

“—a very elegant looking instrument—”: Musical Symbols and Substance in Films of Jane Austen’s Novels

KATHRYN L. SHANKS LIBIN

Department of Music, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY 12604-0018

The recent flowering of Jane Austen novels on television and film raises fascinating issues of interpretation and authenticity. Great efforts have been made to recreate believable nineteenth-century backgrounds; the houses, furniture, costumes, jewelry, and so forth all show scrupulous historical research and attention to detail. Original musical instruments have likewise been featured in these new visual versions of Jane Austen’s texts. However, it is relatively easy to fit an attractive old instrument into its period setting; finding the right tone with the music itself is a much more complicated problem, and few of the film makers involved with Austen’s works have demonstrated perfect pitch in this matter. For the problem consists not simply of finding the right musical symbols: the proper instruments, or sound, or representative pieces of music that Jane Austen might have known; but of grappling, as well, with the musical substance of her novels. In certain instances music is an essential plot device; and musical performance reveals key aspects of personality in many of her characters.

Jane Austen herself faithfully practiced the piano, and copied out music into notebooks for her own use. Indeed, her music notebooks show that she was an accomplished musician, possessing a firm grasp of the rules and implications of musical notation and, not surprisingly, an elegant copyist’s hand.¹ The mere existence of these notebooks, which represent countless hours of devoted labor as well as pleasure, shows the central role that music played in Austen’s own life. Clearly we need to pay close attention to the role of music in her novels. In studying the films, I would like to address certain specific questions: do the film makers succeed in capturing the musical substance in Austen’s original texts? do they represent the music authentically, i.e. in an historically informed way? and do they use music as an interpretative strategy in itself, going beyond Austen’s texts to provide their own musical “commentary” on the action or narrative? I will focus on recent films of three novels in which music gives significant aid in shaping the plot and characterization: *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice*.²

Let us begin with *Emma* (the Gwyneth Paltrow feature film, not the BBC version). In this novel we find one of Jane Austen’s true

musicians, Jane Fairfax, as well as a performer of lesser ability in Emma Woodhouse. The fact that the accomplished Jane has no instrument of her own arouses the sympathy of her neighbors. Naturally the Woodhouses possess a piano, on which Jane and Emma play one evening; after this occasion Mr. Knightley comments to Emma, "You and Miss Fairfax gave us some very good music . . . I was glad you made her play so much, for having no instrument at her grandmother's, it must have been a real indulgence" (*E* 170).³ Another Highbury family, the Coles, display their rising social status with a fine piano, of which Mrs. Cole artlessly says, "I really was ashamed to look at our new grand pianoforté in the drawing-room, while I do not know one note from another . . . and there is poor Jane Fairfax, who is mistress of music, has not any thing of the nature of an instrument, not even the pitifullest old spinnet in the world, to amuse herself with" (*E* 216). Emma and Jane perform again on this occasion, unexpectedly joined by Frank Churchill.

But the most important instrument of the novel is a Broadwood piano, a costly gift with no visible donor, which mysteriously appears at the home of Jane Fairfax. Described as "a very elegant looking instrument—not a grand, but a large-sized square pianoforté" (*E* 214-15), the piano arouses a fury of speculation in Highbury, and triggers the reactions that will eventually reveal Jane Fairfax's engagement to Frank Churchill.

A significant weakness of the film version is its failure to appreciate the significance of the Broadwood as a plot element; in the film, we hear of the piano's arrival in conversation at the Coles', but we never see or hear it as we do in the book, nor are we allowed to witness Jane Fairfax's troubled reaction to it. An instrument of this type, built by London's foremost piano builder, would have been an expensive gift (in 1802, a Broadwood square piano of the "elegant" type, with damper pedal and decoration, listed for about 35 pounds; more than Jane Fairfax, her grandmother or aunt could have afforded)⁴—and, if given by a young man to a woman not his wife, a most compromising one. While pianos usually functioned in novels and paintings of this period as emblems of social harmony, here Austen has subverted the normal rule and used the piano to sow domestic discord. Poor Jane Fairfax, secretly engaged to Frank Churchill, suffers severe embarrassment at the receipt of the piano, and we may imagine that her music gives her little joy until the engagement finally comes to light and receives the sanction of society.

