

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 16, No. 2 Spring, 2012

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog  
(MIRCat)

# JANE AUSTEN AND THE SQUARE PIANO

By Penelope Cave

The small, rectangular domestic square piano by Clementi, placed on the back wall of the front room in Chawton Cottage, where Jane Austen lived with her mother, sister and Martha Lloyd<sup>1</sup> from 1809, did not belong to her. It has been suggested she actually owned one by Stodart.<sup>2</sup> The Clementi at Chawton is suitably dated around 1810, and is a nicely restored example<sup>3</sup>; it was a pleasure and a privilege to play it in the room with her writing desk; the perfect domestic setting for such an instrument, reading from one of the manuscript volumes in her own hand.<sup>4</sup>

The Memoirs of her niece, Caroline, (1867) report,

Aunt Jane began her day with music - for which I conclude that she had a natural taste; as she thus kept it up - tho' she had no one to teach; was never induced (as I have heard) to play in company; and none of her family cared much for it. I suppose, that she might not trouble them, she chose her practising time before breakfast - when she could have the room to herself - She practised regularly every morning - She played very pretty tunes, I thought - and I liked to stand by her and listen to them... Much that she played was from manuscript, copied out by herself - and so neatly and correctly, that it was as easy to read as print.<sup>5</sup>

Jane and Cassandra probably started to learn the piano at the Abbey School at Reading; further inspired by a visit from her accomplished cousin Eliza de Feuillide, for whom the Austens borrowed a piano,<sup>6</sup> Jane continued lessons until 1796, with Dr George Chard, the assistant organist of Winchester Cathedral.<sup>7</sup> The Steventon piano was sold when Mr Austen suddenly decided to move them to Bath in December 1800, and it would seem that both her playing and her writing ceased, during this time. The family returned

to Hampshire, residing in Southampton, and Jane noted, at the end of her 1807 diary, that from her allowance of £50, she expended 2 pounds, thirteen shillings and sixpence upon hiring a piano.<sup>8</sup> A year later, with the move to Chawton decided, she wrote to Cassandra, "Yes, yes we *will* have a pianoforte, as good as can be got for thirty guineas, and I will practise country dances, that we may have some amusement for our nephews and nieces, when we have the pleasure of their company."<sup>9</sup>

She was finally comfortable enough to buy herself a well-earned gift, but she was not above criticizing her newly-wed niece, Anna, for doing the same, acerbically pointing out, "...it seems throwing money away. They will wish the twenty-four guineas in the shape of sheets and towels six months hence; and as to her playing, it never can be anything."<sup>10</sup>

With the gift of a piano to Jane Fairfax, in *Emma*, the excitement and speculation about who sent it is not answered until nearly 200 pages later. Gossip started when Mrs Cole called on Miss Bates,

... and as soon as she entered the room, had been struck by the sight of a pianoforte - a very elegant looking instrument - not a grand, but a large-sized square pianoforté ; and the substance of the story, the end of all the dialogue which ensued of surprise and inquiry, and congratulations on her side and explanations on Miss Bates's, was that this pianoforté had arrived from Broadwood's the day before, to the great astonishment of both aunt and niece...<sup>11</sup>

Broadwoods produced over 64,000 square pianos before they ceased production in 1866. The identity of the donor of a Broadwood

square piano was of some significance within the plots of not only Jane Austen's *Emma*, but also Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. It was Fanny Burney who provided what was to become the title, *Pride & Prejudice*, in her novel of 1782, *Cecilia*, whose eponymous heroine takes her mind off her unrequited partiality for Delvile: "She amused herself with walking and reading, she commissioned Mr Monckton to send her a Piano Forte of Merlin's ..."<sup>12</sup> The choice of this early piano maker, and inventor, was probably prompted by the author's father, Dr Burney, who ordered an instrument with a double quill and hammer mechanism from Joseph Merlin (1735-1804) that was patented in 1774.<sup>13</sup>

In the same way that Marianne delighted in Lady Middleton's instrument at Barton, the "very best toned piano-forte I ever heard", in *Sense & Sensibility*<sup>14</sup>, Jane Austen would have enjoyed grand pianos in the grand houses of some of her friends and relations. She regularly visited her brother Edward and his wife, at Godmersham; her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Bridges, had been well educated in music and dancing at the Misses Stephensons' smart school in Queen Square<sup>15</sup> and visits included a music party at Chilham Castle, when her niece Fanny played<sup>16</sup> and it seems unlikely that there would have been no piano for entertainment, when she stayed with the Biggs sisters at Manydown. In London there may have been hired pianos, and she explained to Cassandra that Mr Haden would not sing without a piano accompaniment.<sup>17</sup> She was unimpressed with Mr Meyer who was teaching Fanny the harp and somewhat cavalier with his appointments; she concluded that music-masters took "too many liberties with their scholars' time."<sup>18</sup>

