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Jane Austen and the Music of the French Revolution

ABSTRACT

Among the music Jane Austen copied into one of her manuscript books dating from the 1790s is a song titled 'Chanson Béarnoise'. This is by no means the only French song in Austen's vast music collection, but it is of particular interest: the words of this song also appear as an Appendix to the 'Justification de M. de Favras' (Paris, 1791) because they had been adduced in evidence against the royalist Thomas Marquis de Favras Mahy, executed by the revolutionary government in February 1790 for high treason.

The Austen family's links to France via her cousin, Eliza Comtesse de Feuillide, whose royalist husband was also executed in 1794 and who later married her brother Henry, are well known. However, the music in her collection provides an interesting new angle on her cultural and personal sympathies with France. Within a few pages of the Chanson Béarnoise, we find not only Stephen Storace's 'Captivity', a song lamenting the suffering and dread of Marie Antoinette as she awaits her fate, but also the music and five verses of words of 'The Marseilles March', an early version of the Marseillaise. In this paper, using her music collection as a starting point, I will consider the evidence for Austen's knowledge of French politics and culture, and her attitude to the turbulent events taking place across the Channel during her teens and early twenties.

KEYWORDS: Jane Austen, French Revolution, Songs

On 1 February 1793, when Jane Austen was seventeen, France declared war on Great Britain. The Revolutionary War turned into the Napoleonic Wars, and continued with only a brief interval until Waterloo in 1815. The Anglo-French war of 1778-1783 had taken place during her childhood, so France was the sworn enemy of Britain for well over half of Austen's lifetime. Four years earlier, 'forces were unleashed in France that set that nation and every nation of the western world on a difference course' (Roberts, 2001, 3), and although she never mentioned the Revolution in her novels or her correspondence, Austen was inevitably affected by those upheavals. Kathryn Sutherland points out that 'we might say she was war-conditioned – wartime was the ordinary, everyday time of her adult life' (Sutherland, 2017, 106). Two of her brothers, Frank and Charles, were officers in the British Navy and took part in the wars with France in Europe and the West Indies, and another, Henry, was in the militia for five years during the 1790s.

Britain's relationship with France was not, however, a simple one of enmity. In Jane Austen's life, as in the life of many of her contemporaries, France and French culture were a significant influence. Every well-educated young person would learn French. As Nicola McLelland writes,

After the Norman conquest in 1066, French – initially the language of the conquerors and the elite who collaborated with them – became, over the course of generations, the first foreign language and language of prestige for those outside the clerical education system. Britain's continuing close ties with neighbouring France and France's cultural pre-eminence in Europe for centuries have kept French as the 'first' foreign language for most British children ever since. (McClelland, 2018, 7)

Noël Riley points out that even in the early nineteenth century, at 'its lowest ebb', the education of a 'lady' would typically involve learning 'to sing, play the piano or harp, to sketch and to speak French, sometimes German ... and occasionally Italian' (Riley, 2017, 36).

Alongside the cultural prestige of the French language, anti-French sentiment was, nevertheless, common enough in England at the time. James Austen, Jane's eldest brother, wrote an essay in April 1789 in his magazine, *The Loiterer*, which deprecates the animosity between the two peoples: 'I must lament the prevalence, and would diminish the force of a passion, which interrupts the harmony of nations, and damps the warmth of private friendship, which robs peace of its dearest blessings, and adds new horrors to the frowns of war' (Austen, 1789).

Despite what he no doubt believed to be his enlightened views, in his essay James nevertheless reinforces many stereotypes: English thuggery versus French dishonesty; English dullness versus French frivolity and so on. Lucy Worsley notes that, although 'in 1789 many Britons ... welcomed the news of the storming of the Bastille ... within a year, doubt had set in as the consequences became clearer.' Worsley quotes Anna Seward, who revised her initial

enthusiasm: ‘O, that the French had possessed the wisdom of knowing Where To Stop’ (quoted in Worsley, 2017, 71). And, as James Austen implies, in these two countries with such long-entwined histories, personal and intellectual ties between individuals across the channel were common. The revolutionary government of France was waging war not only on foreign countries but on counter-revolutionaries within France, and sympathy with those who had a personal stake in the outcome of the extraordinary events taking place there could override – or reinforce – any ideological position.

