

Episode 105 - The Thing About Marianne's Music with Dr. Elizabeth Weybright

Zan: [00:00:00] Welcome to The Thing About Austen, a podcast about Jane Austen's world. I'm Zan.

Diane: And I'm Diane. And this episode we're talking about Marianne's music.

We are excited to welcome our guest for today's episode, Dr. Elizabeth Elly Weybright. Is a lecturer in the English department at Barnard College and holds a PhD in English Literature from the Graduate Center, CUNY and a BA in Literature and music performance from SUNY Genesio. Before coming to Barnard, she taught courses in literature writing and the humanities at the City College of New York. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in the European Romantic Review. Romantic circles, praxis the rambling and a volume on 19th century literature in transition, the 18 [00:01:00] hundreds forthcoming from Cambridge University Press. Elizabeth's research focuses on British literature of the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Her current project explores how women writers engaged with musical aesthetics and soundscapes during this period. Welcome, Elly.

Elly: Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here.

Zan: We are excited to get to talk about Marianne's piano playing. And yeah I can't wait to get into all of the details.

Diane: So the topic of this episode takes us to Devonshire, which has only recently welcomed the edition of the Dashwood Ladies to Barton Cottage. Almost immediately after arriving, they are invited to dine at Barton Park, which side note, it feels like trying to politely decline an invitation from Sir John should be an Olympic sport.

Elly: Totally.

Diane: In the course of that evening, Marianne is discovered to be musical, and so she plays for the assembled company.

Zan: So this is the passage that we are working with today.[00:02:00]

"Marianne's performance was highly applauded, sir. John was loud in his admiration at the end of every song, and as loud in his conversation with the others while every song lasted. Lady Middleton frequently called him to order, wondering how anyone's attention could be diverted from music for a moment, and asked Marianne to sing a particular song, which Marianne had just finished. Colonel Brandon alone of all the party heard her without being in Raptures. He paid her only the compliment of attention, and she felt a respect for him on the occasion, which the others had reasonably forfeited by their shameless want of taste."

I just, there's never a dull moment with Sir John and Lady Middleton.

Elly: I absolutely love it.

Diane: They're not the best audience on the whole.

Zan: Enthusiastic, yes. But, lacking in other areas.

Diane: Sir John is who you want to call when you need a not so discerning hype man. He's great for that.

Elly: [00:03:00] Absolutely.

Diane: Five stars, five stars only. That is their job.

Elly: He would write a lot of Yelp reviews, I think. And all of them would be great.

Zan: Yes.

Ah, so this scene, this is our first kind of really developed scene with Marianne performing, right? But the first specific mention of Marianne and the piano comes when the Dashwood are leaving Norland, and the fact that one of the few luxury items that they get to take with them is a handsome piano forte of Marianne's. So this piano, it's also one of the first things that they set up at Barton Cottage, when they make, they're getting ready to make it feel like a home. So then we have this scene, obviously at Barton Park where Marianne performs for everyone.

And after this, the piano at the park figuratively belongs to Marianne as well. She gets to take over, nobody else is using it. So can you tell us a little bit more about the significance of this idea of ownership with Marianne's piano playing the literal piano that she owns, as well as this kind of figurative ownership of the piano forte at Barton Park?

Elly: Yes, [00:04:00] absolutely. So I think something interesting to me is that early detail about the ownership of the piano tends to get skated over. Like it's not a big deal, but I think it actually is a very big deal.

Piano ownership in general in this period was becoming a lot more common. Keyboard instrument technology was rapidly developing and printed music, including things like *étude* books along with instruments. All of this was starting to be, become a lot more accessible.

A piano forte was increasingly a staple feature in household entertainment and girls' educations in the upper and emergent middle classes. And it was also becoming a more ubiquitous status symbol, which is a trend that Austen herself actually seems to have had some salty opinions about.

She writes a letter to Fannie Knight in 1814 talking about Anna Lefroy, [00:05:00] who has recently moved in with her husband and, Austen reports is to have a piano forte. And Austen writes that the 24 guineas spent on this instrument is going to be a waste, and that in six months they'll wish they'd spent it on sheets and towels. And she goes on to write that "as to her playing. It can never be anything."

Playful, I think affectionate in its own way, but still this really, I think is suggestive about how for Austen personally, a piano was something to be used, not something to be looked at and appreciated as nothing but a luxury piece of furniture.

