

The Courtier and Music

Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (1528)



Baldassare Castiglione
(1478–1529)

And the **Count** beginning afresh:

“My lords,” quoth he, “you must think I am not pleased with the courtier if he be not also a musician, and beside his understanding and cunning upon the book, have skill in like manner on sundry instruments.

For if we weigh it well, there is no ease of the labors and medicines of feeble minds to be found more honest and more praiseworthy in time of leisure than it.

And principally in courts, where (besides the refreshing of vexations that music brings unto each man) many things are taken in hand to please women withal, whose tender and soft breasts are soon pierced with melody and filled with sweetness.

Therefore no marvel that in the old times and nowadays they have always been inclined to musicians, and counted this a most acceptable food of the mind.”

Then the **Lord Gaspar**:

“I believe music,” quoth he, “together with many other vanities is meet for women, and peradventure for some also that have the likeness of men, but not for them that be men in deed, who ought not with such delicacies to womanish their minds, and bring themselves in that sort to dread death.”

[Count Lewis of Canossa speaks in defence of music.]

“Speak it not,” answered the count. “For I shall enter into a large sea of the praise of music, and call to rehearsal how much it has always been renowned among them of olden time, and counted a holy matter. And how it has been the opinion of most wise philosophers that the world is made of music; and the heavens in their moving make a melody; and our soul framed after the very same sort, and therefore lifts up itself and, as it were, revives the virtues and force of it with music.

Wherefore it is written that Alexander was some time so fervently stirred with it, that in a manner against his will he was forced to arise

from banquets and run to weapon. Afterward the musician changing the stroke and his manner of tune, pacified himself again and returned from weapon to banqueting.

And I shall tell you that grave Socrates when he was well stricken in years learned to play upon the harp.

And I remember I have understood that Plato and Aristotle will have a man that is well brought up, to be also a musician: and declare with infinite reasons the force of music to be to very great purpose in us, and for many causes that should be to long to rehearse, ought necessarily to be learned from a man's childhood, not only for the superficial melody that is heard, but to be sufficient to bring into us a new habit that is good, and a custom inclining to virtue, which makes the mind more apt to the conceiving of felicity, even as bodily exercise makes the body more lusty, and not only hurts not civil matters and warlike affairs, but is a great stay to them. Also Lycurgus in his sharp laws allowed music.

And it is read that the Lacedaemons, which were valiant in arms, and the Cretenses used harps and other soft instruments: and many most excellent captains of old time (as Epaminondas) gave themselves to music: and such as had not a sight in it (as Themistocles) were a great deal the less set by.

Have you read that among the first instructions which the good old man Chiron taught Achilles in his tender age, whom he had brought up from his nurse and cradle, music was one? And the wise master would have those hands that should shed so much Trojan blood, to be oftentimes occupied in playing upon the harp? What soldier is there, therefore, that will think it a shame to follow Achilles, omitting many other famous captains that I could allege?

Do you not then deprive our courtier of music, which does not only make sweet the minds of men, but also many times wild beasts tame: and whoso savors it not, a man may assuredly think him not to be well in his wits.

Behold, I pray you what force it has, that in times past allured a fish to suffer a man to ride upon him through the tempestuous sea. We may see it used in the holy temples to render laud and thanks

unto God, and it is a credible matter that it is acceptable unto him, and that he has given it unto us for a most sweet lightening of our travails and vexations.

So that many times the boisterous laborers in the fields in the heat of the sun beguile their pain with rude and cartarlyke singing.

With this the unmannerly countrywoman that arises before day out of her sleep, to spin and card, defends herself and makes her labor pleasant. 't Is the most sweet pastime after rain, wind, and tempest unto the miserable mariners.

With this do the weary pilgrims comfort themselves in their troublesome and long voyages. And oftentimes prisoners in adversity, in fetters, and in stocks. In like manner for a greater proof that the tunableness of music (though it be but rude) is a very great refreshing of all worldly pains and griefs, a man would judge that nature has taught it unto nurses for a special remedy to the continual wailings of sucking babes, which at the sound of their voice fall into a quiet and sweet sleep, forgetting the tears that are so proper to them, and give us of nature in that age for a guess of the rest of our life to come."

Here the Count pausing a while, the **Lord Julian** said:

"I am not of the Lord Gaspar's opinion, but I believe for the reasons you allege, and for many others, that music is not only an ornament, but also necessary for a courtier.

But I would have you declare how this and the other qualities which you appoint him are to be practiced, and at what time, and in what sort. Because many things that of themselves be praiseworthy, oftentimes in practicing them out of season seem most foolish. And contrariwise, some things that appear to be of small moment, in the well applying them, are greatly esteemed."

