Musicianship and Morality in the Novels of Jane Austen

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Introduction

In her surviving letters, Jane Austen mentions music occasionally among news of friends, neighbours and family. We know that she played the piano, 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 the inconclusive evidence supplied by the music which survives at Chawton. Gillen D'Arcy Wood concludes that

The collection suggests she was a fine amateur pianist. The most difficult of the sonatas in the Chawton books – if they were at Austen’s command – would rank her among her own female characters, if not at the near-professional excellence of Jane Fairfax, then certainly higher than Emma Woodhouse. Marianne Dashwood and Anne Elliot perhaps best represent her own standard.¹

Set against this is the recollection of her niece Caroline:

Aunt Jane began her day with music – for which I conclude she had a natural taste; … She played very pretty tunes, I thought – and I liked to stand by her and listen to them; but the music (for I knew the books well in after years) would now be thought disgracefully easy.²

Music certainly played a part in her life: her letters reveal a dislike for public concerts, appreciation of people who are honest about their lack of musical taste, and sometimes

genuine enjoyment of a superior 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.

Musicianship is a common thread in all the novels but one, although it is woven into the fabrics of the five novels to quite different effects. The exception, and therefore excluded from this discussion, is *Northanger Abbey*. Certainly it is significant that Catherine has no accomplishments, as this sets her apart from conventional heroines of fiction; but there is no other character who is a musician to whom she is compared, and music itself plays no part in the action of the novel or the daily life of its characters.

This essay is in five parts, one covering each novel and dealing with a theme which seems particularly well illustrated by that novel.

1. ‘*Neither musical nor affecting to be so*: the question of taste in *Sense and Sensibility*

The question of aesthetic taste and its relationship to moral worth was a common subject of eighteenth-century moralists and philosophers. Hermione Lee shows that, in the eighteenth century, ‘it was felt that taste for art, taste for literature, and taste for nature, were related, and were all three suggestive of one's moral worth.’³ It is clear that Austen did not concur: both the Crawfords in *Mansfield Park* have taste without morals, and Mrs Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility* has morality without taste. While it is true that all Austen’s truly admirable characters combine these qualities, I am inclined to

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agree with Lee when she says that ‘she was thoroughly satirical of the excesses to which that idea could lead’. Of all Austen’s characters, the one who most completely illustrates the dangers of believing that sensibility to art, literature and nature equates with moral virtue is Marianne Dashwood.

Marianne is musical, Elinor is not. This is one of the explicit ways in which Austen distinguishes between her two heroines in *Sense and Sensibility*. Though Elinor has a talent for drawing, she has a much more pragmatic, down-to-earth attitude to the picturesque than Marianne, and she enjoys ironically undercutting Marianne’s rhapsodies.

Music can be a dangerous indulgence for a devotee of sensibility. After Willoughby leaves Barton, Marianne

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 further sadness could be gained; and this nourishment of grief was every day applied. She spent whole hours at the pianoforte alternately singing and crying, her voice often totally suspended by her tears. (SS 83)

Marianne’s excessive indulgence of grief seems at first to be almost a game. Perhaps she plans to talk it over in happier days when she is reunited with Willoughby. But when there is no happy reunion, she is unable to find another way of behaving: she has learned to play the role of the injured heroine, and only her nearly fatal illness can teach

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4 Lee 83.
5 References to the novels of Jane Austen throughout this paper will be to the 3rd edition of the novels by R.W. Chapman, published by Oxford University Press in 1933. The following abbreviations will be used in the text, followed by the page number: *Sense and Sensibility* (SS); *Pride and Prejudice* (PP); *Mansfield Park* (MP); *Emma* (E); *Persuasion* (P).
her the lesson of sense over sensibility. On her return to Barton, there is a parallel passage which clearly demonstrates the change in her attitude:

After dinner she would try her pianoforte. She went to it; but the music on which her eye first rested was an opera, procured for her by Willoughby containing some of their favourite duets, and bearing on its outward leaf her own name in his handwriting –. That would not do. – She shook her head, put the music aside, and after running over the keys for a minute complained of feebleness in her fingers, and closed the instrument again; declaring however with firmness as she did so, that she should in future practise much. (SS 342)