So while piano ownership itself in general isn't necessarily remarkable, the social and financial context and sense and sensibility is very particular. And this is why it's a big deal that Marianne's piano belongs to her even [00:06:00] after the move to Barton Cottage.

So this is something that I think the narrative itself suggests, and I'll say a little bit about that in a moment. But there is also, I think, significant biographical backdrop for this, and that's the fact that Austen, she owned a piano at two points in her life as far as we know, and rented an instrument on at least one occasion.

Significantly, unlike Marianne, when her family moved to Bath in 1801, she had to sell the instrument that she had played on presumably since childhood. And so we know from her letters that this instrument sold for only eight guineas, which really isn't much. Again, think you know just a little bit later an instrument is purchased for 24 30 Guineas thereabouts. So eight guineas really isn't a lot. It's possible that by the time of its sale, this instrument [00:07:00] was a little bit out of date.

Again, piano keyboard technology was rapidly developing. So maybe it was just old. Maybe it was in heavily used condition. We don't really know.

Diane: It was like a clunker car.

Elly: Yeah, exactly. Or like the kind of this had been around again, presumably since Austen and her siblings were fairly young.

So there's a book in the Austen Family Music Collection. It's almost like a commonplace book of music, and it's full of all of these little scraps. It's so beat up. You can see this actually in the Austen family music archive online, but seeing it in person, I was absolutely floored by how destroyed it was. There are food stains, rips just in, in really beat up shape. So it's possible that this instrument was also a bit beat up.

So I do think there's something to say for the idea that, Austen at least by the time *Sense and Sensibility* was [00:08:00] revised and published would have had the experience of having to give up an instrument.

It's hard to unpack the real emotional context for her. What we do know from the letter in which she writes about the sale is that she didn't expect to get any more than eight guineas. I think it's interesting in that letter that she actually seems more upset about some of the other family furniture they had to sell. She seems to have been more upset about the sale of some of the family's books, which included music books. And so what that suggests to me is that maybe Austen knew she would be renting a piano forte in Bath. Maybe she knew she would have access to an instrument even if it didn't belong to her.

But I think this also suggests that she was being quite practical about the need to sell the instrument. That she was fully aware that taking it with them wouldn't really [00:09:00] make any sense. And we don't know whether she rented an instrument in Bath. We do know that when she was living with her mother and sister in Southampton after the death of her father, she did rent an instrument

there. And we know this because it appears in ledger of her Jane Austen's personal expenses.

So at any rate, when the Austens moved to Chawton Cottage, later on, we know that Austen purchases a piano forte and in the letter she writes to Cassandra about that purchase. She to my reading sounds actually pretty excited. This is a letter written in 1808 and she writes ", yes, we will have a piano forte as good, a one as can be got for 30 guineas." And 30 guineas. It's not a tiny amount of money, so this wasn't a small expense.

Austen seems to have been rightfully a little bit [00:10:00] precious about that instrument. This one is not getting beaten up. She writes to her niece Caroline, who's musical practice, she was actually involved in and meddling in afar in her letters, saying, remember to practice your fingerings and things like that. She writes to Caroline at one point when Caroline is visiting chat and cottage while Austen is away reminding her not to let anyone put heavy things on her piano.

Zan: This resonates. This is so good.

Elly: Yes, I know. It's all so on brand, right? And it, and I think it does tell us that at least the ownership of that particular instrument was something that was significant to Austen, likely financially as well as emotionally. And I think we can appreciate that even if she was being practical about it, having to give up her own instrument may have been a part of what made the move to Bath distressing for her.

And on the flip side, that getting an instrument at [00:11:00] Chawton was part of what made that home in a way very similar to how setting up the piano forte of Marianne's is part of what makes Barton Cottage home.

So returning to *Sense and Sensibility*, then, I want to carry forward that sense of practicality and I think that, something that we should really take into consideration. Is the fact that for the Dashwood women, bringing that piano forte was not really a practical endeavor. As you said, it's a luxury item. So beyond just the potential bit of cash they might have gotten by selling the instrument. It would have been costly and logistically involved to bring it along with them.

They had to find a spot for it in Barton Cottage. A piano forte wouldn't do well in the damp. It needs maintenance. It needs [00:12:00] to be out of the way of some of the family's daily activities, both so that Marianne can use it and have

some time to herself with it. But also so that it's not getting knocked about by whatever's going on.

