

## Music, Virtue and Virtuosity

### Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770–1840: Virtue and Virtuosity

By Gillen D'Arcy Wood.

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Review by Kelly M. McDonald.

Combining familial entertainment with individual expression, music played an important role in the lives of Regency women. According to the reminiscences of her niece Caroline Austen, Jane Austen assiduously practiced at the piano, and, as evidenced by her music books, was at the level of a talented amateur. Her characters Marianne Dashwood and Jane Fairfax exhibit exceptional skill and a passion for the piano. Expanding on his chapter in Johnson and Tuite's book *A Companion to Jane Austen* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Gillen D'Arcy Wood here connects British writers to an evolution of music throughout the period of 1770 to 1840. Musicology, literary criticism, and historical cultural studies combine to highlight an integration of music into the everyday lives of Britons.

In addition to Austen (paired with Beethoven), Wood offers chapters on Anna Seward (Handel), Fanny Burney (the galant style), Wordsworth (castrati), Leigh Hunt (Mozart), and Byron (Liszt). A professor of English (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), Wood is strong on his choice of literary figures and uses instances in music history to make his points, for example, the Handel Commemoration of 1784 and the long-anticipated London premier of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Focus on the professional, however, comes at the expense of the purely "popular"—the Scottish songs,

for instance, or the catches and glees that entertained many throughout the country.

Wood weighs in on the debate of the virtuosity of amateur players, an area of considerable study as regards the novels of Jane Austen (for instance the blatant virtuosity of Miss Crawford in *Mansfield Park*) and discusses "the mechanical" in the early chapter focused on the automata exhibited at Cox's Museum, which was featured in Burney's *Evelina*. This debate appeared in other countries, among professional musicians; Mozart himself composed for mechanical clocks and competed against a pianist he termed "a mere mechanicus."

Wood begins with the Lichfield Swan, Anna Seward, then moves to Burney's *Evelina*, which arrived at a time when "the music business was coming increasingly to resemble literary culture in its middle-class, commercial character, with its explosion in publishing and a network of distribution modeled on the book trade. A fashionable young woman might receive the latest novel with the most current operatic arrangement for piano in the same mail." The question of "frivolous or seductive amusement" can attach to both novels (writing as well as reading) and music (learning as well as playing).

Masculinity versus feminization is addressed by a dissection of Wordsworth's poetry as viewed through the framework of the Metastasian opera star Farinelli; this continues in the following chapter, which focuses on the circle of intellectuals associated with Leigh Hunt. This "Cockney Mozart" chapter suffers from an over-use of the "Cockney" appellation, especially as the label "Cockney School" originated and was promulgated by critics of Hunt's circle. The hysteria surrounding the works of Byron and the persona of Liszt conclude the "musical trajectory," which is described by the author as moving "from eighteenth-century oratorio and Italian opera to nineteenth-century bourgeois pianism." Wood's musical culture will be familiar from diaries of the period, wherein England's "free market... attracted the best singers,

composers, and instrumentalists of Europe," including, though not covered here, Joseph Haydn and Giacomo Rossini. Wood's view on virtuosity is capitulated in a "coda" which hints at the musical phenomenon on the horizon: Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale.

The chapter on Jane Austen is especially rich, benefited perhaps by its earlier incarnation in Johnson and Tuite, and will interest Austen enthusiasts. Frank Churchill's gift of a Broadwood piano in *Emma* (1816) is linked to the Broadwood gift sent to Beethoven in the following year. (This instrument, in turn, resurfaces in the career of Liszt.) "Beethoven's Broadwood looms large ... as central to his elevation of piano from the amateur sphere of the parlor to the professional concert-stage... Austen, for her part, in her creation of the Broadwood-playing Jane Fairfax ... participated in the imagined professionalization of female accomplishment in the post-Waterloo period." For Wood, this "casts Austen and Beethoven as fellow technicians of the Romantic humanist subject."

Endnotes are helpful and abundantly applied; the selected bibliography will lead readers to further topics of interest. The index lacks complete thoroughness, although the breakdown under the main subjects (Austen, Byron, Mozart, Liszt, Wordsworth, etc.) is useful for pinpointing specifics within their chapters. Cambridge University Press is making the book available in an "On Demand" printing, in order to keep down costs. The wait for a copy may be lengthy, but the reward is a well-written treatise on music, literature, and scenes of British history that will entertain and enlighten.



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Read Kelly M. McDonald's research blog on the life and times of Emma Austen Leigh at [SmithandGosling.wordpress.com](http://SmithandGosling.wordpress.com). Kelly presented a paper on art and music in Sense and Sensibility at the Fort Worth AGM in 2011.