

## **"No moral effect on the mind": Music and Education in *Mansfield Park***

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In her surviving letters, Jane Austen mentions music occasionally among news of friends, neighbours and family. We know that she played the piano and sang, practising regularly, but we have only the opinions of relations who were still young when she died to tell us how accomplished a musician she was. There is, however, rich but inconclusive evidence in the surviving music books from the collection of Austen and her family circle.

In any event, we know that music played a part in Austen's life: her letters reveal that she generally disliked public concerts, appreciated people who were honest about their lack of musical taste, and sometimes genuinely enjoyed a performance. Some of these attitudes are also displayed in the novels, but there are subtleties and ambiguities in the way she uses music and musicianship to illuminate the characters, sharpening in various ways the differences between them, and adding extra facets to her portraits of young women in that crucial time of their lives just before marriage.

In this paper I will discuss the way Austen uses music and musicianship in her novel, how it illuminates but does not define her characters.

Whether or not Jane Austen had read John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, she seems to have shared his view that, in a child's education, learning was "subservient to greater qualities" of "virtue, wisdom [and] breeding".<sup>1</sup> This belief is implicit in most of the novels; and the heroines usually gain crucial self-knowledge in a context outside their formal education. Catherine Morland learns to see clearly from Henry Tilney; Elizabeth Bennet from Darcy and Jane. The lessons Emma Woodhouse learns from Mr Knightley are more important than those Miss Taylor could ever teach her; and for Fanny Price, although

Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of history; [Edmund] recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, ... encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious

praise. (MP 22)

Perhaps even more importantly, 'he knew her to be clever', while the rest of the family is convinced of the opposite.

*Mansfield Park* is, in many ways, a novel about education, particularly women's education. Once again, we don't know whether Austen read Mary Wollstonecraft on the subject, but the Introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* sets out views very similar to some of those dramatised in her novels, especially *Mansfield Park*:

If ... it can be fairly deduced from the present conduct of the sex, from the prevalent fondness for pleasure which takes place of ambition and those nobler passions that open and enlarge the soul, that the instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the constitution of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire - mere propagators of fools! - if it can be proved that in aiming to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings, they are taken out of their sphere of duties, and made ridiculous and useless when the short-lived bloom of beauty is over, I presume that *rational* men will excuse me for endeavouring to persuade them to become more masculine and respectable.<sup>2</sup>

Austen might not aim to make women more ambitious in a worldly sense, or more masculine, but she shows us in Fanny a woman with "nobler passions that open and enlarge the soul" - for example, her love of nature, which she sees as a corrective to selfishness and meanness - and the education of the Bertram sisters, and Mary Crawford, has aimed "to accomplish them, without cultivating their understandings".

Fanny's education is an important theme especially in the early chapters, where it is contrasted with that of her cousins. Fanny, like Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*, is not a musician. However, Fanny's lack of musical skill springs from a different source to Elinor's. Elinor does not play because she is not musical; she draws and paints. Fanny, according to her cousins' scornful report to Aunt Norris, "says she does not want to learn either music or drawing" (MP 19). Knowing Fanny as we do, we can assume she would not have volunteered this information without having been offered lessons, and it shows an early example of her refusal to be moulded by her environment, and her quiet, perhaps instinctive, determination to

stand up for her own integrity against the showy acquirements of her cousins. When Mrs Norris tells her Bertram nieces that Fanny is "very stupid indeed, and shows a great want of genius and emulation" (MP 19), she has unwittingly hit on Fanny's most cogent reason for not learning music and drawing. As Patrick Piggott points out, "the simple instinct of self-preservation would have warned her to keep as quiet as possible and to avoid any situation which might place her directly in competition with either Maria or Julia".<sup>3</sup> Also, her natural good sense would have shown her that all her cousins' accomplishments do not make them either pleasant or thoughtful companions. She is "of an obliging, yielding temper" (MP 17) when playing with her cousins, but she is far from wanting to emulate them, at this or any stage in her life, and the instinct which keeps her apart and gives her a silent, strong sense of herself is vindicated in later life by arming her against the temptations which Maria and Julia succumb to. Julia's elopement, after all, is partly in emulation of her older sister's behaviour. Want of emulation in Fanny is a source and a sign of strength.

