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## **The Importance of Music and Dancing in Jane Austen's Early Works;**

*Northanger Abbey, Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility*

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## Introduction

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century music was generally very popular in its many forms, at least with the upper classes that could afford it. People did not have very much to do, especially not in the evening; they had no electricity, so electrical devices like televisions and computers were of course not invented. Things that they could do were reading, sewing, playing cards and playing music. After dinner at home, with or without accompanying guests, someone often played a few pieces on the pianoforte as an evening entertainment, sometimes with spontaneous dancing and sometimes without (Olsen, 1: 198). Therefore they would, if they could afford it, see to it that the daughters of the family were musically trained, either by a private teacher at home or by being sent to boarding schools with reputable music programmes, in order for them to perform on such occasions (Olsen, 2: 451). Music was not just something some people practised and some people listened to; it could also be considered a social platform. The people of the upper and middle classes would also go to balls and concerts, both to meet their friends and to make new acquaintances (Olsen, 1: 195).

Being able to play an instrument to entertain at home was not the only reason why upper middle class girls were taught how to play. Another even more important reason why girls were highly recommended to learn how to play and sing was that women of the time did not have much choice but to either get married to a man with great fortunes or become a governess. The ability to play and sing was a good talent to display and was highly appreciated by men. Playing the different rhythms and tempos caused the body to move in different ways, that is, when playing lively pieces the body would move in a lively way, and when playing slower pieces the body would move in a more graceful way (Olsen, 2: 451). By the movement of the playing woman combined with the design of the dresses the men got to see how a particular woman gracefully conducted her body. It was also important for a woman to gracefully conduct her body when dancing. Being a good dancer was important since it often contributed to the first impression when meeting potential suitors and it could be an opening to the possibility of a future marriage.

Jane Austen herself was an amateur pianist and out in society attending balls, so she had a good insight into the importance of music and dancing in her time and this is reflected in her novels (Hanning, 318). The protagonists in *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, like Austen, all belong to the upper middle class. They are all part of the society in the 1790s, which is why this essay will look mainly at these

characters in these particular novels, and at this particular social class. Music and dancing are somehow involved in their lives and this essay will investigate the importance of music and dancing in the novels mentioned above. In addition to this main question the essay will also initially provide a section where the musical period of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is introduced.

When quoting and paraphrasing passages from the novels, *Northanger Abbey* will be referred to as *NA*, *Pride and Prejudice* as *P&P*, and *Sense and Sensibility* as *S&S*.

## **The Classical Period**

The 18<sup>th</sup> century is generally referred to as the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment; a period in history when rationalism, science, education and the conviction that all problems could be solved by experience and knowledge were central elements (Hanning, 271). In music history, however, this period is referred to as the Classical period. The term ‘classical’ originally refers back to the ancient Greek and Roman cultures and it is used to name this musical period since it has many similarities with the qualities of ancient art and architecture. Another, perhaps more simplified explanation why the term ‘classical’ is used is that it describes the maturity of the styles by composers like Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven (Hanning, 267).

The global culture of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century is mirrored in the musical life of the time. European composers travelled to foreign countries to work; for example, German composers went to Paris and Italian opera composers were active in Austria and Germany. Furthermore, many composers travelled to England, France, Russia and Spain (Hanning, 315). According to Nancy Mace, one of Europe’s most “important centres for musical activity” during this time was London, which was musically very vibrant, and the increased interest in concert series, opera and theatre kept composers as well as musicians busy (Mace, 157). The increased travelling among composers resulted in their music spreading wider than ever before (Hanning, 315). Mace states that even though England was a musical centre, foreign composers were superior to the British composers, and that foreign composers like Handel, Haydn and Mozart were more skilled than the native British composers (Mace, 157). However, Mace’s study of the market for published music shows that British composers still were of great importance, for they contributed greatly to the range of music played in concert

halls, theatres and the pleasure gardens, and their vocal pieces were particularly popular (Mace, 168-69; 170).

The main characteristic of the music composed during the Classical period was that it was preferred by people to be logical and flowing as naturally as speech is (Hanning, 315). A composer could be compared to a skilled speaker in the sense that he also used a theme supported by arguments and stylistic components like repetition and a wisely considered disposition of the parts (Hanning, 316-17). Barbara Russano Hanning claims that according to critics of the time, simple and easily comprehensible music was what the educated higher classes enjoyed, since they were of the opinion that complexity reduced music's delight and charm (Hanning, 315). To attain this lightness, composers would divide the flow of the melody into smaller parts separated by "predictable resting points", making the melody easier to comprehend. The composer would then present the parts in "a series of distinct, regular phrases typically two or four measures in length" (Hanning, 316), instead of letting the melody go on and on like something similar to what in literature is called stream of conscience.