Austen’s paternal aunt Philadelphia Hancock and her cousin Eliza Hancock settled in Paris in 1779. In 1781 Eliza married a ‘young Captain in the Queen’s Regiment of Dragoons, Jean-François Capot de Feuillide, from Nérac, in the province of Guienne,’ who claimed the title of ‘Comte’ (Austen-Leigh, 1989, 34). De Feuillide fell foul of the Revolutionary government and died by the guillotine in February 1794. Eliza survived and went on to marry Jane’s older brother Henry. She often stayed with the Austens during the 1780s and 1790s. Jane knew her well.

Eliza was fourteen years older than Jane. She was the dedicatee of Austen’s brief 1790 juvenile ‘novel in letters’ ‘Love and Freindship’ (sic): ‘Jane was much impressed by Eliza’s charm and cosmopolitan vivacity, and this initial childish admiration grew into a steady and affectionate adult friendship that lasted’ until Eliza died in 1813 (Austen-Leigh, 1989, 54). On a long visit to the Austen’s home in Steventon, Hampshire, in 1792, Eliza wrote to their mutual cousin Philadelphia Walter:

Cassandra & Jane are both very much grown (The latter is now taller than myself) and greatly improved as well in Manners as in Person ... They are I think equally sensible, and both so to a degree seldom met with, but still My Heart gives the preference to

Jane, whose kind partiality to me, indeed requires a return of the same nature. (quoted in Austen-Leigh, 1989, 71)

In a letter of December 1786, Mrs Austen mentions that they have borrowed a pianoforte for ‘Madame’—Eliza—who was visiting with her mother and her son Hastings: ‘she plays to us every day’ (quoted in Austen-Leigh, 1989, 53). In 1786, Jane had turned eleven and her formal school education had ended; she and her sister Cassandra returned home where her education continued. The piano borrowed for Eliza was soon replaced by a permanent fixture for Jane to play. She had lessons for at least another ten years from George Chard, assistant organist at Winchester Cathedral. In September 1796 she wrote to Cassandra from her brother Edward’s house in Rowling, Kent, asking after Mr Chard’s health and declaring that she was practising ‘every day as much as I can – I wish it were more for his sake’ (Jane Austen, 1796, 7). She continued the discipline well into her adult life. Her niece Caroline, born in 1805, recalls her aunt practising the piano every morning at Chawton Cottage, where she lived from 1809 to her death in 1817 (Austen-Leigh, 1898, 158). Music was important to her – it was a form of artistic expression that ran alongside, and in some ways intersected with, her literary career.

While Austen’s interest in France, as we will see, is evident in what we know of her musical activities, it is somewhat muted in her novels. Mary Spongberg writes that Austen’s writings, like those of some of her female contemporaries, were ‘neither complaisant nor oblivious to the events in France,’ documenting ‘the localized effect of the Revolution as experienced by Britons, buffeted by time lags in news, the vagaries of the postal service, and a real sense of distance from the action on the Continent.’ She goes on to point out that

Early observers of Austen’s fiction understood her to be deliberately eschewing the literary heritage of France. As a critical tradition evolved around her in the nineteenth century however, a myth of an ‘unconscious’ Austen emerged. This ‘unconscious’

Austen lived through one of the most dramatic periods in history, yet according to her biographers had ‘absolutely nothing’ to say about the ‘great strifes of war and policy which so disquieted Europe’ (Spongberg, 2009, 274).

