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[78] Jonathan Janson, "The Music Lesson," Essential Vermeer, accessed April 6, 2018, http://www.essentialvermeer.com/catalogue/music_lesson.html#.WsYsxojwbIU.

[79] Merriam-Webster, "Virginal," Merriam-Webster.

[80] Wieseman, *Vermeer and Music*.

[81] Edward Buijsen, "Music in the Age of Vermeer," in *Dutch Society in the Age of Vermeer*, ed. Donald Haks and Marie Christine van der Sman, 2nd ed. (Zwolle: Haags Historich Museum, 1996), 106-121.

The music that was composed for the virginal, according to Jonathan Janson, was "measured in rhythms, and nuances of timing were carefully conceived and executed. The lyrics often accompanying the music dealt with human and spiritual love and about the comfort that one can obtain from it."[82] The music of the virginal fits well with Vermeer's technique in painting. Vermeer has carefully conceived and executed each brushstroke to create this image.

There is no way to know for sure if there was singing to accompany the music the woman was playing, or if there were any lyrics to the piece at all. But if the lyrics to the music, according Janson, was often about the comfort one can receive from love, this could relate to the feelings that the young woman in the painting could be feeling. While having to live up to the high standards that Dutch society placed on young women, she could receive comfort from her love for music. Also, for a teacher and student to work together successfully, there has to be a loving and trusting relationship. The teacher must be strict with the student, but also caring and gentle.

The virginal, lyrical and beautiful played by itself, was also used for accompanying instruments including the viola da gamba, which here is placed in the on the floor next to a chair. Because of its deep tone, it is usually associated as a masculine instrument. Rarely does one see a woman playing a viola da gamba in a Dutch genre painting from the seventeenth century.[83] It is a very resonant instrument but it does not have a very loud sound. This makes it better for polyphonic music, which means that it is best for playing individual melodies, or melodic lines that harmonize with one another.[84] Because it is left unattended next to the male figure, it is

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[82] Janson, "The Music," Essential Vermeer.
[83] Wieseman, *Vermeer and Music*.
[84] Rech, "Music in the Time," Essential Vermeer.

presumably his. Often times music was taught by playing with one another, so perhaps he was playing a piece with the woman and had gotten up to give her instructions on something. The instrument is also lying parallel to the virginal, which alludes to the two instruments working together. A lot of interpretations involve the two instruments representing an undercurrent of harmonious love between the two figures, but I think that it could also just represent the teacher and student working harmoniously together, to create uplifting music. The harmony in this painting does not have to be sensual.

According to Wheelock, by using infrared reflectography which can make visible to the viewer the underneath part of the uppermost layers of the paint, one can see that the viola da gamba was not part of the original composition of this painting.[85] One does not know why but Vermeer could have included it later to enhance the composition, or give the viewer another hint at the ambiguous interpretation. Perhaps he wanted to reinforce the musical theme and the idea of the teacher and student working together to create music.

In looking at numerous works by Vermeer, one can see that music is the subject of the paintings in many of them. He must have had a great interest in music to paint the subject so much. His interest in painting the musical instruments is seen through the great detail and skill it took to paint the visually striking virginal. Virginals were most often covered in decorative block printed papers. The designs would be decorated with foliage, sea-horses, flowers, and other designs like the one seen in this painting by Vermeer. Another frequently occurring ornamentation would be different sayings or mottos, usually in Latin.[86]

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[85] Rech, "Music in the Time," Essential Vermeer and also Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "The Music Lesson," in *Vermeer and the Art of Painting*, by Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 85-97.

[86] Benjamin Hebbert, "Flemish Harpsichords and Virginals," *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, 2000, n.p., accessed April 12, 2018, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/flhv/hd_flhv.htm. And also Janson, "The Music," Essential Vermeer.

There is a motto on the inside of the lid on the virginal in this painting and it translates as "Music is the companion of joy, balm for sorrow." This motto is also seen decorated on virginals that are depicted in paintings by Pieter Codde, Gonzales Coques, and Karel Slabbaert. It is also seen on harpsichords made by Andreas Ruckers.[87] This motto represents music's ability to move one's soul and stir emotions of listeners, to be someone's form of joy and a comfort for sorrow. Because this motto is seen in other paintings and on other Dutch instruments, it speaks to how much music must have meant to the Dutch society.

