



YOUNG LADY AT A CABINET PIANO FORTE (c. 1808)

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THE INNOCENT DIVERSION

*A study of Music in
the life and writings of
Jane Austen*

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To
Isména Holland

Caroline Bingley sings duets with her sister, Mrs Hurst, (Italian airs, we are told) while Elizabeth stands by the instrument, turning over some music lying on it. As she does so she notices how frequently Mr Darcy's eyes are fixed upon her. It is a sign that he is beginning to find her unusually attractive. Miss Bingley, sensing danger, 'varies the charm by a lively Scottish air'. This was the period when 'Scotch Songs' were the rage of polite society, not merely in England but throughout all Europe. The collections brought out by several Edinburgh publishers, often with accompaniments by the greatest composers of the day, among them Haydn, Pleyel and later Beethoven, had an immense sale. The demand soon exceeded the supply, and the composition of fake Scottish melodies became a lucrative trade for impecunious British composers. However, the music Miss Bingley played might not have been one of these pseudo-Scottish songs but a piece of genuine Scottish dance music, since it prompted Mr Darcy to ask Elizabeth if it did not make her wish to 'seize the opportunity of dancing a reel'. It was an oddly uncharacteristic remark for him to make, and, as Elizabeth had already heard his opinion of dancing as an entertainment ('every savage can dance'), it verged on the impolite. Not surprisingly, she 'smiled and made no answer', which obliged him to repeat the question and probably made him wish he had never asked it. Elizabeth, who often seems to possess a maturity well beyond her twenty years, knows very well that silence can be a more effective rebuke than words.

When Jane and Elizabeth returned home 'they found Mary, as usual, deep in the study of thorough bass and human nature'. It is puzzling to find Jane Austen (for it is the authoress herself who speaks here) sneering at a plain girl for studying a branch of musical theory. Why was Mary to be ridiculed for doing something so very well worth while? Had Mr Chard, perhaps, once tried to teach Jane Austen something of thorough bass and failed to arouse her interest? One wonders, too, with whom Mary can have pursued her musical studies, for we know that she

never had the advantage of a London master. She probably had pianoforte lessons from a music teacher living in Meryton, but she may well have had to struggle with the science of thorough bass entirely unaided. Surely she deserved praise rather than mockery for her efforts?

Mary receives another 'set-down' a little later on in the story, when, at the Netherfield Park ball, she is all too eager to sing to the very large party assembled there:

Mary's powers were by no means fitted for such a display; her voice was weak, and her manner affected. — Elizabeth was in agonies.

(*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 100)

Elizabeth gives her father a speaking glance to entreat his interference 'lest Mary should be singing all night'. He takes the hint and delivers his celebrated snub:

'That will do extremely well, child. You have delighted us long enough. Let the other young ladies have time to exhibit.'

Mary, though pretending not to hear, was somewhat disconcerted.

(*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 101)

As well she might be. Mr Bennet's sardonic words must have seriously injured her ego, as was doubtless his intention. Elizabeth was sorry for Mary, and regretted her interference, but it must be admitted that it was a splendidly deflating utterance and one would not have it unsaid for the world. How often, when bored to tears by the efforts of some self-satisfied musician (nowadays it is contemporary composers, rather than performers, who are usually the culprits), one longs to quote, in ringing tones, Mr Bennet's immortal phrases.

In the second volume of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's playing gives rise to some of the finest scenes of comedy in all Jane Austen's work — those which describe the heroine's encounters with Lady Catherine de Bourgh at Rosings. The subject is first used to contrast Elizabeth's quiet good manners with Lady Catherine's gross conceit and