Jane Austen wrote of enjoying an unaffected performance of lessons on the harp, played by one of the Weippert brothers.<sup>19</sup> Her choice of the piano and her preference for playing privately, or only in front of others in order to assist their dancing, is in keeping with her descriptions of those, like Emma, and Elizabeth Bennett, who knew their own musical limitations, seated quietly at the keyboard, as if at a desk. She highlights a comparison in Mansfield Park, making the choice to employ the decorative and fashionably "Grecian" harp as an accessory in the attempted seduction of Edmund, by the somewhat manipulative Mary Crawford. She alerts the reader to the allure of a woman whose arms are embracing the harp, her body veiled, yet displayed through the strings, when she writes, "The harp arrived, and rather added to her beauty, wit, and good humour, for she played with

the greatest obligingness, with an expression and taste which were peculiarly becoming..." yet Jane Austen has, perhaps, chosen this instrument for shallow show<sup>20</sup>, in contrast to that in her next novel, *Emma*, in which the aforementioned square piano plays such a pivotal role in Frank Churchill's courtship of the more serious Jane Fairfax, "standing with her back to them, intent on her pianoforte."<sup>21</sup> There is something very touching and very true in this cameo of the intense relationship a player has with her musical instrument.

Although Jane Austen had limited choice in her purchase of a piano, as room and funds dictated what she could afford, the early German piano pedagogue, Milchmeyer, had a strong preference for the square piano over the grand:

If one has the choice of different kinds of instruments, my advice would be to give preference to the small square pianoforte, as opposed to the grand. The latter needs more space, its transport costs more when travelling, and has fewer alterations of colour than the small one ...

Whilst Milchmeyer may have had German instruments in mind, neither have I found the English square piano to be an inferior keyboard instrument, but one with its own special character, that complements both the repertoire and its domestic setting. The 17 music volumes of songs and keyboard music in Jane Austen's collection<sup>22</sup> were representative of current trends and preoccupations: naval affairs, the French Revolution, Turkish and Moorish motifs, love affairs and village-life represented by country dances and folk-song arrangements. The square piano that was made during Jane Austen's lifetime by Broadwood, Stodart, Longman & Broderip, Clementi and others served them to perfection.

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<sup>1</sup> Later, at the age of 63, to become the second wife of Frank Austen, (Admiral Sir Francis Austen 1774-1865).

<sup>2</sup> [www.janeauste.co.uk/a-very-innocent-diversion-2/](http://www.janeauste.co.uk/a-very-innocent-diversion-2/)

<sup>3</sup> By Andrew Lancaster and Andrew Durand.

<sup>4</sup> My thanks go to Tom Carpenter for his generous assistance.

<sup>5</sup> From the Memoirs of Caroline Austen, 1867.

<sup>6</sup> Claire Tomalin, Jane Austen: A Life. Rev. and updated ed., (London: Penguin, 2000), 47

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Piggott, *The Innocent Diversion: A Study of Music in the Life and Writings of Jane Austen*. Clover Hill Ed. (London: Douglas Cleverdon, 1979), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Tomalin, 211.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Cassandra from Castle Square, 27 December 1808.

<sup>10</sup> Hans Place, 30 November 1814.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Professor R.W. Chapman, (London: The Folio Society, 1975), 171.

<sup>12</sup> Fanny Burney, *Cecilia; or, Memoirs of an Heiress. By the Author of Evelina* /I.E. Frances Burney, *Afterwards D'Arblay*, 4th ed: 5 vol., (London, T. Payne & Son; T. Cadell, 1782), Vol 3, 159.

<sup>13</sup> See the introductory notes to Charles Burney and Pieter Minden, *Sonatas or Duets for Two Performers on One Piano Forte or Harpsichord*, (Wolfenbüttel: Möseler Verlag, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Jane Austen, *Sense & Sensibility*, Ed. Professor R.W. Chapman, (London: The Folio Society, 1975), 117.

<sup>15</sup> Sophie von la Roche visited them there with their aunt, Lady Fielding, in 1788. Marie Sophie von La Roche, *Sophie in London, 1786: Being the Diary of Sophie Von La Roche*, transl. Clare Williams, ( [S.I.]:Cape, 1933).

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Cassandra, 6 November 1813.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Cassandra, 2 December 1815 from Hans Place.

<sup>18</sup> Groves dictionary gives details of Philippe-Jacques (Philip James) Meyer, the Alsatian harpist and composer of a harp method in French, settled in London in 1784 but his son of the same name, and brother Frédéric-Charles were also harpists, composers, and teachers.

<sup>19</sup> Letter to Cassandra from Sloane St., 25 April 1811.

<sup>20</sup> Lionel Trilling suggested, on a second reading, that for Mary Crawford, style was more important than character. Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1955).

<sup>21</sup> Austen, *Emma*, 191.

<sup>22</sup> These Austen family's music books are the subject of an ongoing research project that includes a forthcoming PhD thesis by Samantha Carrasco at the University of Southampton.  
[www.soton.ac.uk/music/research/projects/austen\\_family\\_music\\_books.page](http://www.soton.ac.uk/music/research/projects/austen_family_music_books.page)