The motto in the painting is placed right next to the woman's head, her head is partially blocking it. Perhaps this describes her feeling towards music. In a society where there is pressure on women to behave a certain way she must find joy in making music and using it as a vehicle to express her joy or her pain and sorrow. In my experience, music has added much joy and happiness to my life, and it has also helped me through difficult times, acting as a "balm for sorrow."

The figural painting that is partially shown on the back wall could also go with the motto. As seen in many of Vermeer's works, he would include a "picture within a picture." This could have been to enhance the painting technically, and furthermore to add more commentary on the ambiguous narrative. According to multiple art historians, including Gregor Weber, this picture has been "identified as a Caravaggist work based on an original by Gerrit van Honthorst or Matthias Stomer."[88] It is the scene of the Roman Charity, which is the story of a daughter who secretly breastfeeds her father after he is incarcerated and sentenced to death by starvation. She is then discovered by a jailer, but her selfless act won her father's release.[89] The breast milk was a

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[87] Roger Harmon, "'Musica laetitiae comes' and Vermeer's 'Music Lesson,'" *Oud Holland* 113, no. 3 (1999): 161.
[88] Gregor J.M. Weber, "Vermeer's Use of the Picture-Within-a-Picture: A New Approach," *Studies in the History of Art* 55 (1998): 294-307.
[89] Janson, "The Music," Essential Vermeer.

"balm" for the father during his pain and captivity. Most art historians think that this, along with the motto, speaks to the male figure in this music lesson scene being bound or held captive by his love and desire.[90] The two figures are in love but must be restrained and so the music helps ease their sorrow of not being together. However, I think that it could be more than the two figures being held captive by their love. The painting enhances what the motto represents, that music is a balm for sorrow, and brings joy to one's life. No matter the circumstances.

The daughter in the story acting as a caregiver could also represent women's role in society: to be the caregiver and take care of her family. It represents how women are expected to be selfless and sacrifice themselves in order to take care of the ones they love. This, in turn, could be included in the painting of the music lesson because not only is the young woman learning how to play an instrument, but she is also learning about life and her role as a woman in Dutch society. This shows how open Vermeer left his paintings to interpretation. There are multiple possibilities.

Another interesting observation is that if one looks close enough to the mirror on the back wall, you can see a hint of the legs of what must be Vermeer's easel.[91] This alludes to the possibility of this being an actual scene that Vermeer constructed and that the figures posed for the painting. His goal could have been that he was depicting the scene just as he saw it with complete accuracy which meant including the glimpse of his easel. His presence in the painting also makes this music scene stand out from his other paintings and creates a different character. In his other paintings, like *The Concert (*figure 2) for example, it feels like the figures are in their own personal world and that you feel like an intruder. But if that is Vermeer's easel in the mirror,

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[90] Janson, "The Music," Essential Vermeer.

[91] John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 195.

once the viewer discovers it, it makes the painting seem like more of a painting that an artist carefully created. Furthermore, it could also be that he wanted to add something of himself. He probably intended to include his easel as a sort of artistic self-admiration to remind viewers that his technical virtuosity and skill was the component that brought this musical scene to life.

He is also making a point that he is the one listening to the music, and he is doing so as he is painting. He is the audience, and that goes away when he is not referenced. Even though he is on the outside of the music lesson, he could be enjoying the music and allowing it to be a "balm" for his life just as the other figures are. The music he is hearing could also be inspiring the actual way he paints. This speaks to the importance of what the experience of music must have been to him. This also draws attention away from the fact that this could be a love scene, and more about music.

In a way, he combines the art of painting and the art of playing music in one image. Both forms of art have similar qualities. Painting and music require skill, determination, discipline, creativity, passion, etc. Perhaps this is why he painted so many scenes depicting music. He could relate to it. He shows that art and music have worked together in a harmonious way to create this scene.