Music has become for her, in her new, mature frame of mind, more of a discipline than an indulgence, she plans to rise at six and ‘divide every moment between music and reading’ (SS 343). Reading in Austen is usually a sign of seriousness, and this linking of the two arts gives music an equal status. Juliette Wells concludes that ‘in spite of her resolution, Marianne never returns to the instrument in the remainder of the novel. So overpowering are music’s associations with her former emotionalism and unwise first love, apparently, that she must cut herself off from it permanently.’ That Marianne’s piano-playing does not appear again in the last 37 pages of the novel, which have to encompass Elinor’s reunion with Edward as well as her own marriage to Brandon, can hardly be cited as proof. On the contrary, music, I believe, would continue to play an important part in her married life, as recreation and even perhaps an emotional release – she does not lose all her sensibility – and also for the enjoyment of her husband, to whom she becomes, eventually, completely devoted.

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For Elinor, music has no such meaning. ‘Elinor was neither musical, nor affecting to be so’ (SS 250). As Elinor is something of a moral yardstick in the novel, it is tempting to interpret this as a repudiation of music, until we read that her brother John is not musical either. The telling phrase is ‘nor affecting to be so’. Affectation is always a target for Jane Austen's satire. Elinor knows herself and her tastes, and makes no pretence to like what she has no interest in. There is also a contrast implicit between Elinor's honest lack of interest and Lady Middleton's affected musical taste, displayed by her pretence of listening to Marianne without noticing what music she is playing. Elinor's attitude to music echoes passages in Jane Austen's letters, where she expresses indifference to singing in particular and concerts in general, ‘being what Nature made me on that article’. She seemed to believe that musical taste was inborn, and there was no moral value attached to it: her argument with Mr Haden over what appears to be a quotation from *The Merchant of Venice* shows her taking the part of the unmusical, perhaps in defence not so much of herself as of other members of her family who, according to her nephew, ‘were less fond of music’. Other letters show approval of people who honestly admit not liking music, which could be interpreted as dislike of affectation, and sympathy for differing tastes, rather than dislike of music on her own part.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, music has a role in displaying the extremes of sensibility in Marianne, who can submerge herself completely when playing the piano, and of affectation and insincerity in Lady Middleton. Austen uses the change in

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8 Letters 43.
Marianne's attitude to music to mirror a more profound change in her attitude to herself and her world. Musicianship is neither a vice nor a virtue: Marianne is musical by nature, and Elinor is not; and these characteristics are used to reflect other qualities like honesty in Elinor, and youthful imprudence and eventual maturity in Marianne.

2. Capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance: music as a female accomplishment in Pride and Prejudice

Elizabeth Bennet is not a faultless heroine, and like Emma Woodhouse has much to learn. Wood claims that 'in Austen, failure to meet the minimum terms of accomplishment is worse than their abuse.' However, though like Emma Elizabeth is an imperfect musician, her lack of diligence does not carry the moral charge of Emma's. This is perhaps because Elizabeth is more genuinely self-confident and less defensive than Emma: she has no Jane Fairfax to show her up. The contrast to her musical skills is provided by her sister Mary, who devotes her life to accomplishments to make up for her deficiencies in personal charms. Mary’s devotion to music and learning, to the ‘study of thorough bass and human nature’ (PP 60), is always represented as more or less worthless, perhaps reflecting the anxiety about accomplishments which is evident from the conduct literature of the late eighteenth century. Mary has ‘worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments’ (PP 25), so it seems unfair that she should be so thoroughly condemned; but something has gone wrong with Mary’s education. Her motives are faulty, and that shows in the final product: ‘Mary had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic

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10 Wood, 370.
11 For a discussion of this literature, see for example Wells, 'In music,' 99-102 and Wood 368-70.
air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached' (PP 25). Elizabeth, ‘easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well’ (PP 25), and has used her time better by concentrating on learning to mix with people, as Darcy admits, rather than wasting time on mere technical skills (PP 175). Mary’s problem, however, is not so much that she has applied herself to these accomplishments, but that she has not the intelligence to use the knowledge and skills she has acquired to her advantage.

Austen’s satirical treatment of Mary is perhaps slightly malicious, but in *Pride and Prejudice* she is not dealing with questions of morality and education in the serious way she later addresses these issues. We may pity Mary, but we are excused for not liking her.

