

TTAA Episode 95 - Mary's Concerto, Complete

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

Diane: Zan. And I'm Diane. And this episode, we're talking about Mary's Concerto.

For this episode, we are so excited to welcome back our guest, Dr. Lidia Chang. Lidia is a flutist and musicologist whose work examines the intersection of gender, literature, print culture, organology, and music performance practices in Europe during the long 18th century, including the gendering power of musical instruments, as well as questions of aesthetics, sound ideals, technology, reception history, and historical performance practices that influenced musical styles.

She has presented her research at the Jane Austen Society of North America's [00:01:00] annual and regional meetings, the American Musicological Society, and the North American British Music Studies Association, among others, and is currently on the faculty at Colorado College. Welcome, Lidia.

Lidia: Thanks so much for having me back on this show.

Such a pleasure to talk with you guys.

Zan: Oh, always exciting to get to talk about these sorts of things.

Diane: For this episode, we are in the early chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*. Netherfield Park has been let at last. Hooray! And the Netherfield and Longbourn households are now acquainted. During a gathering at Lucas Lodge, Charlotte, Elizabeth, and Darcy are engaged in a brief conversation.

And, you know, a little bit of banter for Elizabeth and Darcy. When Charlotte announces that she is going to open up the instrument, which means that Lizzie will be expected to play.

Zan: Okay, so this is from the book and it's starting out by talking about Lizzie's performance. So here we have it. Her performance was pleasing, though by [00:02:00] no means capital.

After a song or two, and before she could reply to the entreaties of several that she would sing again, she was eagerly succeeded at the instrument by her sister Mary. Who, having in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments, was always impatient for display.

Mary had neither genius nor taste, and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached. Elizabeth, easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well.

And Mary, at the end of a long concerto, was glad to purchase praise and gratitude by Scotch and Irish airs, at the request of her younger sisters, who, with some of the Lucases and two or three officers, were to be married. joined eagerly in dancing at one end of the room. [00:03:00] Okay. So yeah, Mary is very, very ready to play, but her concerto was not in high demand.

So let's start with that. Um, Lidia, let's, let's, let's kind of jump in. What is a concerto? Can you tell us a bit about the history of this particular type of composition and how it might be coming into this kind of musical repertoire? Of someone like Mary Bennett.

Lidia: So the concerto is a genre of instrumental music that began to emerge in the late 17th, early 18th century, and it persisted through the 19th century, maybe worth mentioning already at the outset that the plural of concerto is concerti, uh, but sometimes you'll hear people say concertos.

And if that's what you say, don't worry, like nobody cares. And everybody knows what you mean. So concerti is the proper plural. And I'll talk about concerti grossi, which is also a plural of concerto grosso. So there's solo concerti written for one solo instrument like violin or flute or um, keyboard, like [00:04:00] fortepiano and, uh, with orchestral accompaniment.

And then there's also what are called concerti grossi. Which are written for 2, 3, 4 solo instruments with orchestral accompaniment. And some of the most famous early composers in these genres were Corelli Vivaldi. Some of you of your listeners may be familiar with the *Four Seasons*, uh, and a bit later than theirs.

Handel and Bach. If you know the Brandenburg Concerti, uh, those Aretic Grossie by Bach. And by the time we get to the period when Austen lived, uh,

Mozart was probably the most popular and prolific writer of Concerti. But, we really don't see any concerti in the, in the music books that Jane Austen herself compiled.

There is one by a William Evans, a composer who nobody has ever heard of. And, and this concerto for fortepiano was printed sometime between 1785, 1795. [00:05:00] And it made it into this collection of bound printed music. of Jane Austen's. And it's printed like I imagine many concerti would have been printed for, for young ladies to play in such a way we call a piano reduction.

So, whereas a concerto would have a solo piano part and then a lot of other parts written for all the string players in the orchestra, a piano reduction compresses all of that into one piece. Uh, one part for just one piano to play so that a young lady might be able to play, uh, the whole thing by herself, obviously without an orchestra.

The concerto is, is really a genre more for large scale public entertainment, um, not for the drawing room. It's a genre that showcases the virtuosity of a soloist. Um, or several soloists. And so for a young lady, this was really not the point of her musical education. All of her practicing was not in pursuit of great musical virtuosity, but rather Um, I forget if it's Erasmus [00:06:00] Darwin who talks about the, that these accomplishments are supposed to keep a young lady's impressionable mind pleasantly occupied and, uh, free of dangerous imaginations.

Right? That wonderful quote. But Mary Bennett, for example, is, is sort of doing something different, right? She is pursuing music with a goal of great virtuosity.