Maria and Julia are hardly differentiated in the early part of the novel, until Henry Crawford appears and makes rivals of them. When Fanny first arrives, they are given a holiday "on purpose to afford leisure for getting acquainted with, and entertaining their young cousin", but they perceive her "to be little struck with the duet they were so good as to play" (MP 14) and leave her alone. Fanny, in her forlorn, homesick state of mind, is in no mood to enjoy music, and, in any case, it would be obvious to a sensitive soul like Fanny that her cousins are playing merely to impress her with their superiority and with no intention of giving her pleasure. There is little suggestion that they have any feeling for music in itself, despite their "brilliant acquirements" (MP 34), which of course include their musical performance. Mrs Norris knows perfectly well what these acquirements are intended for. While Sir Thomas is away in Antigua, she spends her time "in promoting gaieties for her nieces, assisting their toilettes, displaying their accomplishments, and looking about for their future husbands"(MP 34). (Her matchmaking efforts are second only to Mrs Bennet's, although in the event considerably less successful.) It is only after the disgrace of Maria's affair with Henry Crawford that Sir Thomas realises that "to be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments - the authorised object of their youth - could have ... no moral effect on the mind" (MP 463).

Music forms part of the illusion of family harmony and decorum Sir Thomas

has created for himself. When he returns from Antigua to find his household disrupted by the theatrical activities of his children and their friends, he calls for music from his daughters, which "helped conceal the want of real harmony" (MP 191). This is typical of his habit of papering over the cracks: he refuses to look beneath the surface, as long as appearances are favourable. Thus he fails to perceive Fanny's superiority to his daughters; he tries to force her into marrying Henry Crawford because it looks like a good match; and he allows Maria to marry Mr Rushworth despite the fact that even he can perceive that Maria "could not, did not, like him" (MP 200). He is, indeed, "too glad to be satisfied" (MP 201) not only in this case, but in the whole matter of his daughters' upbringing and education. He has taught them "to repress their spirits in his presence", which makes "their real disposition unknown to him" (MP 463).

Mary Crawford also, as a result of her education at the hands of her worldly uncle and aunt, has a dependence on material trappings and external appearances, of which music is one. She has not had the advantages of someone like Jane Fairfax in *Emma*, who, "living constantly with right-minded and well-informed people, her heart and understanding had received every advantage of discipline and culture" (E 164). The implication is that the informal side of education, which forms the disposition by discipline and example, is more crucial to a child's development than any formal training can be. Mary betrays herself, when talking to Fanny about the sisters of Edmund's friend Mr Owen, by asking if they are musical. "'That is the first question, you know', said Miss Crawford, trying to appear gay and unconcerned, 'which every woman who plays herself is sure to ask about another'" (MP 288). She does not need to add, "to another who she fears is a rival for a potential husband"; it is implicit in the conversation.

Mary is no doubt aware of the impression she makes when she plays the harp:

A young woman, pretty, lively, with a harp as elegant as herself; and both placed near a window, cut down to the ground, and opening on a little lawn, surrounded by shrubs in the rich foliage of summer, was enough to catch any man's heart. (MP 65)

Mary's liveliness is as natural as her beauty - affectation is not one of her faults - but she is still conscious of her charms, and she uses music as part of her armoury. She

tells Edmund to mention the arrival of her harp when writing to his absent brother Tom:

And you may say, if you please, that I shall prepare my most plaintive airs against his return in compassion to his feelings, as I know his horse will lose.  
(MP 59)

It is significant that Mary sets out to charm Edmund with her siren's song before she discovers that she prefers him (against her better judgment) to his older, more eligible brother, and that "she did not even want to attract him [Tom] beyond what the simplest claims of conscious beauty required" (MP 114). The "simplest claims of conscious beauty" then lead her to turn her charms on Edmund in the absence of Tom, even though she has decided that Tom "might do very well; she believed she should accept him" (MP 48). The harp itself - the saga of its arrival - is telling. Mary's assumption that she should be able to hire a wagon at any time of the year, no matter what the season, is an early example of her belief in "the true London maxim, that everything is to be got with money" (MP 58); not only wagons, but married happiness, or at least contentment. The harp itself was the fashionable instrument of the day, competing with the piano on account of its greater portability and, according to Piggott, "its superiority to the pianoforte for the display of feminine charms (more particularly of feminine arms)".<sup>4</sup> Mrs Elton's comment in *Emma* that Jane Fairfax might do better if she were a harpist as well as a pianist and a singer attests to the capacity of the harp to symbolise fashionable modernity. It also is a sign of wealth, as Mike Parker has pointed out: a harp at the time would have cost more than 5 times as much as a piano, and "for the same price you could buy a small townhouse in London or employ a housemaid for 10 years."<sup>5</sup> With her London ideas (and "Fanny was disposed to think the influence of London very much at war with all respectable attachments"(MP 433)), her harp and her liveliness, Mary still has "a mind led astray and bewildered, and without any suspicion of being so; darkened, yet fancying itself light" (MP 367). She does have genuine feelings and a warm heart, but they do not prevent her being "careless as a woman and a friend" (MP 260).