This view is now thoroughly discredited, to the extent that Kathryn Sutherland can write that ‘Jane Austen is the first English novelist to explore the effect of contemporary war on the home front’ (Sutherland, 2017, 106).

To become aware of this exploration in her novels takes a degree of close attention to detail, as well as some sophisticated historical awareness. For example, as Sutherland points out, *Persuasion* was written in 1815 but set in 1814 – written after, but set before, Waterloo. It is ‘Austen’s most time-stamped novel. ... In the real and fictional summer of 1814 ... peace looked secure. ... The resumption of conflict, and with it the threat of loss, lie just beyond the novel’s frame. In *Persuasion*, through Anne Elliot’s quiet characterisation, Austen offers her most subtle domestic mediation on war’s cost,’ ensuring (for the contemporary reader) ‘the poignant understanding that, like peace, happiness is fragile and not without risk’ (Sutherland, 2017, 112).

Warren Roberts complains about ‘the paucity of biographical evidence’ of Austen’s knowledge of the French Revolution, given that it is mentioned neither in her correspondence nor her fiction (Roberts, 2001, 9). It is unfortunate that her music collection was not generally available to researchers in the 1970s when he undertook his study of Austen’s response to the Revolutionary Age. As I have suggested, clearer evidence about Austen’s interest in, and awareness of, current events in France is to be found there. In her time, the distribution of art music among amateurs involved either purchasing expensive printed material, or the exacting task of copying by hand music borrowed from friends or from circulating libraries. Her surviving music books, and letters, show that she and other women in her extended family

spent both time and money pursuing their amateur musical interests. The family retained much of both the print and manuscript sheet music and passed it down through the generations. Eighteen volumes of Austen Family Music Books survive and the ownership of the various books has been traced to at least five other women in her extended family. Three manuscript books are entirely in Austen's hand. Another contains many of her manuscripts among print music, scrapbook style.¹

Paul F. Rice writes, 'rarely has the relationship between society, politics and the performing arts been closer' in Britain than in the early years of revolutionary France (Rice, 2010, ix). This relationship manifested itself in public theatres and concert halls, but was also evident in the music of the drawing room.

One striking feature among the music Austen chose to write out, presumably for herself to perform, is the juxtaposition of several songs in a volume of thirty-seven items (mainly songs) dating from the early to middle 1790s – her later teenage years. No. 29 in this manuscript book is a ballad titled 'Captivity', first published in 1793.² The title on the printed version is 'Captivity: a ballad supposed to be sung by the unfortunate Marie-Antoinette during her imprisonment in the Temple. The words by the Revd. Mr Jeans ... Set by Stephen Storace.' This is one of several songs composed by English musicians about Marie-Antoinette at the time. In his lyrics, Hampshire-based Anglican minister Joshua Jeans provided a lurid and disquieting imagining of Marie-Antoinette's agony and distress before her execution in 1793:

¹ The collection is now digitised and available on open access at the Internet Archive. I am engaged in a long-term project to index each piece of music separately and to make the information available in the Southampton University Library catalogue.

² 'Captivity.' Manuscript of Vocal Music. Austen Family Music Books, CHWJA/19/3:29, pp. 58-59. Online. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/stream/austen1672310-2001#page/n65/mode/2up> As Paul F. Rice writes in *British Music and the French Revolution*, this is one of several songs composed by English musicians about Marie-Antoinette at the time (163-4, 176ff). I differ from Rice in his assumption that 'supposed to be sung ...' implies that Jeans and Storace were attempting to pass this song off as a composition of Marie-Antionette. I believe that 'supposed' in this case means simply 'imagined'.

How dread the horrors of this place!

In every treacherous guard I trace

The dark design, the ruffian face,

Amid this sad captivity. (Storace, 1793, 3)

Later verses weep over ‘my babes [who] lie hushed in sleep, In briny tears their couch I steep’, and imagine ‘My murdered Lord ... The headless truck, the bosom gor’d’. The composer, Stephen Storace, was born in England of Italian parentage. He knew Mozart in Vienna, and was clearly one of Austen’s favourites: several of his compositions appear among her manuscripts. Most are from comic opera and are lighter in nature: *Captivity* is among the most moving and dramatic of his works, despite its simplicity of form.