A composer highly regarded by the English was George Frideric Handel (Georg Friedrich Händel) (Hanning, 312), who was born in Germany but spent most of his life abroad, mainly in London but also in Italy (Hanning, 304). The reason for his popularity was that he was one of the very first to compose music for the public and not just for church, court or the town council (Hanning, 305). Unlike many composers before him, he became famous during his lifetime. Most of his compositions were vocal works such as operas and oratorios (operas on sacred subjects). However, he also composed a great number of instrumental works, such as solo and trio sonatas, suites and concertos. These instrumental pieces were written for various instrumental constellations; for keyboard, full orchestras, smaller orchestras, and for other instruments as well. His works were much influenced by the Italians, especially Corelli, containing "sophisticated harmonies and vivacious fast movements" (Hanning, 311-312). Some of his most famous works are *Messiah*, *Judas Maccabaeus* and *Water Works*.

Another composer from this time was the popular Charles Dibdin. He was a British composer with a musical background as a solo singer in the weekly amateur concerts in Winchester, and later chorus singer and actor at Covent Garden, for which he also composed. Aside from his compositions for Covent Garden, he also composed for Drury Lane, Sadler's Wells, the Haymarket and the Circus. He wrote over 100 dramatic pieces in

twenty years, and altogether around 1000 songs. His most famous work is *Tom Bowling* (Young, 358).

People's increased musical interest was, however, not only of a passive kind. They were not just interested in going to concerts, operas and theatres; they were also more interested in performing themselves (Mace, 157). The extended distribution of sheet music meant that it became easier for people to get hold of music by various international composers, like those mentioned above. Mace states that since most of the buyers were amateur players, like Jane Austen, composers and publishers mainly published pieces arranged primarily for vocal performances, pianoforte and harpsichord. However, music was also arranged for violin, violoncello, flute and other instruments played by amateurs (Mace, 172). Concertos intended for full orchestras were occasionally rearranged for solo performances (Lockwood, 112). Mace also says that those who bought sheet music were generally interested in buying pieces that they had heard in the pleasure gardens and the theatres, which would be pieces of the kind that Dibdin composed. Of course, only the higher classes were able to buy sheet music since it was rather expensive and those who managed to get hold of some, either by buying or borrowing and copying it from their friends' copies, would still have to afford to buy an instrument (Olsen, 2: 451).

As already stated, Jane Austen was a fair amateur pianist. The remains of her music collection reveal that she owned and played music by the European composers Mozart, Handel, Johann Schobert, Ignaz Pleyel, Haydn and Gluck as well as music by the English composers Dibdin, Arne and Shield (Olsen, 2: 451). These findings contribute to and strengthen Mace's statement that European composers were indeed very popular during the Classical period in England.

The most popular instruments played by amateur players were the harp and the keyboard, though the harp was an instrument only for the richest. There were different types of keyboards, and the harpsichord and the spinet were standard. However, these were both replaced by the pianoforte by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The pianoforte was easier to maintain since it had hammers hammering on the strings to produce sound, while both the harpsichord and the spinet had quills plucking the strings. The quills in the harpsichord and the spinet needed to be replaced fairly often, while the pianoforte only needed to be tuned once in a while. However, while the maintenance of the pianoforte was undemanding, the construction was slightly problematic. The problem was to come up with a construction which fit all the strings in the best possible way, and the most evident solution was to arrange the strings horizontally (Olsen, 2: 455). This design was positive since it kept the performer's

face visible, which meant that the men could watch the woman while she was playing. Men rarely played music on an amateur level, although they would occasionally engage in duets with a woman (Olsen, 2: 452).

## **Concerts and Other Musical Pastimes**

The Classical period brought forward new musical genres, as indicated in the previous section. Music started to be created for its own context, since more and more music was intended to be performed outside the former frames, where it was mainly designed to support vocal performances, for example in church. However, this type of music remained in church and theatres, and the Italians were particularly interested in developing this field (Hanning, 335). Along with the growing interest in instrumental music like sonatas, symphonies and concertos, opera also became more popular during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Especially popular with the British was ballad opera, and the starting point for this interest was the success of *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay already in 1728 (Hanning, 321).

The new popular forums for musical performances were, beside opera, mainly different kinds of concerts. Unlike the amateur performances that many enjoyed at home, concerts were performed by professional orchestras and soloists. These concerts could be very grand, and Kirstin Olsen gives a reference to a diary entry by Parson James Woodforde who writes of a concert with “Near 100 performers in the Orchestra” (Olsen, 2: 454). Public concerts and concert series grew more and more popular and added to the already established concept of private concerts, which will be further discussed. In the cities, public concerts were given both individually and by subscription, and anyone who could afford a ticket could attend (Hanning, 358). Outside the cities, however, concerts performed by top performers were not as common as in the cities. Therefore tickets to such concerts were mostly sold individually and not by subscription (Olsen, 2: 454). Either way, concert tickets were expensive, so the audience would chiefly consist of people from the upper-class. Public concerts were normally held in concert halls, but occasionally people would go to so called Pleasure Gardens where they paid an entrance fee to listen to musical performances outdoors (Hanning, 358). In contrast to how people behave at concerts today, sitting perfectly still and listening to the music, the 18<sup>th</sup> century audience would “stroll around and converse” while

enjoying the music. To them, the social part was just as important as the musical part (Hanning, 359).

