**Troubling Grace: Performing the Tambourine in Georgian Britain**

Around 1800, Britain saw a small explosion in the publication of music with accompaniment for tambourine, complicating existing gender and cultural narratives. Publications by composers such as Clementi, Steibelt and Mazzinghi often took the form of waltzes and reductions of ballets; however, both were highly problematic genres for women. Additionally, instruments of the drum family were associated with masculine military topoi and performance, yet publishers emphasised the suitability of the tambourine for women and instruction manuals clearly yoke tambourine performance with taste, elegance and “the most graceful attitudes”. Although Henry Farmer and Sam Girling separately situated tambourine music within female domesticity, recognising its postural, visual and choreographic nature, little attempt has yet been made to understand how its performance intersected with contemporary ideals of grace.

This paper explores how elite women’s engagement with tambourine music tapped into and jostled against a specific corporeal aesthetic vocabulary and material culture around grace. Bodily grace was epitomised by ease, elegance and “delicacy of attitude and motion”, drawing heavily on notions of antiquity. Yet despite the emphasis on grace in tambourine instruction, its performance required vigour, theatricality and noise, the antithesis of demure grace. The tambourine’s incorporation into the fabric of elite houses, from vases, commodes, figurines and musical trophies through to portraiture, contains clear parallels to depictions of women playing tambourines in musical publications. The recurring portrayal of women with tambourines as bacchantes, and the merchandising of Emma Hamilton’s body and instrument, points towards a narrative that sanitises or nullifies associations with intoxication, violence and voyeurism. In addition to evoking classical mythology, the tambourine was also coupled with diverse ethnicities and representations of class, from French street musicians, ‘oriental’ janissary music, and black instrumentalists in militia bands, to female ballet dancers and the innocence of childhood play. Women’s performance on the tambourine, therefore, needs to be understood within the context of this complex cultural background. Grace became a pivotal tool through which such music-making was both endorsed and promulgated, connecting it to a broader discourse around material acquisition, and sidestepping uncomfortable gender and social juxtapositions.