Immediately after this ballad in Austen’s music manuscript comes Tommaso Giordani’s 1782 arrangement of the traditional Scottish air ‘Queen Mary’s Lamentation.’ The lyrics of the first verse run:

I sigh and lament me in vain, these walls can but echo my moan.

Alas, it increases my pain when I think of the days that are gone.

Through the grate of my prison I see the birds as they wanton in air,

My heart, how it longs to be free, my looks they are wild with despair.³

The links between these two ballads, one about Queen Marie-Antoinette and the other about Mary Queen of Scots, both in captivity, awaiting violent death at the hands of their political enemies, are emphasised by their juxtaposition in Austen’s manuscript book. The youthful,

³ ‘Queen Mary’s Lamentation.’ Manuscript of Vocal Music. Austen Family Music Books, CHWJA/19/3:30, 60. Online. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/stream/austen1672310-2001#page/n67/mode/1up>

parodic 'History of England', written in November 1791, 'turned on its head the very premises of [Edmund] Burke's vision of England's past' (Spongberg, 2009, 278). It is, like most of her teenage writing, for the most part witty and wildly satirical. However, when it comes to Queen Elizabeth's crimes against Mary, Austen's wit falls away and is replaced by passionate intensity:

[W]hat must not her most noble mind have suffered when informed that Elizabeth had given orders for her Death! Yet she bore it with a most unshaken fortitude, firm in her Mind; Constant in her Religion; & prepared herself to meet the cruel fate to which she was doomed, with a magnanimity that could alone proceed from conscious Innocence. And yet could you Reader have beleived (*sic*) it possible that some hardened & zealous Protestants have even abused her for that Steadfastness in the Catholic Religion which reflected on her so much credit? But this is a striking proof of *their* narrow souls & prejudiced Judgements who accuse her. (Austen, 2017, 130)

Spongberg claims that

while Burke predicted the disastrous fate of Marie Antoinette and sought to utilize the horror of her captivity to convince Protestant England to support Catholic France, Austen resists Burke's chivalric understanding of history, drawing attention to another ill-fated queen from France, anticipating the vindication of Mary Stuart, and other ill-fated queens, in the works of writers such as Mary Hays and Elizabeth Benger. (Spongberg, 2009, 280)

Could the twinning of these two ballads in Austen's manuscript complicate this picture further? Storace's restrained setting of Jeans' rather melodramatic words creates a sympathetic and moving portrait of the doomed French queen, and it is at least conceivable that copying 'Captivity' into her manuscript book reminded Austen of the earlier ballad about Mary Stuart,

which she then sought out and copied immediately afterwards. As Spongberg points out, in ‘The History of England’, Austen ‘draws attention to what Burke’s account of England’s transition from Catholic past to Protestant present suppresses, that the violence of this transition was largely played out upon the bodies of women’ (Spongberg, 2009, 279-80). The evidence of her music book seems to indicate a link in Austen’s mind between these two women, and thus a link between the current violence in France and England’s violent history.

There is another song with a rather poignant French royal connection in Austen’s scrapbook volume. The 1789 chanson ‘Pauvre Jacques’ is by Jeanne-Renée de Bombelles, Marquise de Travenet (1753-1828), and the words are often attributed to Marie-Antoinette, although they may have been by her sister-in-law Madame Elisabeth.⁴ The song was inspired by a Swiss milkmaid who looked after the cows in the queen’s dairy at Versailles, daily lamenting having left her fiancé behind in Switzerland. And in later life, Austen’s niece Caroline remembers her often singing and playing another song in French, a romance beginning ‘Que j’aime à voir les Hirondelles’, which survives in the family collection in a book which had belonged to her cousin Eliza de Feuillide (Austen-Leigh, 1989, 159). This 1788 song, by François Devienne, also deals with the trope of captivity and death: a swallow captured by a cruel child and kept from its faithful lover will die ‘d’ennui, de douleur et d’amour’.⁵