We are never called on to pity Caroline Bingley. She unites affectation with insincerity, shallowness and a clumsy artfulness that always fails to impress Darcy. For her and her sister, music is an ornament, a lady-like occupation for the drawing room, when the gentlemen are present to be impressed. Even though it is never explicitly stated, the Bingley sisters only seem to perform to a male audience. When Jane is sick, they are not often absent from the sick room as ‘the gentlemen being out, they had in fact nothing to do elsewhere’ (PP 33). Elizabeth, on the other hand, always has something to occupy her idle time. In one instance, the Bingley sisters are said to enjoy music. They ‘solaced their wretchedness’ at Jane’s illness ‘by duets after supper’ (PP 40). However, this statement is so barbed that we are invited to assume that music for them is merely a heartless occupation. Their standard of performance is never commented on: presumably they had a typical young lady’s education, with all the
attention on externals and none on the moral basis of behaviour. Caroline Bingley’s definition of an accomplished woman – one who has ‘a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and all the modern languages … and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions’ (PP 39) – is perhaps an indirect boast that she embodies these qualities, and a reference to Georgina Darcy’s superiority to Jane, to discourage Elizabeth from seeing Bingley as a potential brother-in-law. Darcy agrees with her, but adds that ‘to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading’ (PP 39), implying not only Caroline’s failure to attain his standard – she cannot bring herself to read with any application even to impress Darcy – but perhaps his growing attraction to Elizabeth. She deflates them both with her forthright protest that ‘I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united’ (PP 40).

_Pride and Prejudice_ may be seen, among other things, as a plea for the imperfections of a lively intelligence against the greater sins of thoughtless pursuit of pleasure (embodied by Lydia), heartless insincerity (in Caroline) and the affected stupidity of Mary. Elizabeth’s musicianship is part of her easy and unaffected personality. It, among other things, does attract Darcy’s attention and admiration, but she does not play merely for display. In this novel, music has a natural and unemphasised place in normal social life, and in Elizabeth’s case it is simply part of her public presentation. As she is not vain about her appearance, she is not vain about her music. Vanity spoils Mary’s performance, and the absence of vanity enhances Elizabeth’s.
3. *No moral effect on the mind*: music in education (Mansfield Park)

Whether or not Jane Austen had read John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, she certainly shared his view that, in a child’s education, learning was ‘subservient to the greater qualities’ of ‘virtue, wisdom [and] breeding.’\(^{12}\) This belief is implicit in most of the novels; and the heroines usually gain crucial self-knowledge in a context outside their formal education, often from the man they will eventually marry. In *Mansfield Park*, despite the emphasis on accomplishments in the education of Maria and Julia, Fanny is left to herself to a great deal. As Kathryn Libin points out,

> In this respect the *laissez-faire* attitude toward education at Mansfield Park … actually aids Fanny in her personal growth; in many other households, she might well have been chained to the piano against her will. Instead she is permitted without intervention to cultivate her own tastes, particularly her taste for reading.\(^{13}\)

However, Fanny is not entirely without guidance:

> 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)

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Mansfield Park is in many ways a novel about women’s education. Mary Wollstonecraft’s Introduction to A Vindication of the Rights of Women sets out views very similar to those dramatized in this novel:

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.¹⁴

Clearly Austen would not profess to aim to make women more ambitious in a worldly sense, or more masculine (one could certainly mount an argument for her belief in the equality of the sexes in all important areas of life), 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,¹⁵ and the education of the Bertram sisters and Mary Crawford has ‘accomplish[ed] 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

¹⁵ See Libin, ‘Lifting’ for a discussion of Fanny’s response to nature versus art.
not a musician. However, Fanny’s lack of musical skill springs from a different source. Elinor does not play because she prefers another branch of the arts – she draws and paints. Fanny, according to her cousins, ‘says she does not want to learn either music or drawing’ (MP 19). Knowing Fanny as we do, we can assume that 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 agrees with 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.’\(^\text{16}\) Also, it would have been clear that all her cousins’ accomplishments do not make them either pleasant or thoughtful companions. 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 her own selfhood is vindicated in later life by allowing her to survive the temptations which overcome Maria and Julia. Julia’s elopement is, after all, partly in emulation of her older sister’s behaviour. Want of emulation in Fanny is a source of strength. Sir Thomas, having left his daughters’ education in the hands of his sister-in-law, is ‘too glad to be satisfied’ (MP 201) with the results. He has taught them ‘to repress their spirits in his presence,’ which makes ‘their real disposition unknown to him’ (MP 463).

and it is only after the disgrace of Maria’s affair with Henry Crawford that he 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).