Private concerts were naturally hosted privately. These events were more elegant than normal after-dinner performances and to attend a personal invitation was needed. Professional musicians were hired and the host normally paid all the expenses (Hanning, 358). Therefore the quality of the performance would depend on how much money the host spent on the event (Olsen, 2: 454). On one occasion Jane Austen wrote of such a concert in a letter to her sister Cassandra. Her brother Henry had hosted a concert in London and Jane wrote that “The Music was extremely good” (Austen, ed. Chapman, 274). She gave no exact number of performers, but mentioned a female singer “whose voice was said to be very fine indeed” (Austen, ed. Chapman, 274), which indicates that she herself did not think so, but that the rest of the party did (Olsen, 454). Further she wrote that she sat in the passage in connection with the drawing room and from that position she had a good view of all the newcomers (Austen, ed. Chapman, 273-274). It can be assumed that she was slightly more interested in the visitors than the music itself even though she thought the music was very good.

Some of the characters in Austen’s novels attend concerts, both public and private. Even though Austen does not provide her readers with thorough descriptions of the events, she lets other characters give indications of their importance in the upper middle class society. When Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* is in Bath and is first introduced to Mr Tilney they first talk about “matters as naturally arose from the objects around them” (NA, 13). Mr Tilney quickly realizes that he has not yet asked her about her activities in town. He asks her among other things whether she has been to the theatre and the concert, and she answers that she has been to both (NA, 13). The conversation implies that it is expected that she would have attended both the theatre and the concert, or at least that she would attend them in the near future. Furthermore, Mr Tilney’s feeling awkward about not having asked about the theatre and the concert sooner indicates that those subjects are very important, not only as topics of conversation but as social events as well.

On one occasion in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne attend a private concert that a friend of Mrs John Dashwood, their sister-in-law, hosts. Their being invited is a mistake, but they still attend to be polite towards the hostess. The way in which the event is described is nonchalant and reveals that neither Marianne nor Elinor has much interest in it. This is made clear when Elinor further on is described as not being “musical, nor affecting to be so” and more interested in the young men in the audience (S&S, 242-243). This attitude towards this kind of event corresponds to Austen’s attitude, which brings credibility into the



matter; even though concerts were generally very popular, not everyone appreciated them. Marianne's lack of interest in the concert is, however, not due to lack of musical interest, but due to the heart ache caused by Willoughby's deceit.

In addition to concerts, people had several other opportunities to enjoy musical entertainment. People could, for example, go to "Italian operas at the King's Theatre, Haymarket, and English operas at Drury Lane and Covent Garden", and between the acts at the theatre, songs and dances were performed (Olsen, 2: 454). However, there were not only traditional, elegant musical performances to enjoy in the cities. Companies that put on different kinds of shows would often travel from town to town and perform. They would often display people and animals with odd looks or odd skills. Parson James Woodforde experienced such a show when "five men drove up to his door, and the leader, 'a black with a french Horn [sic],' offered to display 'a little woman only 33 Inches high,' who came into Woodforde's kitchen and sang two songs for a shilling" (Olsen, 1: 241). Olsen further writes of Sergeant-Major Philip Astley who did not like the law that limited the number of public theatres in London. Therefore he put on shows at his own residence with "tumbling, music, dancing ... and horses dancing a minuet. It was not only the horses who could dance; Astley's son ... could dance a minuet himself – while riding three galloping horses" (Olsen, 1: 242). Unfortunately, Austen does not include such forms of entertainment in her novels. It can be argued that these kinds of events were not particularly classy, and not proper for her type of novels.

## **Balls**

The division between classes in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was not as strict in Britain as it was in other European countries. Those who dressed as gentlemen were treated as gentlemen, and the classes mixed without greater concerns. The lives of the rich can be assumed to have been, at times, boring; they had servants doing their jobs, and those who lived in the country had tenants working on their land, so they had very little to do although the men went hunting, rode their horses and improved their estates. However, if upper-class men had little to do, the women were almost completely idle. Their greatest pleasures were balls and concerts, which were especially popular in the winter (McDowall, 115), since the

number of possible outdoor activities, like taking walks, was heavily decreased during that time of year (Olsen, 1;196).

Balls are a recurring feature in Austen's novels, which suggests that they play a significant role in the plots. Both public and private balls were held. Public balls were normally held at inns with assembly rooms like those Catherine Morland, the protagonist in *Northanger Abbey*, attends in Bath, and those at the first ball in *Pride and Prejudice* which is held in Meryton. These balls were given by subscription, which gave those who could afford it an opportunity to attend all the balls during a season; however, they were not exclusive to the subscribers. These balls were very formal and required an appointed master of ceremonies whose job was to coordinate the dances considering the number of couples participating and what position the dancers should have with social rank in mind. In addition to this coordination he would also make sure that everyone knew the routine of the upcoming dance, retain a good atmosphere, as well as introduce suitable couples (Olsen, 1: 196), like at Catherine's second ball in Bath where the master of ceremonies introduces her and Mr Tilney (NA, 12).

