Soft and Loud ~
Jane Austen and the pianoforte


Note on the Author: JASA member Margaret Coulson has always been fascinated with the square piano, and was delighted to see the Clementi in the drawing room of the Jane Austen House Museum in Chawton. During a visit to her sister in Berkshire last year, a neighbour invited them to supper to ‘meet’ a recently bought, beautifully restored square piano from about 1815. They sang songs of the period, and she was even allowed to PLAY the instrument. So she was obviously hooked! She found that the touch was a little different to modern pianos but its tone was sweet and pure.

Early mornings at Chawton were a special time of day for Jane Austen. Her domestic task was to prepare breakfast at the unfashionably early hour of 9am – to make the tea (coffee and chocolate were too expensive for everyday use), prepare the toast, rolls and buns and perhaps to wash the breakfast china (1).

While the cottage was quiet, however, for an hour beforehand, Jane played the piano just for herself. Her niece Caroline, in her Memoir of 1867, reminisced:

Aunt Jane began her day with music – for which I conclude 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; but the music (for I knew the books well in after years) would now be thought disgracefully easy – Much that she played from was manuscript, copied out by herself – and so neatly and correctly, that it was as easy to read as print (2).

There are eight volumes of music at Chawton. Three are handwritten, two of these definitely in the hand of Jane Austen. The piano that she played was a square pianoforte, and appears to have been an indispensable part of Jane’s life. The 1810 Clementi piano which is at Chawton, though not the one purchased by Jane, is of the period. This Clementi square pianoforte has recently been restored with a donation from the Jane Austen Society of North America.

For 100 years from 1760, England was the centre of pianoforte manufacture. The first pianoforte (c1709) was made by an instrument maker at the Medici court in Florence named Bartolomeo Cristofori and it was described as a gravicembalo col piano e forte - a harpsichord with soft and loud [capacity] (3).

In 1726 in Germany Gottfried Silbermann (1683-1763) made two pianofortes and showed them to Johann Sebastien Bach, who criticised them for their heaviness of touch. The European wars of the 18th century, especially the Seven Years War, 1756-1763, caused an exodus of German workmen to England, and amongst them was Johannes Zumpe, a pupil of Silbermann, who is recognised as the inventor of the square pianoforte c1760. This ‘square’ pianoforte, actually rectangular rather than square, was the size of a small side-table, convenient for even small
cottage rooms, and the price was reasonable. Johann Christian Bach used a square pianoforte for an historic solo recital in London on 2nd June 1768, and afterwards bought one for himself from Zumpe at a cost of 50 guineas. This ‘English’ Bach was particularly responsible for the huge surge in popularity of the piano, and in no time Zumpe could not keep up with the demand. This brought many new manufacturers onto the scene, among whom were Clementi, Pleyel and Broadwood.

In the early 1780s John Broadwood designed a square piano with vastly improved tone and volume. A year later he built his first grand pianoforte based on the shape of the harpsichord, embracing many improvements, including pedals, which he patented in 1783. The grand pianofortes were beautifully made with polished woods and inlay and were very much more expensive and prestigious than the plainer square pianoforte. In 1818 Broadwood sent one of his grand pianos to Beethoven, who kept it until his death in 1827.

Muzio Clementi (1752-1832) was a brilliant performer on the harpsichord and organ. He made his debut as a pianist in London in 1770, and went on to become quite an entrepreneur, composing music for the piano, setting up a publishing house and also manufacturing the square pianos. Clementi compositions were such that they could be played by a reasonably competent pianist. They did not, however, have the approval of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who wrote to his father and sister from Vienna, June 7 1783 –

> Now I must say a few words to my sister about the Clementi sonatas.
> Everyone who plays or hears them will feel for himself that as compositions they do not signify .... and I beg my sister not to devote too much time to these less she spoil her quiet and steady hand and make it lose its natural lightness, suppleness and fluent rapidity.

However, Clementi had enough influence, or perhaps money, to persuade Beethoven to arrange his *Violin Concerto in D* for the piano. He died in 1832, a very rich English country gentleman.