[**Messer Federico**:]

"There is nothing so excellent in the world, that the ignorant people have not their fill of and smally regard in often beholding it. The like judgement I have in music. But I would not our courtier should do as many do, that as soon as they come to any place, and

also in the presence of great men with whom they have no acquaintance at all, without much entreating set out themselves to show as much as they know, yea, and many times that they know not. So that a man would ween they came purposely to show themselves for that, and that it is their principal profession.

Therefore let our courtier come to show his music as a thing to pass the time withal, and as he were enforced to do it, and not in the presence of the un noble, nor of any great multitude. And for all he be skillful and does well understand it, yet will I have him to dissemble the study and pains that a man must needs take in all things that are well done. And let him make semblance that he esteems but little in himself that quality, but in doing it excellently well make it much esteemed of other men.”

Then said the **Lord Gaspar Pallavicino**:

“There are many sorts of music as well in the breast, as upon instruments, therefore would I gladly learn which is the best, and at what time the courtier ought to practice it.”

“Methinks,” answered **Sir Friderick**, “pricksong is a fair music, so it be done upon the book surely and after a good sort.

But to sing to the lute is much better, because al the sweetness consists in one alone. And a man is much more heedful and understands better the feat, manner, and the air or vein of it, when the ears are not busied in hearing any more then one voice. And beside every little error is soon perceived, which happens not in singing with company, for one bears out an other. But singing to the lute with the ditty, methinks, is more pleasant then the rest. For it adds to the words such a grace and strength, that it is a great wonder.

Also all instruments with frets are full of harmony, because the tunes of them are very perfect. And with ease a man may do many things upon them that fill the mind with the sweetness of music. And the music of a set of viols doth no less delight a man, for it is very sweet and artificial.

A man’s breast gives a great ornament and grace to all these instruments, in the which I will have it sufficient that our courtier

have an understanding. Yet the more cunning he is upon them, the better it is for him, without meddling much with the instruments that Minerva and Alcibiades refused, because it seems they are noisome.

Now as touching the time and season when these sorts of music are to be practiced: I believe at all times when a man is in familiar and loving company, having nothing else a do. But especially they are meet to be practiced in the presence of women, because those sights sweeten the minds of the hearers, and make them the more apt to be pierced with the pleasantness of music, and also they quicken the spirits of the very doers.

I am well pleased, as I have said, they flee the multitude, and especially of the un noble. But the seasoning of the whole must be discretion, because in effect it were a matter impossible to imagine all cases that befall. And if the courtier be a righteous judge of himself, he shall apply himself well enough to the time, and shall discern when the hearers minds are disposed to give ear and when they are not.

He shall know his age, for (to say the truth) it were no meet matter, but an ill sight to see a man of any estimation being olde, hoary-headed, and toothless, full of wrinkles, with a lute in his arms playing upon it, and singing in the midst of a company of women, although he could doe it reasonably well. And that, because such songs contain in them words of love. And in olde men love is a thing to be jested at. Although otherwhile he seems among other miracles of his to take delight in spite of years to set a fire frozen hearts.

Then answered the **Lord Julian**:

“Doe you not bar poore olde men from this pleasure, Sir Fridericke, for in my time I have known men of years have very perfect breasts and most nimble fingers for instruments, much more than some young men.”

“I go not about,” quoth **Sir Fridericke**, “to bar olde men from this pleasure, but I will bar you these Ladies from laughing at that folie. And in case olde men will sing to the lute, let them doe it

secretly, and only to rid their minds of those troublesome cares and grievous disquietings that our life is full of. And to taste of that excellency which I believe Pythagoras and Socrates favored in music. And set case they exercise it not at all: for that they have gotten a certain habit and custom of it, they shall savor it much better in hearing, then he that hath no knowledge in it.

For like as the arms of a smith that is weak in other things, because they are more exercised, be stronger then an other bodies, that is sturdy, but not exercised to work with his arms: even so the ears that be exercised in music do much better and sooner discern it, and with much more pleasure judge of it, then other, how good and quick soever they be that have not bene practiced in the variety of pleasant music. Because those musical tunes pierce not, but without leaving any taste of themselves passe by the ears not accustomed to hear them, although the very wilde beasts feel some delight in melody. This is therefore the pleasure meet for olde men to take in music. The self same I say of dancing, for indeed these exercises ought to be left of before age constrains us to leave them whether we will or no.

“It is better then,” answered here **M. Morello**, half chafed, “to except all old men and to say that only young men are to be called courtiers.”



Young Man Among Roses, c.1585–1595