Although, we read that great passage where we see that essentially everybody except Colonel Brandon, is utterly incapable of really appreciating Marianne's music, but everyone in the Barton Circle does at least begin to recognize how important and woven into her daily life, Marianne's practices. Even Sir John, when he comes over. Makes remarks about how if the piano forte is open, Marianne must be near. And you mentioned earlier the idea that the piano forte at Barton Park becomes figuratively Marianne's, I think that's part of this as well.

So we [00:13:00] know that Lady Middleton, like many other formerly accomplished young women, has gleefully given up her musical practice as soon as she gets married.

Zan: I love that line. That is so funny.

Elly: It's so good.

Diane: She could start a musical club with Mrs. Elton.

Elly: She could. They would be great together. Great together.

But yeah, she is, she's not touching that piano and that's bad for it as well. Instruments don't do great when they sit unplayed for years. So Marianne becomes a source of kind of maybe even life extending vitality for that instrument. And significantly it gets tuned.

Zan: Yeah.

Elly: This is another small detail that I think is so telling, and it's telling because, maybe that piano has a piano tuner visit now and then. I think I'm inclined to guess that's not entirely likely, but it gets tuned when Marianne is around. And I've [00:14:00] done a bit of digging to see about what that might have entailed, how much that might have cost. I found that there were traveling piano tuners. Maybe musical instrument sellers or music sellers or even music teachers who were going to arrive in in a certain provincial area would put out ads in the local newspaper. Things like the *Bath Chronicle*. Other kind of regional newspapers.

So they would put out an ad announcing when they were coming into town and how to get in touch with them. So if you wanted your piano to be tuned, you would go to the specified location or send a servant to do this and arrange for the tuner to come out to your home and service the instrument.

Yeah. What all of this means is that someone someone in the Barton Circle had to decide to do this, keep an eye out in the [00:15:00] newspapers, make sure that when the piano tuner was in town they arranged for his services. And it was a little bit difficult to figure out how much this would've cost, but I did find one ad from 1801 listing a rate of four shillings for a grand piano forte, which is likely what we have at Barton Park. We don't know about Marianne's piano but the one at Barton Park almost certainly. Is that kind of bigger, expensive instrument.

Zan: That status piece as well. Yeah, exactly.

Elly: Exactly. So you know, maybe somewhere around four shillings for that instrument to be tuned, it would've cost around two shillings, six pence for a small one. So if we assume that Sir John paid, that's not a huge amount. But for the Dashwood women who are having to economize, it might not be insignificant.

This is all to say that again, the narrative before we even get to that [00:16:00] moment where Marianne is judging everyone for failing to listen to her, with the proper attention, the narrative has first set this tone of legitimate ownership of her instrument. And I think in a way asks us to take Marianne a little more seriously as a musician than she often is by readers. And that seriousness remains interspersed with the narratives implicit critique of her over emotional absorption in music.

Diane: So Elly, in your own work, you examine a range of tropes that apply to musical young women in Austen's novels. And you specifically mentioned the trope of the "effectively overwrought victim of romantic and Romantic sensibility," which does sound like something you might need to visit a doctor for.

So can you tell us a bit more about this trope of young women essentially performing [00:17:00] Romanticism and how it does or perhaps does not apply to Marianne?

Elly: Sure. Yes. So this is another thing in this novel that I think is as always in Austen, a little more a little more nuanced when you scratch at the surface. But

Marianne is absolutely a character who Austen is using as a kind of index for some debates that were going on around women's education. The education in accomplishments that was so standard at this point.

What makes Marianne so interesting to me, especially she's my favorite Austen musician. She's an Austen character whose musicianship clearly exceeds the guidelines of "polite accomplishment" or what Mr. Collins and *Pride and Prejudice* would describe as "innocent diversion." She's just clearly doing more with music than she's technically [00:18:00] supposed to be doing.

Her playing is absolutely bound up in her romantic encounters with Willoughby. It's a point of attraction for Colonel Brandon as well, but she isn't playing with the mercenary aim of bagging ineligible husband.

As so many Austen characters do. So right out of the gate, her character complicates the accomplishments narrative that says that women's musicianship in this period was essentially a tool on the marriage market. And as her piano ownership begins to suggest. Certain small details in the novel ask that we recognize her to be a serious amateur musician.