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). With her London ideas, her harp and her liveliness, Mary has ‘a mind led astray and bewildered, and without any suspicion of being so; darkened, yet fancying itself light’ (MP 367). Her good-heartedness and genuine feelings are shown, but they do not prevent her being ‘careless as a woman and a friend’ (MP 260).

Music itself in *Mansfield Park* has a disadvantage. As Fanny does not play, it is logical that her rival should be musical. Music has the effect of drawing Edmund away from Fanny. But she is enough the heroine of sensibility to enjoy music, and Mary plays the harp ‘with superior tone and expression’ (MP 207). Fanny’s taste is genuine, and her jealous feelings, although clouding other issues, do not entirely prevent her from enjoying Mary’s music.

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, and in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth, at least, has not be 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). In contrast, Fanny’s education has been more solid, having been directed by Edmund. At the end of the novel Austen extols the Price family’s ‘advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure’ (MP 473). However, we have seen 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). It is surprising, then, that Fanny could even ‘read, work, and write’ (MP 18) on her arrival at Mansfield Park. The Price household hardly seems the abode of discipline, though hardship is certainly present. Austen’s point is probably that there is no emphasis in the Price’s education on merely decorative accomplishments, and they are none the worse for this deficiency.

Music in *Mansfield Park* is used as a symbol of the shallow, husband-hunting attitude to feminine life. Indeed, it is often used thus in the other novels, but in *Mansfield Park* it has no counteracting social usefulness or educational discipline. Musicianship itself is not condemned, but the implication is that a girl can do very well without it.

4. ‘The degree of excellence which she would have been glad to command’: subjective attitudes to musicianship in *Emma*

There are three young female musicians in *Emma*. For each of Jane Fairfax, Augusta Elton and Emma Woodhouse, piano-playing has a distinct significance related to the past, present and future course of their lives. Their attitudes to their own and each
other’s musicianship influence their perceptions of their worlds and themselves, and there is a remarkable diversity of implications for each of these young women. As Libin observes, 'in no other novel do so many of the main characters reveal essential aspects of their personalities through their attitudes toward music.'

Jane Fairfax has the most reason to be ambivalent about her musical skills. We are told that the Campbells have given her ‘an excellent education’ with the purpose of ‘supplying the means of respectable subsistence’ as a governess (E 164), and music is prominent among the talents she has developed. To Emma, Jane’s skill is a source of uneasy self-consciousness and regret at her own lack of application; to Mrs Elton it is a means of vicarious gratification and an excuse for officiousness, but what does it mean to Jane herself? For reasons of point of view and plot, we are exposed to very few of her thoughts, but we do know that she has resolved to ‘retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification for ever’ (E 165) at the age of 21. So Jane’s musical skills form part of her competence ‘to the office of instruction’ (E 164) and this fact would hardly be a source of pleasure. Against her own taste and judgement, she may feel that these highly marketable skills now pose a threat to her future happiness, as they prompt Mrs Elton to rush her against her will into a situation with a fashionable family.

Other implications of Jane’s musicianship can be seen obliquely through the actions and opinions of others. Frank Churchill’s thoughtless present of a piano adds fuel to Emma’s already kindled fancy of Jane’s secret romance with her friend’s husband, and puts her at the centre of unwelcome gossip and speculation. The

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pleasure Jane has in the gift would be far outweighed by embarrassment, anxiety and guilt. So for Jane Fairfax, music could bring little pleasure, and her considerable skills little lasting satisfaction.

One function of Jane Fairfax is to provide a standard of comparison with Emma. There is certainly a moral implication in the correlation between the application and self-discipline of the two girls and their respective musical ability. Emma has never needed to become good at anything in particular:

She had always wanted to do everything, and had made more progress both in drawing and in music than many might have done with so little labour as she would ever submit to. She played and sang; – and drew in almost every style; but steadiness was wanting; and in nothing had she approached the degree of excellence which she would have been glad to command, and ought not to have failed of. (E 44)