In an article titled "'Musica laetitiae comes' and Vermeer's "Music Lesson,"" Roger Harmon discusses how there was a Dutch variety of a virginal called the muselar, which is the type depicted in Vermeer's painting. The keyboard is placed on the right which results in the strings being plucked in the middle and it produces a more "flute-like" tone that is supposedly very beautiful. Harmon says that muselar stems from 'muse' and the suffix 'lar' makes it a 'muser' and allows the actually player to 'muse.' Therefore, the young woman playing the virginal becomes the Muse. He then goes on to say that this leads to thinking about where this

idea of Vermeer's "muselar" originated. The woman's back is facing the viewer, and in another painting by Vermeer titled *The Art of Painting*, there is a figure painting whose back is also facing the viewer. Harmon says "It is set in the same room as *The Music Lesson* and features again a man and a woman, one active, one passive. Here too the person whose back is turned practices an art: the painter, at his easel, arms raised. The painter and the 'Muse' personify their respective arts."[92] This reinforces the idea that Vermeer must have related the art of playing music to the art of painting. They both could express things and move the soul more than words ever could, and perhaps that is why Vermeer painted musical scenes so much. Harmon at the end of his article proposed a new title for *The Music Lesson*: "The Art of Music."[93] This addition of his painting easel in the mirror adds more depth and complexity to the scene, and also teaches the viewer how music can relate to painting.

The mirror also includes the young woman's reflection. Since her back is turned and we can not see her face, her reflection in the mirror is the only clue that we have to what she is like. It is hard to make out her expression but perhaps her reflection in the mirror represents her own self-reflection. She is thinking about the notes she is playing, how she is going to play them. She could be thinking about pleasing her teacher by playing it correctly. She could also be thinking about pleasing her parents, with all the pressure that she has from society to be a "perfect" woman. Or she could just be reflecting on her love for music.

We do not know what the young woman is thinking, and we can barely see her face. The man's face is only half visible. This makes the scene seem more private, allowing the figures to focus on the music and the lesson being taught. Gregor Weber writes in his article titled

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[92] Harmon, "'Musica laetitiae," 164.
[93] Harmon, "'Musica laetitiae," 165.

"Vermeer's Use of the Picture-within-a-Picture: A New Approach" that "even if we have to recognize that every one of his figures is very consciously contrived, we must also acknowledge that Vermeer is more restrained than his contemporaries would be in the way he exploits them, seeming to treat them with more delicacy."[94] This appears to be true in *The Music Lesson*, he is careful not to exploit the figures, giving them privacy from the outside world so that they truly focus on themselves and the music.

Not only does he do this by making their faces hard to see, but the windows do not have a view of the outside and the furniture in the foreground almost blocks the figures. The hands of the woman actually playing the virginal are also hidden. This gives the figures a sort of privacy but it also leaves more for the viewer to imagine. The viewer has to imagine the music being played and what the figures in the painting could be thinking. It teaches the viewer how to look at the painting in an imaginative way and create the story.

Comparison with other Music Lessons

Along with Vermeer, Gerard Ter Borch (from the previous chapter), Frans van Mieris the Elder, and Jacob Ochtervelt also have paintings titled *The Music Lesson.* Frans van Mieris the Elder and Jacob Ochtervelt's depictions are the most different from Vermeer's. In Frans van Mieris the Elder's *The Music Lesson* (figure 3) the figures are in the foreground and it just shows the upper halves of their bodies. There is little depth to the painting because the figures are in the center foreground and the background of the canvas is black. The painting almost seems like a cartoon because van Mieris paints the textures and outlines of the figures and objects rather harshly. The woman is dressed in feathers and beads so it appears to be members from the upper class, like the figures in Vermeer's painting. However, the instruments in this painting are not as

[94] Weber, "Vermeer's Use of the Picture-Within-a-Picture," 303.

elaborate and, as discussed in the previous chapter, usually violins were used by lower class members.[95] Since we cannot see the interior, it is unclear if this is a scene of upper class members.