Popular dances of this time were for example French dances like minuets and English Country Dances (Adams, 56). The minuet was the trendiest dance in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century ballrooms and dates back to the baroque; the musical period preceding the Classical period. Participating in the minuet was a splendid opportunity to show off dancing skills. This kind of dance was danced both at public balls and in theatres by professional dancers (<http://www.minuetcompany.org/theminuet.html>), but it was not danced at private balls and spontaneous dances at home. In order to dance the minuet, and other similar formal dances as well, having a good posture and good timing was crucial, since it was demanding with quick small steps (Olsen, 1: 203). Furthermore it was "danced lightly on the balls of the feet, with the heels only just off the floor and the feet turned out slightly" and the steps were combined with low, graceful arm movements. New choreographies of the minuet were constantly made (<http://www.minuetcompany.org/theminuet.html>), though they consisted roughly of the same steps put together in slightly different ways (Tomalin, 101). They were always suited for a fixed number of participants (<http://www.minuetcompany.org/theminuet.html>).

English Country Dances, or contradanses [sic], in contrast to the minuet, were danced later in the evening after the formal dances. These were more simple dances without a fixed number of participants and new choreographies (<http://www.minuetcompany.org/theminuet.html>), and the length of the dances depended on the size of the set, that is, the number of dancers (Olsen, 1: 201). These dances were livelier

and “had a reputation for being danced with careless abandon and even amorousness” (<http://www.minuetcompany.org/theminuet.html>). Since everybody already knew these dances, the participants could focus more on socializing than on their dancing skills (<http://www.minuetcompany.org/theminuet.html>). In addition to showing off dancing skills and socializing, dancing was good exercise. Olsen writes that Jane Austen enjoyed dancing (Olsen, 1: 195). She wrote in a letter to her sister Cassandra that at a ball she attended when she was at Manydown “There were twenty dances, and I danced them all, and without any fatigue. I was glad to find myself capable of dancing so much, and with so much satisfaction as I did” (Austen, ed. Chapman, 44).

Timothy Dow Adams points out that the procedure preceding the actual dancing was rather complicated. A woman could not herself choose a suitable partner, but must hope to be spotted and considered suitable by a man in order for them to share a dance (Adams, 56). The woman must, if travelling, also be aware of the local customs and be introduced, or “out”, in society to be available as a dance partner (Adams, 57-58). This is the circumstance for Catherine Morland when she attends her first ball in Bath where “she longed to dance, but ... had not an acquaintance in the room” (NA, 9). It is obvious that she is grieved by this, since Mrs Allen repeatedly throughout the evening attempts to comfort her.

Furthermore, the woman had to carefully mind whom she accepted to dance with, since accepting one dance meant in fact accepting two dances (Adams, 56), for the dances were given in pairs (Olsen, 1: 199-200). Dancing two sets of dances, that is, four dances altogether, with the same partner in one evening could imply a developing romance (Olsen, 1: 200). Littlewood writes in the introduction of *Pride and Prejudice* that “In a society that allows little scope for the direct display of sexual interest, such clues are eagerly sought” (Littlewood, IX), which again points to the importance of these events. This is the situation in *Pride and Prejudice* when Mrs Bennet and Jane Bennet seem very surprised and excited about the fact that Mr Bingley danced with Jane twice in one evening, and furthermore that she was the only woman whom he granted the honour of dancing two sets of dances with him (*P&P*, 13). Whether this is true surprise or mere modesty is hard to determine. Elizabeth Bennet’s reaction to the matter matches what Olsen and Littlewood state. She thought it obvious that Mr Bingley would ask Jane to dance twice, and she says to Jane; “What could be more natural than his asking you again?” (*P&P*, 14), implying that Mr Bingley naturally regards her sister very highly and that a romance is almost expected.

If a woman decided not to accept a man’s inquiry to dance, she would most likely have to decline all inquiries for the rest of the evening in order not to make the first

denial a personal insult (Olsen, 1: 199). This is clearly the case in *Northanger Abbey* when Catherine accepts to dance with Mr Thorpe although she would rather dance with Mr Tilney (NA, 37). Had she declined Mr Thorpe, she would have had to decline Mr Tilney too if he had asked her later in the evening, which was something she did not wish to do. Since she was new in town, it can be assumed that she could not afford to abstain from dancing and risk not getting to dance at all. Since this ball was public, manners and etiquette were particularly important, though had it been a private ball, she might have considered sitting down and waiting to dance with Mr Tilney.