But lest we start thinking that Austen’s sympathies lie exclusively with the victims of revolutions and wars, we should consider another song in this same music book. No. 25, ‘The Marseilles March’, otherwise known as ‘The Marseillaise’, was composed in April 1792 in

⁴ ‘Pauvre Jacques.’ ‘Songs’ [a musical miscellany]. Austen Family Music Books, CHWJA/19/7:44, 142-143. Online. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/stream/austen1676459-2001#page/n143/mode/2up>

⁵ ‘Romance.’ ‘Collection of Music Printed by Cousineau of Paris.’ Austen Family Music Books, Jenkyns/04:09, 41. Online. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/austen1676487-2001/page/n41> Jeanice Brooks has written extensively on this song in her article ‘In Search of Austen’s “Missing Songs”,’ *Review of English Studies*, 67: 282, November 2016, pp. 914–945 <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgw035>

support of the French war against Austria.⁶ Austen wrote out not just the music, both tune and simple accompaniment, but all six of Rouget de Lisle's verses. Two versions of the Marseillaise were published in London in 1792. One, 'The Marseilles March', is listed in the English Stationer's Register on 23 October. It is subtitled 'as sung by the Marseillois going to battle', with English words beginning 'Ye sons of France awake to glory' (Kassler, 2004, 184). The other, with French words, was published the following month, with the title 'Marche des Marseillois or French Te Deum' (Kassler, 2004, 185). While Austen's version is titled 'The Marseilles March', the lyrics are in French, so it is uncertain from what print source she was copying.

At the time of publication, England was not yet at war with France, so there might not be any patriotic reason why this song should not appeal to the average young English woman. Although it is not absolutely certain when Austen copied it, a song composed in 1794 appears just a couple of pages earlier in the manuscript book, so it seems likely that it was copied no earlier than that, when the two countries were at war – and after her cousin's husband had been executed by the French government. Paul Rice points out that 'after 1793, a composer would have to be viewed as unpatriotic (or worse) if he composed a movement based on a French revolutionary song' (373-4). What about a teenage girl who copied the Marseillaise into her manuscript book?

On the other hand, we have the 'Chanson Béarnoise'. The words of this song appear on page 165 of *Justification de M. de Favras* (Paris, 1791), and it appears to have been adduced in evidence against Favras at his trial. According to Wikipedia,

Thomas de Mahy, Marquis de Favras (March 26, 1744-February 19, 1790) was a French aristocrat and supporter of the House of Bourbon during the French Revolution.

⁶ 'The Marseilles March.' Manuscript of Vocal Music. Austen Family Music Books, CHWJA/19/3:25, 52-53. Online. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/stream/austen1672310-2001#page/n59/mode/2up>

Often seen as a martyr of the Royalist cause, Favras was executed for his part in ‘planning against the people of France’ and is known for saying ‘I see that you have made three spelling mistakes’ upon reading his death sentence. (‘Thomas de Mahy’)

The words of the first verse of the Chanson run:⁷

Un troubadour Béarnois, les yeux inondés de larmes,
A ses Montagnards chantoit, par un refrain, source d’alarmes,
Louis le fils de Henri est prisonnier dedans Paris.

Louis was not literally the son of Henri – his father was the Dauphin, Louis – but he was descended from Henry IV, who was king of Béarn and Navarre in 1589 when he succeeded to the French throne. Along with the region’s loyal feelings to the king himself, there could have been another reason for their opposition to the Revolution. The Parlement de Navarre et Béarn had been created in 1620 on the region’s incorporation into France by Louis XIII, but was disbanded after the Revolution, thereby depriving them of their autonomy.