She practices a lot and she plays well. To draw a comparison with *Pride and Prejudice*. Again, there we have a musical character, Mary Bennett, who also plays concertos, but Mary Bennett's [00:19:00] concertos are called *long* while Marianne's Concerto, in *Sense and Sensibility*, is called *very magnificent*. So some readers might find sarcasm in that label, but I do think there's an available reading here where the magnificence of the playing is a sincere description and it suggests that Marianne is talented and that she works hard at her music.

Her practice involves serious keyboard repertoire. I like to think of her as being on the cutting edge of the music coming out of Vienna and Germany, although we don't know for sure. But she's not just playing flirtatious duets with Willoughby.

As Austen knew from her own keyboard practice to play music like that takes rigorous study. The concerto, in part in particular was a genre that from the late 18th century forward signaled [00:20:00] soloistic, virtuosity. Concertos are big. They're long. Three movements. And you don't just play one out of nowhere. Or if you try to. It's really not going to go well. You have to play Etudes and you have to practice your fingerings.

And we know that Austen did this. She owned some Etude books that were proliferating in this period, and I think she expects an astute reader to realize

that all of this private and disciplined practice must be behind Marianne's displays of musical expression.

And I think we also see Eleanor noticing this because when we hear that Marianne is playing that magnificent concerto, this is during the conversation Eleanor is having with Lucy Steele, where Eleanor is kinda using Marianne's music to cover over her conversation with Lucy. But it's interesting to me that her ear is still catching enough of Marianne's playing to, if we are in [00:21:00] Eleanor's head at this point, if the free and direct narration is cluing us into what is happening in Eleanor's mind, that she's recognizing that it's a concerto.

So I do think that Marianne's practice is something that's being taken, seriously, at least to a degree in the novel. But she is also undeniably a prime example of some dangers that 18th century conduct literature actually warned against.

So musical accomplishment, again, was a part of an educational agenda for young ladies that was essentially supposed to be a tool of social control. And writers like the Edgeworth in *Practical Education*, dramatized the possible ways that this could go off the rails.

So the two kind of dangers were, on the one hand, an anxiety that too much practice might make a young [00:22:00] woman entirely mechanical, overly accomplished, like an automaton. But the other was that too much music would involve too much feeling in both bodily and metaphysical senses, and that's the danger that Marianne represents.

She dives into this Romantic way of interacting with the world. In her musical practice, she prizes expression centering her herself. And her creative impulses, she values natural, authentic feeling as an aesthetic priority to the point that it takes the place of moral or social codes for her. So Marianne is always basing her choices and her principles on what she intuitively feels to be right and good. And to oversimplify a little bit, this obviously contrasts with Eleanor's controlled rationality and observation of [00:23:00] social conventions. So Marianne really doesn't care about music as a social tool.

Zan: Yeah.

Elly: She cares about it as a tool for self-knowledge and self-expression. As a way of forging intimacy with her own feelings and sensations and as a way of, as she thinks forming real intimate bonds with other people.

Her way of approaching music as a vehicle for all of this is distinctly Romantic, and she is definitely extra about it. I think the least generous reading of Marianne as a musician and more generally finds that she really takes to heart the kind of Wordsworthian idea of creative inspiration as the, spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.

Zan: That sublime. Yeah.

Elly: Yeah. But Marianne completely forgets what Wordsworth adds after that, which is that powerful feeling needs to [00:24:00] be recollected in tranquility, where the intellectual interiority of a creative genius is supposed to temper and kind of process those inspirations. Marianne is just, nope. Let's feel it all.

Zan: We're leaning all into that. Yes.

Elly: All, all in on feeling. And she uses music to do that.

Zan: I think in a scene that you're you were describing where she's playing that, that magnificent concerto. It's a really interesting moment too, because it is where she's found a socially appropriate ish moment to do this, right?

This is like the women are in the drawing room, and so this is fine, but it's also at the same time, like this like really big piece. There's that scene where she just she's abruptly stands up, but she's i'm gonna play the piano and everybody has to kinda just oh, she, this is fine.

They work around it, but the fact that there's that social moment, I think that is really exemplifying all the things that you're talking about. Where it is she wants to play because she's actually proficient. It's an important thing to her, but also that she maybe is eschewing [00:25:00] the propriety of the scenario a little bit in favor of this, because this is also like post Willoughby's abandonment, right? He's left. And so she's feeling a lot of things .