There is not a sense of mystery or curiosity like Vermeer's painting because the figures are in the foreground and the viewer feels like they are a part of the scene. The facial expressions of the figures are clearly seen so it does not really draw the viewer further into the painting, like Vermeer's. The man in this painting is in the shadows and gives a sense of mystery, similar to Vermeer's. However, the woman is fully illuminated and is the center of attention in this scene. It is unclear who the teacher is because the woman looks like she could be the one instructing. The man has a smirk on his face and seems to be paying more attention to the woman and not focusing on the music. The woman, however is paying no attention to the man and is looking at something else. Perhaps she is the teacher and is teaching a group of musicians on the other side of this scene. There is no clear way to know. Either way, this does not seem as much like a music lesson as Vermeer's depiction represents. In my opinion, there are no signifiers or elements that would remind the viewer of a teacher and student relationship in this painting. The only thing that is similar is that the narrative of this painting is ambiguous and can be open to several interpretations.

In *The Music Lesson* by Jacob Ochtervelt (Figure 4), the scene is quite different. The woman is standing, holding a violin with one hand and pointing to a music score on the table with her other hand. The man is sitting down, playing the lute. The figures' poses are angled, and they are both looking at each other. There is a dog, awake, sitting on a chair in front of the table to the right of the painting. The interior and objects are similar to Vermeer's scene. There is an

[95] Finlay, "Musical Instruments."

unattended viola da gamba on the table, and hanging on the back wall is what appears to be a map; just like Vermeer has the unattended viola da gamba and includes a picture on the wall. The interior looks like one belonging to the upper class, and the woman and man are elegantly dressed. However, the objects and the figures are all bunched together in the foreground. There is not much spatial depth in this painting.

The room is well lit. The light source is from the window that is partly visible on the left side of the painting. The light coming in illuminates the woman and draws the viewer's attention to her. The man, like the other painting, is in the shadows. His head is turned because his attention is also on the woman and only the side of his silhouette is visible. The color palette is fairly limited. The artist uses different shades of gold, green, brown, and white. Ochtervelt is similar to Vermeer in terms of painterly technique. He uses soft brushstrokes to show different textures of fabrics and creates smooth transitions between the outlines of the figures and objects in the painting. This makes the scene look more realistic. This painting was constructed in about 1671 and Vermeer's painted his in 1662-1664, so it is possible that Vermeer influenced Ochtervelt. Afterall, Ochtervelt spent most of his career in the city of Rotterdam, and Vermeer was nearby in the city of Delft.[96]

The lighting and the colors create a cheerful feeling. Unlike the other two paintings, the woman has a pleasant look on her face and she is looking at the man. Another peculiar observation is that she is picking up a violin. This is unusual because the instrument is usually played by a male and is a lower class instrument.[97] She is also pointing to the music in a commanding way. This, along with the fact that she is standing and the male is sitting, suggests

[96] Art Institute of Chicago, "About This," The Art Institute of Chicago.
[97] Finlay, "Musical Instruments," 52-69.

that she could be the teacher. It is interesting how the roles have been reversed in this music lesson scene when you compare this with Vermeer's. The woman's face is completely visible and she is interacting with the man, unlike Vermeer's where the woman's back is facing the viewer. The man's face is barely visible and he is in the shadows. The woman is in complete command of the scene. The man could still be the teacher but there is no way to be certain. This painting could be similar to an actual music lesson but it does not have the same feelings as Vermeer's. It does not have the same undercurrent of the characteristics of a student and teacher relationship and also there is no feeling of focus and cautiousness like Vermeer's. This scene to me seems more playful and happy.

In comparing Vermeer's scene with Gerard ter Borch (figure 5), I think both of them most resemble how a music lesson would be. However, Gerard ter Borch contains more obvious emblems and symbols to make it easy for the viewer to create a narrative, which seem to lead most viewers to thinking it is a moral lesson about love. I think that in ter Borch's painting, the relationship between the figures are very similar to a teacher and student in a more interactive way. However, the way that Vermeer portrays the woman and the male with a sense of foreboding that represents the pressure a student can feel in a music lesson. Ter Borch paints the scene in a more open way that seems more about the way he portrays the figures and the emblems to create a narrative. The viewer can still use their imagination when interpreting the image but it is more guided in a sense. The scene is in the foreground and the figures are more accessible to the viewer. The figures in Vermeer's painting seem out of reach and compel the viewer to come closer. Vermeer is much more nuanced and complicated and makes it less about the figures and more about the painting and the scene as a whole. The fact that the viewer is not

caught up in the activity of the figures allows the viewer to focus on using what they see to imagine the music that is being created in the scene.