Aside from the formal public balls, many people hosted private balls on their estates. These balls were less formal and were often combined with a complete dinner rather than just tea, which was served at public balls. Since the hostess would put together the guest list herself, many of the attendants would already be acquainted and therefore a master of ceremonies was not necessary (Olsen, 1: 196; 197). The level of formality was not as high as on public balls, and therefore the etiquette differed slightly. At private balls it was more acceptable to sit down in the wait for the right partner than it was at public balls. In a letter to her sister Cassandra, Jane Austen wrote of a private ball she had attended in Kempshott Park and says that “One of my gayest actions was sitting down two dances in preference to having Lord Bolton’s eldest son for my partner, who danced too ill to be endured” (Austen, ed. Chapman, 52). Many of the balls in Austen’s novels, especially in *Pride and Prejudice*, are private balls, held by various characters. As can be seen in the novels, these balls are sometimes requested and discussed among the guests and the host or hostess. For example, Mr Bingley is requested to host a ball at Netherfield, and he offers Lydia Bennet to name the date for the event. Furthermore, Lydia is determined to have Colonel Forster to host a ball in Meryton (*P&P*, 41-42). The ball at Netherfield is anticipated with much pleasure, both by the host and the Bennets since they are all fond of this kind of social event. Since *Pride and Prejudice* takes place in the countryside, there is no immediate access to an extended selection of balls in large assembly rooms, like in London and Bath, and therefore people have to arrange their own.

The opinions of private balls vary among the characters. Mr Bingley appears to enjoy them very much, which is implied by his spirits during the first ball in Meryton, for on this occasion “he was lively and unreserved, danced every dance, was angry that the ball closed so early, and talked of giving one himself at Netherfield” (*P&P*, 12). Furthermore, his hosting a ball at Netherfield adds to and confirms the implication of his enjoyment. In contrast to this positive attitude towards private balls, *Sense and Sensibility* provides the opposite

attitude. When Elinor and Marianne are situated in London for the winter, Sir John at one point plans to host a ball (*S&S*, 164). He loves to have many people in the house and “the noisier they were the better was he pleased” (*S&S*, 31). This plan is not liked by Lady Middleton, however. According to her, hosting minor private balls in London means taking too big a risk of losing her “reputation of elegance”, since the number of guests and musicians would be very small (*S&S*, 164).

Generally, it seems that more women than men were keen to dance. Therefore the men were more or less obliged to dance as many dances as possible in an evening (Olsen, 1: 199). If a man did not bother to dance it could be considered rude. Mr Darcy, being a handsome single man with a great fortune, is instantly judged when he only dances two dances and refuses to make any new acquaintances at the first ball in *Pride and Prejudice*. The party has, based on these actions, made up their minds about his character, and think him “the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world” (*P&P*, 12). The matter of women being more interested in dancing might be due to their lack of occupations, but it can also be argued that it is because of their want of husbands. The ballrooms were considered a market where women displayed themselves to potential suitors, and they generally put great effort into making the best impression possible, both socially and in respect of appearance and the display of their accomplishments such as dancing. As a result, if a ball did not go well enough for a woman, her chance of marrying well could be ruined. These high expectations of a ball are well presented in *Pride and Prejudice*. Mrs Bennet is very eager to have her daughters married because of the entailment on their estate. Therefore she looks forward to the Netherfield ball with much excitement since Miss Bennet and Mr Bingley have a good chance of falling in love if they get to dance and spend the evening together. The Bennet sisters are also very excited since they want to display themselves; Jane to Mr Bingley, Elizabeth to Mr Wickham and Kitty and Lydia to all the officers or anyone they find agreeable (*P&P*, 75).

Dancing does not only occur in a literal way in the novels. In *Northanger Abbey*, Mr Tilney makes an extended comparison between a dance and a marriage:

You will allow that in both [dance and marriage] man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal; that in both it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong exclusively to each other till the moment of its dissolution; that it is their duty each to endeavour to give no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere, and their best interest to keep their own imaginations from wandering towards the perfections of their neighbours, or fancying that they should have been better off with anyone else (*NA*, 65).

Mr Tilney's comparison focuses mainly on the commitment itself and the essence of it. He points to the responsibilities that the partners have and that both parts are given advantages by the commitment. He presents his comparison objectively, that is, he does not take sides with either sex and does not emphasize one more than the other, which indicates that he believes that women and men can live together as equals.

While Mr Tilney focuses on the essence of the commitment, Adams focuses on the proposal and the technical aspects of the dance in his article. He states that in dancing synchronization, good timing and the right movements are crucial elements (Adams, 58). So is the case in love as well. Adams uses the example from *Northanger Abbey* when Catherine has promised to dance with Mr Thorpe. When she finally succeeds in avoiding him and is engaged to dance with Mr Tilney, they are interrupted by Mr Thorpe who claims that he in fact is the one to dance with Catherine (NA, 63), although no such engagement has been confirmed by both parts. As Adams says, "She [Catherine] and Henry are out of synchronization, separated from each other by ill luck and poor timing" (Adams, 58). Furthermore he explains that "Catherine's movements have all been thrown out of phase by Thorpe" (Adams, 58). Due to this bad timing in the assembly rooms in Bath, Catherine and Mr Tilney do not develop the close companionship which they otherwise would develop during their stay in Bath. Adams points out how they constantly miss each other by seconds (Adams, 58), which also is a good example of their poor timing. Catherine and Mr Tilney's relationship is just like the dances of their time; first they dance together, then they part and interplay with other partners and eventually they are joined together in the end. However, the ideal turn of events for Catherine and Mr Tilney's relationship would be like the slightly more modern couple dancing where the dancers only interplay with one partner for the whole dance. It is this struggle that creates the suspense and an urge to know how things will work out.