Elly: She is, she's feeling a lot of things, and the piano has just been tuned right in her head. Nobody could blame her, but she hasn't been invited to play and as you point out, nobody wants her concertos.

I think it's actually a line from Mrs. Bennett in one of the *Pride and Prejudice* adaptations. Yes. Where she says something like, "nobody wants your concertos here, Mary."

Zan: "Play a jig, Mary."

Elly: Yeah. But it's really it's the same thing going on in *Sense and Sensibility* and everybody just accepts it. We can also imagine this works out for Eleanor, but everyone else is trying to play cards. And you can imagine them kind of being like, they don't have noise canceling headphones. Marianne is just over in the corner [00:26:00] belting it out on the grand piano forte. And that's absolutely breaking some rules.

And it's also an example of how Marianne's total investment even. I think we could call it naive investment in the idea that if she feels she wants to play this magnificent piece, she should do it because expression and feeling is the most righteous thing in the world. And it also becomes something that actually puts her in some danger.

We'll absolutely talk about Willoughby as a person who becomes involved in Marianne's music making. One of the things that this romantic musical sensibility blinds Marianne to is the possibility that Willoughby might be interested in her [00:27:00] music. Not because he's just interested in her music, but because he's using it to manipulate her. And he sees how swept up she gets and he's using that for his own nefarious aims.

Zan: Yeah. Yeah.

In the passage that we read at the top of the episode, we again, get this kinda idea of listening and what's going on here, and we get an interesting insight into how other people are engaging or not, as the case may be with Marianne's piano playing. So can you talk a little bit more about how you interpret the way people react or engage with Marianne's musicianship as her audiences?

Elly: Yes. So I should say at the top, that *Sense and Sensibility* gets published at a very particular moment in the history of social rules around how we behave at musical performances, especially the Royal Philharmonic Society was founded in 1813 so just a couple [00:28:00] years after its publication. And that organization played an enormous role in ushering in ideas, novel ideas that said that maybe when you go to a concert, you should actually listen to it. You want us to pay attention what? But when *Sense and Sensibility* is initially being drafted and when its events are likely taking place, this was at best just beginning to emerge. This all comes before that becomes a mainstream idea.

Zan: So it's not codified at all socially as a thing?

Elly: It's not, it's not at all. But I think that what *Sense and Sensibility* shows us is that for some of its characters, this was beginning to be a glimmer of an idea.

Gill Darcy Wood and his great book on romanticism and music culture in Britain reads, [00:29:00] Colonel Brandon's listening as what he calls code for romantic depth.

And he writes about how Colonel Brandon, when he's standing there and listening quietly is among other things showing us that in contrast with the Middletons who don't, Lady Middleton's scolds Sir John for not using his inside voice. But so Colonel Brandon is a character who is maybe showing us that this is becoming a sort of new and emerging social norm.

I think Marianne's expectation for attention is maybe a little bit different. She genuinely, she wants attention because she's that excited about the music. And so in a kind of, her natural impulses say that this is something worth listening to. And maybe her ego a little bit [00:30:00] as well. She thinks she's quite good and so they should all really be listening to her.

But the fact is that it was really completely normal for people to be at a performance, especially a casual performance like this, right? Where, they just found out at dinner that Marianne plays and they said, oh, you should play for us.

It's not in any way a formal or high stakes performance environment. And so especially in that kind of context, it was absolutely the normal practice for people to be socializing. And again, they even did that at professional performances of theater and music.

Diane: It's like what Elizabeth plays at Rosings Park and she's also talking through the performance. Yes. Like they're all conversing while she's playing at the same time.

Zan: It was also making me think of in Bath when Anne Elliot is translating the Italian song live to her cousin, the fact that she's. They are talking. And it's expected,

Elly: Right? And that Ann's actual attention and interaction with the [00:31:00] music involves speaking aloud, which would be totally taboo for us, but was absolutely considered normal. And so to the extent that there would've been an expectation for a young woman like Marianne to be sitting at the piano forte and playing and singing and getting attention.

It was as much as anything else, just a cover story for men in particular to be admiring her beauty and that doesn't necessitate listening to the music. It's just

an opportunity for her to put her on the stage. And again, this is where that accomplishments narrative comes in. That it's really not about the music at all. And it's, it has everything to do with the social norms that were set up to give a woman an opportunity to show off her delicate taste and her beautiful figure without veering into promiscuous territory.