Her future is secure: her musical and artistic proficiency does not make any practical difference in her life, as it does in the case of Jane Fairfax. She has hard lessons to learn but they will be learned without improving her accomplishments. Nevertheless, her musicianship is important. Firstly, it shows her moral character as it stands at the start of the action, and secondly it illuminates and partly explains her feelings for Jane. She has a fair estimate of her own skill: ‘She was not much deceived as to her own skill either as artist or musician, but she was not unwilling to have others deceived, or sorry to know her reputation for accomplishment often higher than it deserved’ (E 44). This passage is highly revealing, couched in passives and double negatives which lessen the moral charge but do not remove it. Her assurance is, however, shaken by
Jane. Mr Knightley suggests that her dislike of Jane is caused by her awareness of their disparity in musical skills, ‘and though the accusation had been eagerly refuted at the time, there were moments of self-examination in which her conscience could not quite acquit her’ (E 166). That troublesome conscience is, of course, in the end Emma’s greatest asset.

Mrs Elton, the other young lady reputed to be accomplished, has no such capacity. Musical proficiency to her is a mere matter of reputation. She wears her accomplishments in very much the same way as she trims her gowns, disclaiming a taste for finery while displaying it to the full. The vanity and self-deception we see in Emma are caricatured in Mrs Elton, with the important difference that underneath Mrs Elton’s faults there lies no moral worth.

In *Emma* musicianship has no intrinsic moral value. Jane and Emma have it in approximate proportion to their youthful application and self-discipline. Mrs Elton uses musicianship as an element in the elaborate image of herself she is at pains to project. The pleasure that music can afford to either players or listeners is barely glanced at. Only Mr Knightley refers to the ‘luxurious state’ of ‘sitting at one’s ease to be entertained a whole evening by two such young women; sometimes with music and sometimes with conversation’ (E 170). He also mentions the pleasure it must be to Jane to be able to play at Hartfield: this is the only hint that she takes pleasure in music at all. As for Emma, her pleasure is outweighed by her guilty conscience. Only, perhaps, in Mrs Weston’s cheerful provision of country dances at the Coles’ do we see an uncomplicated joy in musical performance, unaccompanied by vanity, selfishness, guilt or dread for the future.
5. ‘Talents or accomplishments for home’: music as a personal resource in *Persuasion*

In *Persuasion* we have a heroine who is isolated within a close-knit society, as are Fanny Price and Elinor Dashwood in their different ways. Each of these three characters also has a strong sense of social obligation and finds satisfaction, if not pleasure, in being useful without expecting gratitude. But of these three, Anne is the only musician. Music is both an aspect of her isolation and a means of being useful in her small crowded world.

Not since Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* has Austen presented a heroine to whom playing music is an important source of pleasure in itself.¹⁸ To Anne, however, it is not a dangerous indulgence. There is a world of difference between Marianne’s ‘nourishment of grief’ (SS 83) and Anne’s playing country dances at the Musgroves’: ‘though her eyes would sometimes fill with tears as she sat at the instrument, she was extremely glad to be employed, and desired nothing in return but to be unobserved’ (P 71). Anne can see the dangers of her sensitivity to art and nature. Her tears at the pianoforte, unlike Marianne’s, are signs of tenderness and sensibility which are good qualities, particularly as she is careful to keep them to herself and not upset her family and friends.

The solitary enjoyment of music, whether others are present or not, is a resource of a type which the most shallow of female characters in the novels are entirely without. In *Persuasion*, Anne’s sisters Elizabeth and Mary have respectively ‘no talents or

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¹⁸ Wood claims that ‘to the actual pleasures of music … or musicianship as an expression of self and its autonomy, as with Anne Elliot … modern criticism is entirely deaf’ (369). However, Wells treats this subject in her 2004 article ‘“In music she had always used to feel alone in the world”: Jane Austen, solitude, and the artistic woman.’
accomplishments for home’ (P 9) and ‘no resources for solitude’ (P 37). Their absence of resources to fall back upon is both a weakness in character – a sign of shallowness, lack of imagination and perhaps even stupidity – and a personal disadvantage. Of the three sisters, Anne is the only one who has the intelligence to turn her talent to her advantage as an occupation, and the taste to enjoy music for its own sake.

