During the nineteenth century middle and upper-class women in Nashville and the surrounding region occupied a clearly defined place within society, and their social and academic education was designed to prepare them for that place. Even as female education gradually became more progressive in the later nineteenth-century, its scope was still limited by gender roles and expectations. Parents wanted their daughters to learn proper social graces, and “ornamental” studies such as music, needlework, and painting were a large part of their education. As the nineteenth gave way to the early twentieth-century, the focus of women’s education began to shift, with more scholarly subjects added to the list of studies and more career choices open to women. Women became empowered in new ways through the women’s suffrage movement and sought to use their new freedom to pursue higher education and academic careers.

Female education mirrored the changing status of women in general, and music, in particular, provides a unique perspective on the changing role of women in American society during this time. This study focuses on three schools in Nashville, Tennessee, a city which provides an excellent example of the formation and development of women’s education in female academies and seminaries, as well as being a cultural center of the South. The music programs at the Nashville Female Academy, Ward’s Seminary for Young Ladies, and the Ward-Belmont School for Girls are studied in order to demonstrate how the level of instruction changed over time, mirroring similar changes in society as a whole. Recital programs, instruction books, and biographies of faculty members all help to develop a picture of the music education students received. As changes in repertoire, faculty, and coursework from the mid-nineteenth-century into the twentieth century are discovered, connections emerge between female music education in Nashville and the status of women across America.