Jane Austen appears to have learnt to play the piano at the age of nine years when, with Cassandra, she attended the Abbey School at Reading in the spring of 1785, remaining there until the winter of 1786. However, for the Christmas of 1786 the Austens did not possess a pianoforte as they had to borrow one for cousin Eliza, Madame de Feuillide, to play. Mrs Austen’s girlhood music books were used and it was during this period (1780s and 1790s) that Jane compiled the volumes of music which are in the possession of the Jane Austen Memorial Trust. As the fortunes of the Austen family looked up, a piano was purchased and Jane took lessons from a visiting teacher, Dr George Chard, assistant organist of Winchester Cathedral.

Upon Mr. Austen’s sudden decision to retire and move to Bath in 1801 Jane’s piano was sold for £8. There is no record of a piano at any of the residences at Bath, and it can confidently be surmised that the lack of both a garden and a piano there played an important part in her depression and a downturn in her literary output during this period.

The move to the house in Castle Square, Southampton in 1807 brought much cheer to Jane. The house, she noted, was not in good repair but it had a large garden. Her accounts for 1807 show that from her allowance of £50 she spent £2.13.6 to hire a pianoforte. The prospect of a move to Chawton caused Jane to write a happy letter to Cassandra, Tuesday, December 27, 1808:

> ... yes, yes, we will have a pianoforte, as good as can be got for thirty guineas, and I will practice country dances, that we may have some amusement for our nephews and nieces,
Many of Jane Austen’s heroines played the pianoforte for it was considered a necessary accomplishment of a young gentlewoman. Elizabeth Bennet was given a skill that appeared to be similar to that of Jane herself. When Elizabeth visited Rosings, the instrument that she played in the drawing room was, no doubt, the prestigious grand pianoforte. When Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who, in her own view ‘if [she] had ever learnt … would have been a great proficient’, offered Elizabeth a piano on which to practise, it would have been the more common square pianoforte tucked away in Mrs. Jenkinson’s room where Elizabeth ‘would be in nobody’s way … in that part of the house.’(11)

A much more accomplished musician was Jane Fairfax, and the arrival of a new pianoforte in the Bates’ parlour elicited a surprised response from Mrs Cole, for

as soon as she entered the room [she] had been struck by the sight of a pianoforté – a very elegant looking instrument – not a grand but a large-sized square pianoforté; … this pianoforté had arrived from Broadwoods the day before.

Still Mrs Cole was proud that she possessed a grand pianoforte in her drawing room and noted that the rich Colonel Campbell, whom Mrs Cole thought had sent the gift, had also, in his London house, ‘a grand pianoforté, … he might think it too large for Miss Bates’s house’. (12)

Jane Austen’s happiness at Chawton, where she had both a garden and her own pianoforte, is matched by Marianne Dashwood upon setting out for Barton Cottage –

I know we shall be happy … I mean never to be later in rising than six, and from that time till dinner I shall divide every moment between music and reading (13).

– a plan Marianne probably did not keep, but one that Jane herself would.

**Notes**


**Questions:**

1) What kind of piano did Jane Austen play?
   a) a grand pianoforte  
   b) a square pianoforte  
   c) a Medici piano
d) a Chawton piano

2) “Aunt Jane began her day with music – for which I conclude 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.”

What is the author telling us about Jane Austen in this passage?

a) She disliked music and was forced to play.
   b) She enjoyed playing the piano.
   c) She was a talented piano player because she had secret lessons.
   d) She had to keep her love of piano hidden from her family.

3) There are many main ideas in this text. The two most important are:
   a) How musicians were made and what instruments they played.
   b) How Jane Austen acquired a love of the piano and how she wove pianos into her writing.
   c) Different pianists favored different kinds of pianos and Jane loved the piano forte.
   d) Real musicians learned naturally without lessons and they learned on different types of pianos.
   e) The history of pianos and the role of the piano in Jane Austen’s life.

The above are supplemental questions created by coaches, teachers and staff developers at Teachers College Reading and Writing Project.