Nor does the gift reflect well on Frank Churchill, who thoughtlessly instigates his fiancée's discomfort. Interestingly, Austen offers

other musical signs to suggest that Frank was not quite the gentleman he ought to have been. When he surprises Emma by joining her at the Coles' piano, and must beg her pardon at the close of the song, he proves himself to be a rather fast young man; in this period, the pursuit of music was not considered to be an altogether gentlemanly occupation, a topic to which I will return in a moment. When he sings with Jane, Emma absently notes "the sweet sounds of the united voices" (E 227), but without finding any implications in that union, as other, wiser observers might have done. And when Frank declares himself to be "excessively fond of music" (E 201), suspicions should immediately have been aroused; for in Jane Austen's novels, characters who say they are "passionately," "doatingly," or "excessively" fond of music unfailingly turn out to be cads or frauds (think, for example, of Mrs. Elton or Lady Catherine de Bourgh). In the film *Emma*, the musical performance at the Coles' does take place, but is handled with mixed results. We are allowed a glimpse of Jane Fairfax's musicality and vulnerability when she sings the cautionary air "Virgins are like the fair flower" from *The Beggar's Opera*, while Frank Churchill joins in with gusto.⁵ However, the fine old piano that we see gives out the sound of a modern concert piano in a clear mismatch of visual and aural effects.

This unfortunate gap between sound and image continues in the film *Sense and Sensibility*, which features a number of handsome old pianos—all of them carefully selected as representative of fine London piano building, *circa* 1800—that sadly, again, all sound like modern pianos. The small square pianos that Marianne plays at Barton Park and Barton Cottage should have brought forth a delicate, silvery tone in keeping with the lightness of her voice; while the grand piano at Norland should have sounded brighter and more plangent than the mellow, homogenized tone of the modern piano in the soundtrack. In a film with such elaborately realized settings as *Sense and Sensibility*, one would expect to find more care taken with the sound of the instruments; however, authenticity in the realm of sound is sacrificed to the general richness of the soundtrack. Since the quality of the music, written by Patrick Doyle, is very effective and fine (particularly the solo pieces for Marianne, which weave thematically throughout the film as a whole), I will not complain too much about the sound of the pianos. There are more important matters of musical interpretation in question here.

Marianne Dashwood is the embodiment of romantic sensibility in the novel, and music is her primary vehicle of expression. She plays the piano and sings in a number of scenes, all of which are taken up in the film and magnified, so that Marianne at the piano becomes a

central focus of the story. In Austen's text, music is also one of the key elements that unites Marianne and the ardent Willoughby: "They read, they talked, they sang together; his musical talents were considerable . . ." (*S&S* 48). After Willoughby's abrupt and painful departure, music was Marianne's chief outlet and indulgence: "She played over every favourite song that she had been used to play to Willoughby, every air in which their voices had been oftenest joined, and sat at the instrument gazing on every line of music that he had written out for her, till her heart was so heavy that no farther sadness could be gained . . . she spent whole hours at the pianoforté alternately singing and crying; her voice often totally suspended by her tears" (*S&S* 83). This brings us to an important divergence between the novel and the film; for while the screen Marianne and Willoughby read Shakespeare together, spin about madly on the lawn in front of Barton Cottage, and whirl through town in his flashy gig with flying dust and lusty screams, they never once make music together. This choice on the screenwriter's part deserves our close consideration, for on the one hand it shows a misreading of Jane Austen's implications about Willoughby's character, and on the other serves as a reflection of twentieth-century attitudes and sensibilities.

By the end of the eighteenth century, music was considered an essential aspect of feminine accomplishment in England; this we recognize in Jane Austen's female characters, nearly all of whose musical gifts, or lack thereof, are carefully delineated. But something of the reverse operated in relation to men, who no longer required musical training to be properly educated, and who moreover could be regarded as disreputable if they were musicians. In 1749 Lord Chesterfield wrote to his son, then in Venice, "As you are now in a musical country, where singing, fiddling, and piping, are not only the common topics of conversation, but almost the principal objects of attention, I cannot help cautioning you against giving in to those (I will call them illiberal) pleasures (though music is commonly reckoned one of the liberal arts). . . . If you love music, hear it; go to operas, concerts, and pay fiddlers to play to you; but I insist upon your neither piping nor fiddling yourself. It puts a gentleman in a very frivolous, contemptible light; brings him into a great deal of bad company; and takes up a great deal of time, which might be much better employed."⁶ We find similar warnings issued in numerous courtesy books of the period; for example, writer David Hartley stated, "It is evident, that most Kinds of Music, Painting, and Poetry, have close Connexions with Vice, particularly with the Vices of Intemperance and Lewdness; that they represent them in gay pleas-

ing Colours . . . that they cannot be enjoyed without evil Communications.”⁷ An instructive illustration of this contemporary attitude may be found in the career of celebrated London pianist Johann Samuel Schroeter, who married a gentleman’s daughter in the 1780s, but only on condition that he give up his musical career; this he did, in exchange for an ample annuity.⁸

Jane Austen, therefore, was giving a strong hint as to Willoughby’s true colors, for he was clearly too proficient musically for a cautious woman’s comfort; however, Marianne Dashwood (along with her mother) was not a cautious woman, but one blinded by passion. Their perpetual singing and playing together represented a “consummation” of their relationship that convinced onlookers that they were engaged. Why, then, was so significant an aspect of their interaction neglected in the film?