Perhaps Austen herself enjoyed music mostly as a solitary occupation. As Wood points out, ‘private practice, not public performance, formed the greater part of a Georgian woman’s musical life.’¹⁹ James Edward Austen-Leigh’s Memoir tells us that she practiced every day before breakfast, ‘I believe … partly that she might not disturb the rest of the party who were less fond of music.’²⁰ But she would also play for the enjoyment of others, as long as she was not the centre of attention. Like Anne Elliot and her namesake Anne Weston in Emma, she played country dances for the young people of the family ‘when we have the pleasure of their company.’²¹ Anne is conscious of her superior musical skills, but does not resent the Musgrove’s preference for their daughters’ inferior performance, which ‘gave her much more pleasure for their sakes, than mortification for her own’ (P 47). For Louisa and Henrietta, music is one of ‘all the usual stock of accomplishments’ they have ‘brought from a school at Exeter’ (P 40). Their good spirits and pleasant manners initially attract Captain Wentworth, but it is not long before he realises his mistake and reverts to his former preference for Anne. Music is something they have enjoyed together. Anne knows he will attend the concert in Bath because he ‘was very fond of music’ (P180), and their youthful romance was the ‘one short period in her life … since the loss of her dear mother’ when she has ‘known the

¹⁹ Wood, 369.
²⁰ Austen-Leigh, 330.
²¹ Austen, Letters 244.
happiness of being listened to, or encouraged by any just appreciation or real taste’ (P 47). The suggestion is that Anne’s musical solitude will be at an end with her marriage: Wentworth is a worthy husband because he appreciates Anne in all her qualities. Wells once again believes that marriage will deprive an Austen heroine of her music: ‘she will hardly be able to take a piano … with her when she accompanies Wentworth aboard ship. In addition to paying the “tax” of anxiety about war, it seems that she must also give up one of her chief delights.’ However, a Navy wife is not at sea all the time, and anyway peace and consequently retirement were shortly to descend on the British navy.

Music in *Persuasion* has perhaps less overall significance than in some of the other novels. Certainly an important scene is set at a concert, but this is principally because it is a useful device for the purposes of the action, with its particular arrangements of seating and patterns of movement. But in her musicianship Anne is set apart from her unworthy sisters and the commonplace Musgroves, and Austen uses it to illustrate both her superiority and her isolation.

**Conclusion**

Austen was a moralist, but she was certainly not dogmatic. Her interest lay in exploring the way her characters either succeed or fail to exercise moral intelligence in realistic circumstances. There are some characteristics of those who succeed which may bear a reasonably constant interpretation across all of the novels. To enjoy reading, for example, is usually a good sign; or to dress neatly and without ostentation. But musicianship and musical taste are by no means indicators of moral intelligence. Wood

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22 Wells, 107. In a footnote, she concedes that there may have been keyboard instruments available which could be taken aboard ships.
believes that ‘one reason for the marginalization of music in Austen criticism is the ambivalent image of music given in the novels.’ Musicianship has such a variety of implications among the dozen or so young women discussed in this paper, that they defy a brief summary. Libin has noted that ‘what gradually becomes evident in a close reading of musical elements in Jane Austen’s novels is that Austen tends to treat music as problematic,’ but the very fact that Jane Fairfax, Marianne Dashwood and Mary Crawford are all excellent musicians, while being so vastly different in moral worth, maturity and personality, demonstrates the incapacity of music to symbolize any moral value, positive or negative.

Music, then, has so many meanings in the novels that in itself it is devoid of meaning. But it is not insignificant. Like all the other qualities of Austen’s characters, musicianship and taste always show something about a character. Instead of attributing goodness or lack of worth to a particular quality, Austen constantly explores the nature of moral character, showing us through everything about a person how she fits into the moral scheme. Thus Mary Crawford’s consummate musicianship helps define her as lively, attractive, but misguided and spoilt by a bad education, while Jane Fairfax plays the piano beautifully as a result of praiseworthy application to her studies. It is all part of Austen’s great and subtle rhetorical skill. She never allows overt symbolism to interfere with the more complicated message she wants to convey. The musical need not be offended that the excellent Elinor Dashwood is quite unmusical, because it is clearly not important in itself, but only inasmuch as it helps to show her unaffected and

23 Wood, 367.
undemonstrative personality. The realism of Austen's approach, and her quiet insistence on the importance of context, works against any such offensiveness.

Whatever part music played in Austen’s own daily life, music is neutral to her as a writer. She never allows her opinions to interfere with the needs of the story-telling task in hand, and this allows her to manipulate her narrative as she wishes, using music to illuminate her meaning rather than to symbolize or epitomize it.