Music itself in *Mansfield Park* is at a disadvantage. As Fanny does not play - and it is of considerable significance that she does not - it is logical that her rival should be musical. Music has the effect of drawing Edmund away from Fanny, not only when Mary plays the harp, but at an evening party at Mansfield Park. Fanny and Edmund are at the window, and Fanny, looking out at

the brilliancy of an unclouded night, and the contrast of the deep shade of the woods, ... spoke her feelings. "Here's harmony!" said she, "here's repose! Here's what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe!" (MP 113)

But the power of music, which Fanny is deprecating, is working on Edmund's mind, "and as [the glee] advanced, she had the mortification of seeing him advance too, moving forward by gentle degrees towards the instrument" (MP 113). A glee

is a form of vocal polyphonic composition, usually but not exclusively written for male voices, which owes a great deal to the Elizabethan madrigal and the Jacobean partsong. Its development was in some measure an antidote to the earthy vulgarity of many of the 17th and 18th century catches that were intended for masculine consumption. As the Catch Club held Ladies' Nights, some thought had to be given to the sensibilities of the fairer sex. Gleees were in general intended for amateur performance and therefore aimed at immediate appeal, and tended to avoid too much elaborate part writing.<sup>6</sup>

Fanny feels the power of Mary's music as well; it is part of the "kind of fascination" (MP 208) which Mary holds for her, but she is more resistant than Edmund, and Mary never wins her love. Mary herself genuinely enjoys playing - she is not just being a coquette when she declares "I dearly love music myself" (MP 59), and she soothes herself after the discussion of Edmund's future expectations at her sister's dinner party by playing the harp, being "too vexed by what had passed to be in a humour for anything but music" (MP 227). Fanny prefers the silent, unsocial activity of reading, which accords with her quiet, subdued and unobtrusive personality, but she is enough the heroine of sensibility to enjoy music when executed "with superior tone and expression" (MP 207) as Mary's harp-playing is. Fanny's taste is genuine; and her jealous feelings, although clouding other issues, do not entirely prevent her from enjoying Mary's music. And Fanny loves dancing, let us not forget that - Austen lets her participate in the normal pleasures of youth to that extent.

The place of music in education is shown in a more negative light in *Mansfield Park* than in any of the other novels. In *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*, it can be seen as a useful discipline for young women, and in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth at least has not been led astray by her musical pursuits. But in *Mansfield Park*, the musicians have wasted their time on acquiring accomplishments. Maria and Julia

"had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice" (MP 463). Fanny herself suggests to Edmund that Mary's faults are "the effect of education", and "he could not but agree to it" (MP 269), and when the charm she has exerted is finally broken, he exclaims, "where, Fanny, shall we find a woman whom nature had so richly endowed? - Spoilt, spoilt! -" (MP 455). In contrast, Fanny's education has been more solid, having been directed by Edmund. This type of attention was missing from the childhood years of Maria, Julia and Mary, whose education had been of a more fashionable type. However, Jane Austen seems to contradict herself. At the end of the novel she talks of the Price family's "advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure" (MP 473). This provides a strong contrast to the frivolous nature of the education of the rich children of Mansfield Park and London. However, we see the Price household in all its chaos. We are told that Mrs Price "was a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern, who neither taught nor restrained her children" (MP 390), and that the child Betsey was "trained up to think the alphabet her greatest enemy" (MP 391). It seems surprising, therefore, that Fanny could even "read, work, and write" (MP 18) on her arrival at Mansfield Park, if her early education had been at the hands of her mother. The Price household hardly seems the abode of discipline, although hardship is certainly present. But Jane Austen's point is probably that there is no emphasis in the Prices' education on "merely decorative" accomplishments like music, and they are none the worse for this deficiency.

Music in *Mansfield Park* is a little more morally significant than in the other novels. It is used as a symbol of a shallow, worldly, husband-hunting attitude to feminine life. It's often used like that in the other novels; but in *Mansfield Park* there is no counteracting social usefulness or educational discipline. Musicianship in itself isn't condemned, but it's clear that a girl can do very well without learning any musical skills.

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<sup>1</sup> D.D. Devlin, *Jane Austen and Education* (London: Macmillan, 1975) 11.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, Walter Scott, n.d.) xxxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Piggott, *The Innocent Diversion: A Study of Music in the Life and Writings of Jane Austen* (London: D. Cleverdon, 1979) 65.

<sup>4</sup>Piggott 38

<sup>5</sup> Mike Parker, 'Tidings of My Harp', *Jane Austen's Regency World* Issue 44, March/April 2010, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Penrose, sleeve notes for *Sweet and Low: Glees & Partsongs*. Pro Cantione Antiqua (London: Conifer Ltd, 1986).