Vermeer depicted this music lesson scene in a complex way that represent the complexities of teaching and music. In a way, Vermeer teaches himself by putting his skills to practice learning how to create the scene he wants. The painting teaches the contemporary Dutch viewer about the roles of a Dutch woman in society and the importance of learning how to play an instrument, and the role that a teacher is supposed to take on. This painting also teaches the modern day viewer the importance of music and painting in Dutch seventeenth century. Furthermore, Vermeer's painting teaches the viewer how to look at the painting in different ways. This music lesson scene could just be about music and teaching, or it could have a hidden message about love. It could be both. Vermeer's complexity does not allow closure or a set interpretation. It compels the viewer to return.

Figure 1- Johannes Vermeer
The Music Lesson, c. 1662-64, oil on canvas, 73.3 x 64.5 cm.

Figure 2- Johannes Vermeer
The Concert, c. 1663-66, oil on canvas, 72.5 x 64.7 cm.

Figure 3- Frans van Mieris the Elder
The Music Lesson, n.d., oil on canvas, 33.5 x 27.5 cm.

Figure 4- Jacob Ochtervelt
The Music Lesson, c. 1671, oil on canvas, 80.2 x 65.5 cm.

Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have attempted to interpret these music lesson scenes by viewing them as scenes of an actual music lesson and seeking to explore various ideas they convey to the viewer. It was rather difficult to imagine a different narrative for these scenes when so many of the interpretations already existing are about the moralizing messages of love and desire. Another factor that was challenging was the lack of writing on actual music pedagogy in Dutch culture during the seventeenth century. However, my own experience with years of music study as well as secondary sources about musical culture proved very helpful in this endeavor.

Understanding genre painting in Dutch culture was vital to my study of the two paintings. Genre paintings were intended to be educational, and having musical themes in so many of the Dutch paintings showed how they used it as a visual aid to instruct the viewer or tell a story. It was also important to know the significance of education to the Dutch society during this time, and so teaching music must have been very common. Learning about the different aspects and types of Dutch genre paintings showed how complicated and ambiguous they are, and that there can be more than just one artistic interpretation.

In analyzing Gerard ter Borch's painting, knowing the musical culture and the types of instruments that people of different classes played was very helpful in my study. Music was primarily played in the home, which is why the settings of both paintings are in the interior of a Dutch home. Ter Borch has certain objects in his paintings that could act as emblems or symbols that signify something to the viewer and help them create a narrative for the painting. I argue how this painting is more than just a love scene, and that this could be an actual scene of a music lesson taking place. I also take it a step further by discussing how using the scene of a music

lesson can convey numerous things to the viewer like the idealized Dutch woman or gentleman, the undercurrents of gentility, discipline, pressures of society, and feelings that a musician might experience during a music lesson.

In the final chapter, I analyze Vermeer's painting, and I found his music lesson scene to be the most challenging because it is so nuanced and more complex than ter Borch's. However, in looking at this painting, I see how Vermeer uses color, light, configuration of objects, and the placement of the figures to convey the emotions that one might feel in a music lesson. I argue that the complexity in his painting demonstrates the complexities in music and teaching music, as well as the sometimes complicated relationship between a student and teacher.

Neither of these paintings allow the viewer to come to an exact interpretation. This caused the writer to be personally drawn to them, but it also could be the reason musical scenes in genre painting during the seventeenth century were such a common theme. The combination of two different arts, painting and music, working together to convey a message is very powerful.

I learned that images of music lessons were not only a theme in seventeenth century genre paintings, but that they have occurred throughout centuries. If I had another year to work on this project, I would look further into the role that they played in different time periods. I found an interesting change in some images that instead of the male being the teacher, like in the seventeenth century images, that the woman was the teacher and the student was a child. It would be an interesting study to look further into these images and the factors that influenced this change in gender roles and ideals.

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