Related to bad timing is Adams' connection between a marriage proposal and a dancing proposal. He claims that throughout the novels he has studied there are several cases of badly timed proposals, both of marriage and of dancing. They are made by the wrong person, at the wrong time or in the wrong way (Adams, 59). Again, Mr Thorpe makes a good example when saying "'Heyday, Miss Morland' ... 'what is the meaning of this? I thought you and I were to dance together'" when he believes that they are engaged for the upcoming dance (NA, 63). It can be assumed that he is expecting to make a proposal of marriage as well in the near future, since he seems to have a clear vision of a bond between them, which obviously is not mutual. Here, sense and reason have clearly been compromised by expectations.

Adams makes an interesting comparison between proposals of marriage and proposals to dance in *Pride and Prejudice*. He points to the resemblance between the first time Mr Darcy asks Elizabeth to dance with him and the first time he proposes to her: “Darcy proposes to dance, Elizabeth refuses; Darcy proposes again to dance, Elizabeth accepts; Darcy proposes marriage, Elizabeth refuses; Darcy again proposes marriage and Elizabeth accepts” (Adams, 59). In addition to this comparison more resemblances can be found. Elizabeth and Mr Darcy initially despise each other; Elizabeth despises Darcy’s pride and the fact that he finds no pleasure in dancing and is very fastidious in his choice of partner if he would dance after all. Mr Bingley tries to convince Mr Darcy to dance with Elizabeth at the ball in Meryton, but Mr Darcy is not interested at all, and if he would consider dancing he states that “the only handsome girl in the room”, Jane Bennet, is already taken. Elizabeth, on the other hand, is only “tolerable” to him (*P&P*, 12-13). She is naturally shocked when she later, at the ball hosted by Sir William Lucas, is again introduced to Mr Darcy by the host himself and Sir William recommends their dancing together. Surprisingly Darcy does not refuse to dance with her. She does not believe that she all of a sudden makes an agreeable partner, so she declines in a civilised way (*P&P*, 24-25). This proposal to dance resembles Darcy’s second proposal of marriage, except from the outcome. The second marriage proposal is not a proposal per se, but more of a mutual agreement between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. Neither of the proposals contains an actual question asked by Mr Darcy and the nature of both of the proposals is calm, composed and civilised. The nature of these proposals also resembles the nature of the formal and graceful minuets in the sense that they all focus on a higher level of formality and etiquette. Even though Elizabeth declines to dance with Mr Darcy, she tries to do it in a civilised and playful way. Further, the marriage proposal is nothing but a normal civilised conversation.

In contrast to the two previous proposals the second proposal to dance and the first proposal of marriage are not calm and civilised. The second proposal to dance is made at the Netherfield ball and this time Mr Darcy asks Elizabeth himself. Elizabeth still believes that Mr Darcy despises her, so she is very surprised by his inquiry and accepts without knowing what she is doing. When Darcy has walked away she is irritated and starts to criticize herself for accepting to dance with him even though she should not have accepted. Similar strong feelings are present in the first proposal of marriage. Mr Darcy has reluctantly given in to his passionate feelings for Elizabeth and exclaims: “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you” (*P&P*, 161). Here too, Elizabeth is very surprised by Mr Darcy’s

inquiry and her reaction is strong and she answers in a poor attempt of remaining polite: “It is natural that obligation should be felt, and if I could *feel* gratitude, I would thank you. But I cannot – I have never desired your good opinion, and you have certainly bestowed it most unwillingly” (*P&P*, 163). Further she says: “I have every reason in the world to think ill of you” (*P&P*, 164). The nature of these proposals resembles the nature of the wild, lively and less formal country dances. When Mr Darcy again asks Elizabeth to dance she can barely remain calm and composed, and when Darcy asks her to marry him she tries to stay civil but she cannot.

Evidently, balls and dancing generally take up a great deal of the lives of the characters in the novels. They are anticipated with much pleasure and they represent much more than just enjoyable pastimes and meeting friends. The importance of being a good and strategic dancer goes beyond the obvious self-satisfactory reasons, since it can make the difference between entering a life as married or remaining single. The fact that Austen uses dancing metaphorically is a clear evidence of how important dancing is to her characters, irrespective of whether they are aware of it or not.