Diane: [00:32:00] This sort of calls back to our episode with Dr. Lidia Chang on Mary's concerto and how part of poor Mary, even though the text describes her, is like she's actually fairly technically proficient. Nobody wants to hear that style of music. And then on top of that, she's not attractive either.

So I think there's something like with Marianne where it does feel like even if you know when she's playing this magnificent concerto or she's playing songs and she's expecting people to really listen to her. Even if they aren't appreciating her execution on the piano, they're still, they're like, oh, isn't she so pretty? Yeah. They're still taking that part in.

Zan: I think, and I think this is also it gives you an extra way of reading, even Colonel Brandon's attention. In the best case, he is technically admiring her proficiency, her performance, her ability to to really pull this music together. But at the same time as we learn, he's got a back history and he's fascinated by parallels between her and, the Eliza of his past. And so he might also just be like [00:33:00] admiring the view in some ways.

Elly: Yeah.

Zan: But she interprets it as wow. Yes. This man has taste.

Elly: She does. Yeah. And that makes that such an interesting moment in their marriage plot as well. I think a reader will likely have an inkling that Brandon is interested in Marianne on the level of courtship. But yes, it's really telling that Marianne notices him listening. And in that moment, actually the narration is settling us in Marianne's point of view, which is a little bit unusual.

Usually we're seeing things through Eleanor's eyes, right? But here we're on Marianne's side and she thinks to herself that she has a little bit of respect for him. While everyone else is unable to appreciate her expression and her talent, that he knows enough [00:34:00] to see that there's something good going on in her performance itself, but also that he knows enough that the way to show that appreciation is to just be quiet.

And I think it's worth mentioning that Austen, generally across her novels, her narrators regularly critique characters who are unable to listen. In *Persuasion*, we have Ann Elliot actually sitting and judging everyone for failing to recognize that she's a better musician than the Misses Musgrove, but she rationalizes it away and forgives them by thinking, oh they love their daughters. So of course they'd be paying attention. To them, and Anne understands in a way that Marianne refuses to accept that it's almost never about the music itself. And instead is always about the social rules and [00:35:00] about how people feel about the performer. Which means that they're, how they direct their attention is more based on, their kind of prior sense of investment in the woman who's playing.

Diane: Do I like you? Do I think you're charming. Then I also like your playing. And I also think you're playing as charming and otherwise, get off the stage.

Yeah. No, no one wants you here. Yeah.

Elly: Yeah. Absolutely. I think that on the one hand, Marianne looking around her and feeling, really viciously critical of everyone who's failing to look at her is because she is, she's she is she's really, she's actually annoyed by it. And on the one hand, this is something that's a little bit naive about Marianne, that she should understand in the way that Ann Elliott does, what's going on there. I think that's a critique that we could bring to her character.

But then there's this other layer where [00:36:00] Austen gives that space to Sir John and Lady Middleton to tell on themselves. Lady Middleton is saying to Sir John, oh, how could you, how could your attention be drawn away from this wonderful music? But then she asks Marianne to play the thing she's just played. Either she's incredibly stupid or she's not really paying attention, and she's affecting informed musical taste without really possessing any of it.

And so Austen is, yes, critiquing Marianne, but also. Through her judgment of other characters showing us that various versions of polite standards around musical performances like this were vapid and arbitrary.

So yeah, Marianne is extra about her aesthetic principles and it's unfair of her to expect that everyone else would feel the same [00:37:00] way. But she's also not entirely wrong in thinking that the social rules around music making lack intellectual and aesthetic rigor and that they're, a kind of stilted, classist set of rules about when her playing is welcome and when it isn't.

I think that she's not entirely misguided there.

Diane: She doesn't care, either. She's you know what? I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do.

Elly: She doesn't care. But again, this is something that puts her in danger, right? Because something that *Sense and Sensibility* is showing us is that however much Marianne's investment in music might be admirable in certain ways, however much her enthusiasm for music might come from sort of natural impulses, it causes her to miss how it [00:38:00] really puts her at odds with the social world she lives in and she is just, her feelings are not really going to help her survive in this kind of world. Yeah.

Diane: So one of the things that really stands out in this novel is the way that both Colonel Brandon and Willoughby engage with Marianne's music and with Marianne through her music. So why do you think Austen sets up these different interactions between these two suitors? What is Austen possibly suggesting here about, everyone's character and motives?