The answer seems in part to be that other kinds of behavior can be shown on film that are just as compromising, and a bit more exhilarating, at least to outward appearances; thus, the wild buggy ride and the spinning on the lawn. More importantly, Emma Thompson, the screenwriter, shifts Willoughby’s musical affinities to Colonel Brandon, instantly making the Colonel more interesting to modern eyes.⁹ Jane Austen’s Colonel Brandon appears to be a bit colorless; an older, quiet man with an honorable soldier’s background and the concerns of a country gentleman. But we in the twentieth century admire a strong man who also has a soft side. Thompson’s musical feminization of Colonel Brandon enhances his character in our view, and makes him seem more worthy of Marianne than Willoughby. Furthermore, when Colonel Brandon gradually stands revealed as a musician—possessor of a Broadwood grand, a fine player, and finally, the donor of a lovely square piano to Marianne (how neatly Thompson has snagged those details from *Emma*)—he emerges as the one *true* mate for Marianne. With Willoughby Marianne found a meeting of minds, but with Brandon a meeting of souls transpires. In the novel Colonel Brandon expresses concern over Marianne’s opinions on relationships, asking her sister Elinor, “Does your sister make no distinction in her objections against a second attachment? or is it equally criminal in every body? Are those who have been disappointed in their first choice, whether from the inconstancy of its object, or the perverseness of circumstances, to be equally indifferent during the rest of their lives?” (*S&S* 56). Our age of high divorce rates inclines many of us to believe that, in fact, the second attachment is the most real and the most significant; Emma Thompson’s *Sense and Sensibility* has given us, through the power of musical affinity,

and a high opinion of second attachments, a Colonel Brandon for our time.

Finally, I would like to turn to the recent BBC/A&E version of *Pride and Prejudice*, which in my opinion is musically the most successful of these three films. Here the film makers have shown exceptional sensitivity to the musical possibilities of Austen's novel; they not only capture the sound of the period, in the spirited forte-piano playing of Melvyn Tan, but also the nuanced handling of music as social intercourse in Austen's original text. Carl Davis's lively score, with its wittily appropriate hunting motif at the opening, alternates his original music with well chosen period music.¹⁰

In two contrasting assemblies, the dance at the Red Lion inn in Meryton and the Netherfield ball, the Bennet family appear against the backdrop of country society. The very different social planes represented by the hosts of each gathering are reflected in the music provided for the dancing; while country dances are played at both parties, the band at the Red Lion comprises only a wooden flute, a fiddle, and a cello for the base line, while the Netherfield ensemble includes not only strings, but a small wind band of flute, oboe, bassoon, and horn. Since the 1780s, such wind bands had been popular with the aristocracy throughout Europe, playing an important role in elite entertainments (opera lovers will recall the wind band that plays for the banquet finale in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*); here the group clearly signifies the elevated status of Netherfield's inhabitants. The haunting, stately music that accompanies Eliza Bennet and Mr. Darcy in their dance at Netherfield is an authentic eighteenth-century dance piece, "Mr. Beveridge's Maggot," from *The English Dancing Master* of 1728 (attentive listeners will have heard it in *Emma* as well).

Fine pianos are sprinkled throughout the various dwellings of Austen's characters in this production. Lucas Lodge, Longbourn, and the Meryton home of Mrs. Philips all contain small, attractive "square" pianos—built by leading London manufacturers like Broadwood or Clementi—that were the standard household instruments of the British middle class in this period. Designed essentially for domestic music making, these pianos were ideally suited for accompanying the voice, providing casual dance music (as at Mrs. Philips's house), and serving as vehicles for practicing (as we see Mary Bennet doing at Longbourn). Their compact shape and intimate sound made them the perfect parlor instruments.

However, the grand drawing rooms of the rich demanded a "grand" style of piano; thus at Netherfield, Rosings, and Pemberley we see the *crème de la crème* among pianos of the time, stately

instruments built with costly woods and fitted with all the latest pedal-operated devices required for fashionable contemporary music. Naturally we are not permitted to view any young lady actually *practicing* on any of these elegant machines, though they must have done, in order to become the thoroughly accomplished women of Miss Bingley's description (*P&P* 39). Instead, these instruments are meant for display, as opposed to mere playing. The disgraceful fumbling of young Mary Bennet (whose off-key renditions of the humble sentimental tunes "Slumber dear maid" and "My mother bids me bind my hair" must have seemed a defilement of the piano to its proud possessors) during the evening at Netherfield, was sharply—indeed, deliberately and rudely—upstaged by Mrs. Hurst's too fast, flashy performance of Mozart's "Turkish" rondo;¹¹ a work neatly selected by the film makers not only to parallel the modish turban worn by the lady, but to illustrate her rank through more elevated music than that played by Mary Bennet. Of course, not even Mozart can lend more than a veneer of gentility to a truly ill-natured performer!