## **Young women and music**

The 18<sup>th</sup> century was a time when education went through major changes. Education was, however, still optional and privately purchased by those who desired it, or given to poor children as charity (Olsen, 1: 227). Most people in the upper middle class would have their children educated in some way. Some families would send the daughters to boarding schools. These schools would teach standard subjects like language, geography and history at a standard rate. Aside from the basic subjects girls would focus on acquiring accomplishments, which were mainly different artistic skills, as Olsen expresses it (Olsen, 1: 235). There were several kinds of accomplishments, but the ones that Austen dedicates most space to in her novels are the musical ones; playing, singing and dancing. These desirable special classes, like dancing- and music lessons, were not included in the school’s standard fee (Olsen, 1: 232). However, it is understood that parents willingly paid additional fees in order for their daughters to acquire these particular accomplishments, since musical training was a particularly important element in a young woman’s education.



Far from all families sent their daughters to boarding schools. Girls were often taught basic household chores, needlework and basic literacy at home, either by their mother or by a governess living with the family. For subjects which parents wished their daughters to acquire particular proficiency in, masters were hired for private tuition and large sums were paid to have the girls trained by these specialized tutors. Subjects taught by masters were for example painting, music and dancing (Olsen, 1: 229). The teaching continued even when the master was not there. The family would together, for example, practice the steps of dances that they already knew to keep them fresh in mind (Olsen, 1:202). The main reason why girls were taught how to play, sing and dance was “to keep them busy in their life of leisure and to enhance the pleasure of those around them” (Olsen, 1: 235). Gary Kelly further says that “Dancing, singing and playing music displayed the young woman’s body and bearing at social occasions to attract a suitor” (Kelly, ed. Todd, 257). The woman was supposed to practice hard in order to become proficient. She would then display her talents both to friends, family and potential suitors at dinner parties or at home, as Olsen states (Olsen, 2;451). The performance could be carried out in many ways; symphonies, sonatas and concertos brought focus on the music; playing songs brought focus on the woman’s voice as well as her playing; duets on the pianoforte allowed women to play together; and vocal duets, as Olsen states, “offered a man and a woman a chance to unite their voices on the way to uniting their hearts” (Olsen, 2: 452). Here Olsen indicates that a woman’s musical skills not only serve as entertainment, but that they are useful tools in the process of finding a husband. Penny Gay adds to this by stating that Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* “is a keen duettist”, although perhaps not in the sense that he wishes to display his talents, but in the sense that it is a good way to flirt (Gay, ed. Todd, 339)

Jane Austen herself was taught both at home and at boarding schools. However, most of her education took place at home (Olsen, 1: 228). She had a music master, who taught her how to play and Olsen states that George William Chard, assistant organist of Winchester Cathedral appears to have been the one who taught her (Olsen, 2: 451). She remained musically active all her life and practiced as much as possible. In a letter to Cassandra written in Rowling she wrote that “I practise every day as much as I can” (Austen, ed. Chapman, 10). Further, Gay writes that Austen always practised before breakfast and that she on some occasions played and sang “simple old songs” in the evening. In addition to practising, Austen studied music in another way; she had her own music collection with works copied in her own hand. In her article Gay pays attention to the fact that musical accomplishments do not only

include playing and singing, but also “copying out music from published sources for later study” (Gay, ed. Todd, 337-338). Even though Austen personally enjoyed practicing she has given the characters in her novels different attitudes towards music and accomplishments. Kelly points on the one hand to Jane and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, who have a good education and enter good marriages, and on the other hand to the less accomplished Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* and the “wrongly educated” Mary Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (Kelly, ed. Todd, 259) when he proves that the interest in music varies between the characters.

Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* developed an early interest in music and as a child she liked to play on the family’s worn spinet. Therefore her mother decided that she was to be taught properly by a music master in order to become proficient. However, Catherine could only stand it for a year, so finally her mother dismissed her master and that day “was one of the happiest of Catherine’s life” (*NA*, 2). Olsen describes Catherine’s musical education as “haphazard” only consisting of “some dabbling in music” (Olsen, 1: 229). Throughout the novel no indication of a revived musical interest is given, which leads to the conclusion that she never cared much for music even though she appeared to do so initially. Since Catherine’s musical education is not mentioned much in the novel, it can be concluded that it is of little importance in the narrative.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Mary Bennet is the one who cares the most for music. She puts all her hope on her singing and playing skills since she has no charming countenance or graceful air. By being an accomplished musician there is still hope for her to find a husband, even when her looks fail her. However, her musical skills are not very good either. The best way for her to make a good impression with her musical skills is to play advanced music, which is why she on one occasion chooses to perform a long concerto (*P&P*, 22). She is always eager to perform, but time after time she is interrupted by embarrassed family members who do not wish her to pain the audience. Even though Mary practises far more and plays more complex music than her sister Elizabeth, Elizabeth receives more praise for her performances. The difference between the two sisters is that Mary has a weak voice (*P&P*, 87), poor taste and does not seem to know which music is proper in which situation, and she possesses a “pedantic air and conceited manner”, while Elizabeth is “easy and unaffected” (*P&P*, 22). Evidently, just being able to play is not enough; the quality of the performance is equally important, if not more important than the degree of difficulty. Therefore, Elizabeth receives higher praises for her simple but well performed songs than Mary does for her ill-advised performance of a long concerto. Olsen explains this phenomenon further and explains

that girls should not be too educated or too eager to perform since they would then be considered to “invade masculine realms of study” (Olsen, 1: 236), which was not attractive. This description fits Mary’s character very well. She is eager to perform, which is understandable since it is her only chance to be recognized, although it sadly has the opposite effect of what she expects.