Elly: Yeah. This is a really complex question, I think because there's an available reading. I think that, and I'm, I should say I think this is less ambivalent about the marriage to Colonel Brandon than I'm really comfortable being. It's, not an entirely lowercase r romantic, [00:39:00] happy ending, and I think that. We should keep that in mind, but showing us Colonel Brandon's ability to listen quietly and if Marianne is right, to behave with real respect for her playing, actually, I think bodes well for their marriage.

But before we get there, we should really talk about Willoughby, because he is everything musically that Marianne would want in a lover. He can sing, he knows music. He's really interested. He asks her to play. And he joins in with her. They're obviously engaging in mutual flirtation at the piano. Singing duets together is just undeniably hot.

And I think...

Zan: Facts.

Elly: Facts. We can understand how, for Marianne singing duets together becomes part of her certainty that there's [00:40:00] chemistry between them, that they think in similar ways, and that there's mutual affection between herself and Willoughby. Because again, no matter who it is, who's listening to her, she

takes their body language as a signal of real investment or lack of interest in her music.

So this is really a major difference between the two men. Brandon listens to Marianne, but Willoughby joins his voice to hers. And of course that's more exciting to her. He, Willoughby, buys music for Marianne and he writes her name in it. He even writes music out for her.

This was a common practice at this time, partly because music printed sheet music was expensive. So it was common for women especially to trade with each other and then copy something out if they wanted it in their own collection. But that's [00:41:00] also a long embodied process and so Willoughby writing music out for Marianne is also a way of showing, in her eyes anyway, and maybe his too, of course we have Willoughby's own account of how he accidentally becomes genuinely in love and invested in Marianne.

So we can't really know what he's doing here. Maybe he really is just that invested in her playing. But at any rate, he's doing this time consuming and involved thing and that writing out of music and writing her name and the music he buys for her is absolutely itself a site of eroticism in their courtship.

The problem is that I think this is something that in a way, takes something from Marianne, whereas in other moments we see Marianne absorbed in her music, [00:42:00] but in control of what she's doing in it. Refusing to play by the rules and playing her concerto when she wants to play her concerto.

With Willoughby, we see that his influence is really invasive, and whatever his plan was, it absolutely works because it gets her to play the things he wants her to play. The music he purchases for her and writes out appears to be mainly music operas, vocal music that likely, maybe entirely include themes about love and courtship.

And so this is something that Willoughby does that makes sure that when Marianne is spending all of this time at her piano, she's thinking about him. And when he's away, it's something that she self-indulgent uses as a way of keeping his memory alive [00:43:00] and, conjuring his voice.

Diane: She's playing that mixed tape he made her over and over again on repeat.

Elly: Yes. Yeah. I, it's worth maybe reading the relevant passage if that's okay.

Zan: Yes, please.

Elly: It's really striking. So this is after Willoughby has abruptly left for London:

"The evening passed off in the equal indulgence of feeling I. She, Marianne played over every favorite song that she had been used to play to Willoughby. Every air in which their voices had been often disjoined 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 piano forte, alternately singing and crying. Her voice, often totally suspended by her tears."

And she's reading to do this as well. [00:44:00] Marianne isn't the only pianist in Austen who cries at the piano, and Elliot does it too. She thinks nobody notices, but she does. But this is one of the moments that is really often read as a signal of how completely absorbed and ridiculous Marianne is and how to the extent that Willoughby's music making with her leads her into danger. It's her fault because she is indulging in it. But it also really shows us how much Marianne, before her illness even, has lost something of her practice.

I think I want to be careful and not suggest that this is absolutely telling us that Marianne is setting aside her serious practice in favor of these frothy romantic heirs, but because she plays the concerto after this, but all the same, I think it does show us that Willoughby [00:45:00] has hijacked some of her practice for his own purposes.

And it's significant too that in the Austen Family Music book collection, this is online and available on the internet archive, which is amazing. You can just go browse the music books. I was lucky enough to go take a look at them in person, and I actually gasped the first time I opened one of the books that had Jane Austen's own inscription of her name inside the cover. And so Austen spent a lot of time copying out her own music. She wrote her name in her music book. She was careful about writing out tables of contents for them and the mark of her own hand in her music is something that I think also suggests a kind of ownership and curatorial authority over her music collection.

Zan: Yeah. This is the stuff I care for. This is the [00:46:00] stuff I want to practice and play and own.