The interesting thing about this song for me is that Jane Austen copied it into her manuscript book at around the same time as the other songs I have mentioned. It is hard to date this manuscript book exactly but the contents up to that point in the book mostly seem to come from publications before 1795, the year Austen turned twenty. Of the thirty-seven songs in this manuscript book, eight are in French, composed by André Grétry, Egidio Duni, Giovanni Paisiello and Antoine Baudron, among others. There is one in Italian and the rest are in English. ‘The Marseilles March’ and the ‘Chanson Béarnaise’ are distinctive, however,

⁷ ‘Chanson Béarnaise.’ Manuscript of Vocal Music. Austen Family Music Books, CHWJA/19/3:20, 42-43. Online. Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/stream/austen1672310-2001#page/n49/mode/2up>

because of their overtly political nature – and because they come from different sides of the conflict.

How did these songs come to be among the music collection of the young daughter of an English country parson? The logical presumption is that she transcribed them from copies belonging to friends or relatives. This is simple enough with the songs we know to have been printed in England, like ‘Captivity’ and ‘The Marseilles March’. The ‘Chanson Béarnoise’, however, as far as I can establish, doesn’t appear to have been published in England. Perhaps her cousin Eliza had a copy with her on one of her visits in the early 1790s. In the Favras book, there is a note below the words of the song: ‘Cette chanson étoit imprimée & couroit les rues; elle s’est trouvée dans les papiers de M. de Favras, comme tout le monde ouboit l’avoir’ (Mahy, 1791, 167). It is interesting that Austen included only the tune – no bass or keyboard accompaniment – but made sure of writing out the words of nine of the verses (five of which correspond to the Favras version). As with the Marseilles March, she seems to have been as interested in the words as in the music – perhaps even more so.

The question of Austen’s political sympathies has been hotly debated over the past decades, since the myth of her quietism has been debunked. Some, like Marilyn Butler in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1987) assume Tory sympathies based on her family background, while Helena Kelly more recently wrote of her as a ‘secret radical’ in a 2017 book of that title. As Freya Johnston writes,

Austen, depicted by her immediate family as a covert, dutiful, and domestically-minded writer, has since her death been serially repackaged by critics and imitators as a conservative and a radical, a prude and a saucy, pro- and anti-colonial, a feminist and a downright bitch. Perhaps this fluidity and adaptability spring from her reluctance to be pigeonholed. (Johnston, 2017, 31)

In her parodic ‘History of England’, written in her mid-teens, Austen displays strong sympathy for Mary Queen of Scots and equally strong odium for Queen Elizabeth. As with her religious beliefs, however, the clues about her politics in her letters are ambiguous. What she writes to one correspondent might be contradicted by something she writes – ironically or not – to another. She is known to have detested the Prince Regent, later George IV, but she had dealings with his librarian, James Stanier Clarke and dedicated *Emma* to the Prince at his suggestion. In her published fiction she does not tend to allow her passions and prejudices (if she felt them) much of a voice. Mary Poovey writes that ‘unlike her more radical peers, Austen did not want literary writing to be a political engine’ (Poovey, 2009, 260). Roberts believes that she was neither a conservative nor a radical, but that ‘she hoped, as a member of the gentry, of traditional landed society, to see the members of her class adjust to a world that was changing before her, but also she was aware of their shortcomings. Neither attacking nor defending her class, she examined its chances of survival’ (Roberts, 2001, 8).

Austen’s music books show her to have been interested in songs that embody or dramatise a character or point of view, and looking at the contents of this particular manuscript book, it is tempting to believe that the attraction of songs like this lies in the staging of particular attitudes – that is, she valued the songs for their drama and ability to convey a mood, an emotion or a situation, rather than for their adherence to a particular point of view – which is, after all, what a novelist aims for. But the very presence of such songs in her music collection also demonstrates that she was far from unaware of events across the channel.

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