None of the girls in the Bennet family is forced to study by their parents, although it is encouraged. During a visit at Rosings Park, Lady Catherine asks Elizabeth about herself, her sisters and their education. Elizabeth conveys that she herself plays and sings a little and that only one of her sisters plays too. Lady Catherine is very surprised by this and immediately assumes that they never had an opportunity to go to town in order to have masters teach them and that they only had governesses to do that job. Elizabeth then answers that they had no governesses, but that they had access to the masters needed, though if they wished to be idle they could (*P&P*, 139-140). Lady Catherine obviously cannot understand this unconventional attitude towards education and encourages Elizabeth to practice on her ladyship’s instrument whenever she likes during her stay (*P&P*, 148). Elizabeth is seemingly not particularly interested in becoming a proficient musician, and she is not particularly fond of displaying her skills to others. However, she does perform on a few occasions in the novel. One of these occasions is during a visit at Rosings Park. She agrees to play for Colonel Fitzwilliam and while she is playing, Mr Darcy, who has at this point started to admire Elizabeth, cannot help but drawing nearer to the pianoforte on which she is playing. Elizabeth believes that he is just trying to intimidate her (*P&P*, 148), so while playing she starts to tease him about the ball in Meryton where he refused to dance, but he is not offended by this. Instead, as a defence, he points to the similarity between the two of them: “neither ... perform [sic] to strangers” (*P&P*, 151). Here, Austen does not use Elizabeth’s musical accomplishment as a direct tool to connect her and Mr Darcy. Instead she uses it to point to similarities in their personalities. Up to this point it has been difficult to see Elizabeth and Mr Darcy as anything but opposites of each other. By making Mr Darcy realise that they actually have something in common, Austen opens up a world where these two characters can begin to understand each other and abandon their pride and prejudice, and through that connect on a deeper level.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Marianne Dashwood is the one with musical interest. She both plays and sings, and the family instrument is “an [sic] handsome pianoforte” that belongs to her (*S&S*, 24). After having moved to Barton Cottage, Marianne and her family are summoned to Barton Park to dine. When the party learns that Marianne plays, they

immediately ask her to perform for them. She borrows Lady Middleton's songs and performs most of them, and her performance is "highly applauded" (S&S, 33). Further mentions of Marianne's musical talents are swiftly presented. No further details are given, only statements that the pianoforte is opened or that she on some occasions plays on the pianoforte. In contrast to Marianne's interest in music, there is no record of Elinor being interested in playing and singing at all. On the contrary, she is described as not being interested in music and with no inclination of becoming so, as already mentioned. It is understood that musical accomplishments are not of great importance in this novel. This novel differs from *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice* in this aspect. While *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice* are more centred on music, music is more of a decoration in *Sense and Sensibility*.

## Conclusion

Music and dancing were big parts of the lives of the upper class people in the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The increased selection of easily comprehensible music and the flourishing musical life in England had a great impact on people. They would go to balls, concerts and other kinds of musical events, and they also brought the music into their homes by hosting balls and concerts themselves. Along with this increased musical interest, musical education grew more important for young girls, not just for the purpose of entertaining, but also for the purpose of displaying themselves to suitors.

Dancing and music evidently appear very frequently in Austen's novels. The way she uses the different musical accomplishments makes them essential to the plots since she lets them add information to the characters and to society. However, it can be concluded that the importance of dancing and music varies between the three novels. Still, many of the relationships that develop among the characters are somehow tied to elements of dancing, music, or both combined. Catherine Morland and Mr Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* meet at the balls in Bath. Had they not done so, they would not have become a couple at all since the assembly rooms were the only places where they could meet and socialise. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* meet for the first time at a ball in Meryton. The more balls, and similar events, they attend, the more attached they become, although it takes a long

time for them to become mutually fond of each other. Furthermore, Elizabeth's modest musical accomplishments are used to her advantage, unlike in the case of her sister Mary. Musical performances of any kind are, however, of little importance in *Sense and Sensibility*. Had they been of the same importance as in the previous two novels, music and dancing would in all probability have taken up more space than they do. Instead friendships and connections matter more in the search for a suitable husband in this novel.

In addition to the more obvious occurrence of music and dancing, they are also used symbolically, for example as an extended symbol of marriage, on a number of occasions. This indicates that music and dancing in fact are very important and serious parts of the characters' lives, and not just pastimes. Being accomplished in these areas can make the difference between becoming a wife and forever being a spinster. Finally, as Adams states and the novels secretly reveal: "When we realize how frequently dancing and courtship are connected in the novels, we begin to see the terrible importance of getting a partner both for the dance and for life" (Adams, 57), and marriage is like the end of a well performed dance.

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