Elly: Yes. This is *my* music.

So the fact that we see Willoughby doing this for Marianne, I think is really telling. And then of course, when she gets back to Barton Cottage after her illness, Eleanor is watching Marianne do this kind of give and take with her feelings where, she is, it shows that she's been reformed in Eleanor's eyes, right? That Marianne is still sad, is still hurting, but is now able to pull herself back from the ledge and exercise rationality and managing her feelings.

So it's when this is going on that Marianne goes to her piano forte and she sees a book of music that Willoughby had written her name in and she almost recoils from the instrument. She complains of feebleness [00:47:00] and she closes the piano. But then she says in the future she "will practice much."

So we could read that as a total loss for Marianne. I think that this is an incredibly sad moment in the novel and I think Eleanor sees this with some sadness as well. So this is another moment where I think we could say, oh, okay, Marianne has seen the error in her ways and she is, still feeling that kind of painful stab when she's reminded of all of those great times with Willoughby at the piano.

I think there's a more practical reading too, though, where we can say, as an instrumentalist myself, who stepped away from my I, I play the cello and I stepped away from my cello for a long time after spending many years playing it essentially every day. And [00:48:00] it was shocking to me how I actually lost muscle strength in my fingers. I, I lost my chops. I also lost calluses, so it became literally painful to play my cello again when I tried to come back to it.

That's something I read into this scene with Marianne as well. When she complains of Feebleness in her fingers, that might be a practical problem getting in the way of her playing. And that's a real and legitimate loss that contributes to this sense that there's something that's been taken from Marianne.

This is the last thing we see of her music in the novel. Actually, the novel refuses to tell us whether she does practice much in the future. We can hope that given that Colonel Brandon is apparently interested in her music, he might encourage her to do that. Give her the space to do that, but Austen [00:49:00] refuses to let us know.

And let's be real. She would have a piano forte if she married Willoughby, as well. If everything went okay. If he doesn't get disowned and all of these things. Yeah. But provided that all goes well. If they were, if they had gotten married, she would've had that with him.

But I, but again, there's an argument to be made that says that a reading of Colonel Brandon that says that, yeah, he, he'll provide those things for her, but then he'll stay out of it and let her music remain her own thing. That's something that Willoughby is never actually willing to give her. He is, he's always in the novel, involved in her musicianship and taking some of it over for himself.

And yeah, so it becomes, I think that it's a, again, a really complex question. Does Marianne open herself up to these risks by misunderstanding what she should be doing, or what she should be protecting herself [00:50:00] from in her music and in her sunny public performances? Or is Willoughby just that nefarious that he sees this and he seizes on an opportunity to to manipulate her because he knows that she won't notice.

Diane: I'm always going to vote on the side of Willoughby being nefarious. That just feels right.

Elly: Yeah. Yeah. I think so.

Diane: I'm not giving that guy credit for anything.

Elly: No.

Diane: His dogs like him apparently. That's about what you can say about Willoughby.

Elly: Yeah. So does Sir John. I mean

Zan: With his Yelp review of...

Elly: His Yelp review of Willoughby. Great dogs. Great guy.

Diane: Elly, thank you so much for coming on and talking to us about Marianne's Piano playing. Where can our listeners follow you online if you are online or learn more about your various projects and publications?

Elly: Yeah, this is an ongoing project. My hope is that [00:51:00] an article length version of it might be out in the world soon. I'm not as online as I probably should be. I have a Twitter account @EllyWeybright, and I'll be honest I lurk a little bit on there, but I am likely to do that shameless academic thing and share when I've had something come out.

Zan: Excellent.

Elly: So yeah, you can find me on there.

Zan: Thank you again, Elly for coming and talking to us about Marianne's piano playing. It's always so fun to get really into the weeds of these kinds of details, so it's been a delight.

Elly: Thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me.

Diane: Thank you again to Dr. Elizabeth Weybright for joining us for this episode.

You can find us on Instagram at [@TheThingAboutAusten](#) and on Twitter at [@Austen_Things](#). You can also check out our website, [TheThingAboutAusten.com](#). And email us at [00:52:00] thethingaboutAusten@gmail.com.

And you can check out our merch for the podcast on Redbubble. Go to [AboutAusten.redbubble.com](#).

Zan: Stay tuned for next episode when we'll be talking about special licenses.

Diane: Thanks for listening. Bye.