On the other hand, we learn that Mozart's superb music can ennoble a woman already graced with intelligence and spirit; for at Rosings, Eliza Bennet tellingly plays an expressive *Andante grazioso*, the tender counterbalance to the aggressive "Turkish" finale from the same Mozart sonata that Mrs. Hurst had played. By having the two ladies share the same sonata, the film makers place them squarely in the same cultural sphere, while illustrating their very different personalities through the contrasting moods and styles of performing. The climax comes in Eliza's performance at Pemberley, where she plays on the most beautiful of all these pianos—newly purchased for Mr. Darcy's beloved sister—the famous aria "Voi che sapete" from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*.¹² In this aria, Cherubino describes the sensations of being in love for the first time; surely no other love song could better illustrate Eliza's romantic capitulation, in terms that the cultured Mr. Darcy could well understand. Her heartfelt rendition of Mozart's music tells us that the ennoblement of Elizabeth Bennet has already been accomplished; all that remains is the official sanction of marriage to Mr. Darcy that will confirm her status. It is important to note that the vision of nobility inherent in Mozart's music is a product, again, of our own time. Mozart had not yet achieved such prestige in Jane Austen's England; indeed, in Austen's music notebooks, only one piece by Mozart appears, and it is not even attributed to him.¹³

Though this scene in the novel does not expressly include music, in the film musical performance becomes one current of the eve-

ning's discourse, as might quite naturally have occurred. The music also conveys the unspoken deepening of feeling between Darcy and Eliza, which in the book emerges through delicate implication. The makers of *Pride and Prejudice* were able to employ the potent resources of music to enhance the story and develop the characters, without altering the sense or substance of Jane Austen's original text.

NOTES

- ¹ The notebooks survive at the Jane Austen House in Chawton, with reference numbers CHWJA/19/2 and CHWJA/19/3; their contents have been catalogued in *Jane Austen's Music*, ed. Ian Gammie and Derek McCulloch (St. Albans; Corda Music Publications, 1996). Further discussion of the notebooks appears in Patrick Piggott, *The Innocent Diversion. A Study of Music in the Life and Writings of Jane Austen* (London: Douglas Cleverdon, The Clover Hill Editions, 1979). My thanks to Mr. T. F. Carpenter of the Jane Austen Memorial Trust at Chawton for kindly allowing me to study the notebooks in August 1997.
- ² Jane Austen, *Emma*, adapt. and dir. Douglas McGrath, music by Rachel Portman (Miramax, 1996); *Sense and Sensibility*, adapt. Emma Thompson, dir. Ang Lee, music by Patrick Doyle (Columbia Pictures, 1995); *Pride and Prejudice*, adapt. Andrew Davies, dir. Simon Langton, music by Carl Davis (A&E-BBC, 1995).
- ³ Quotations from Austen's text are taken from *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 3rd ed., ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932). Page references appear in the text.
- ⁴ David Wainwright, *Broadwood by Appointment: A History* (London: Quiller Press, 1982), 99.
- ⁵ John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*, Act I, Air 6 (1728).
- ⁶ Letter of 19 April 1749. Philip Dormer Stanhope, *Letters to his Son by the Earl of Chesterfield on the Fine Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman*, ed. Oliver G. H. Leigh, 2 vols. (New York: The Chesterfield Press, 1917) 1:170.
- ⁷ David Hartley, *Observations of Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations* (1749; reprint Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1966), 253-54. For further discussion see Richard Leppert, *Music and image: Domesticity, ideology and socio-cultural formation in eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11-27.
- ⁸ Ronald R. Kidd, "Johann Samuel Schroeter," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 6th ed., 20 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1980) 16:747.
- ⁹ Emma Thompson, *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay & Diaries: Bringing Jane Austen's Novel to Film* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1995; revised 1996).
- ¹⁰ For Davis's own comments on his score for the film, see Sue Birtwhistle and Susie Conklin, *The Making of Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Books/BBC Books, 1995), 61-65.
- ¹¹ Wolfgang Amadè Mozart, Sonata in A, K. 331, movement 3 (1783).
- ¹² Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Act II, scene 3 (1786).
- ¹³ Titled "The Duke of York's New March performed by the Coldstream Regiment," the piece is a keyboard arrangement of the famous *Non più andrai* from *Le Nozze di Figaro*; found in CHWJA/19/2, page 35.