Diane: So, like, in terms of acquiring this type of music, like, you know, the, the sheet music to actually learn these pieces, is this the kind of thing that Mary could have just picked up in Meryton?

Would she have had to send away for them? We know that they had a rather indifferent education in the Bennett household, so obviously this isn't something that's, like, being given to her by a governess or something like that because they don't have one.

Lidia: She probably would have sent away for it or in a subscriber to a particular composer or, um, to a, uh, publishing house, um, and then would receive music from that subscription, and it could have included concerti.

Diane: So Lidia, you know, from this description [00:07:00] that Austen provides, you know, we get the sense that Mary's actually not a bad technical musician. She's perceived as unpleasant to listen to due to her general air while at the instrument. And. Maybe, perhaps, because it's not what everybody wants to hear, but you don't get the sense from Austen that she's like clomping her way down the keys, right?

That she's completely unskilled as a musician. So can you talk to us a little bit more about why Mary's choice of a concerto is noteworthy here? And what is it about this performance that's really not working for this audience?

Lidia: Yeah, this is a really, really good question. And I think something that makes Mary's performance Musical skills are really fascinating in this novel because the thing about Mary is that she does music really well, but for a woman that's in this period and especially a woman of her social class, she does it wrong.

She's just doing it wrong. Um, even while she's doing it well. So, so to understand her musical skills. And what they [00:08:00] tell us about her as a character, we have to consider with them within the broader context of how Mary is performing her gender and her social class throughout the novel in other ways. So, Mary is often described as pursuing accomplishments that would have been understood as masculine.

To Austen's readers, um, for example, instead of reading novels, she reads great books and makes extracts and she studies in her hours of repose. I think there's one scene described where after tea in the evenings, she and her father both retired to their respective places of study. He to his library and she to her instrument.

Often it comes up that like, she doesn't want to go on a walk with her sisters or like do the things that her sisters like to do because she's too busy studying and. Being very serious about her studies. She even really rates her intellectual abilities so highly that when she's briefly considering whether or not she would marry Mr.

[00:09:00] Collins, you know, if, if the opportunity presents itself, she says that she, uh, she, she's like impressed with the solidity of his, um, of his reflections, but thinks that he's not as clever as she is. And if they were to marry, that maybe she would have, she'd be a good influence on, on him and like, you know, get him to read the right books and like, therefore make him into a good companion.

Mary's academic and intellectual interests would have been understood not just as unusual, but as distinctly unladylike. And her musical sensibility also paint her in, in a, in a kind of masculine light. So when she plays a long concerto, Instead of Scotch and Irish airs. The Concierto, as I, as I mentioned before, was this genre meant for large scale public entertainment.

And as such, it was performed by men, professional musicians. So working class men in public for money. So, the concerto, as a genre, has these layers of [00:10:00] association that skew away from the virtuous domestic female musician, which contributes to Mary's characterization as not appropriately feminine. And what's more is that she studies the thorough bass, which is also called basso continuo.

Figured bass is a kind of guitar tabs for the harpsichord that emerged during the Baroque era, and by Jane Austen's day, it would have been really outdated and totally superfluous to the musical education of a lady. During that period, the music that ladies were expected to play would have been fully written out for them.

Thoroughbass was considered a subject within the study of music theory. science of music and because it was not really it no longer had a practical application. And so while a young lady would not have studied thoroughbays, a young man might have, and especially a young man of the working [00:11:00] class who intended to become a professional musician.

Diane: Well, it's so funny that line too They found Mary, as usual, deep in the study of thorough base and human nature. Right. She's like, she's studying thorough base. She's reading deep philosophy.

Lidia: Reading Hume. You know.

Zan: Well, and one of the things that's really interesting to me, Lidia, based on what you were just talking to, about too, is not only that there's the, the gendered element to her performance of the concerto, but that there is the class element to what she's performing as well. The fact that this is, this is something that is paid entertainment, that you would, the fact that she's, she's performing beyond not just her gender, but also beyond her class.

When, and even in the passage that we read at the top where it talks about how. She's kind of purchasing praise and gratitude by the Scotch airs. And so that there's, there's kind of like this like commerce element that's that I would never have noticed without that context.

Lidia: There is this element of, of a transaction, [00:12:00] uh, in that passage and, and yes, how inappropriate for a young lady of her class, um, to, to appear to be having purchasing power.

Yeah.

Diane: I mean, you can really get the sense of her as. She's like the serious one at the party and everyone's like, okay, stop playing the really serious music that we have to really focus on to appreciate. Can you just play something we can dance to? Switch the radio station to something more fun.

Lidia: Right.

And that's part of it too, that like the point of a young lady's musical education was besides keeping her. Her dainty little mind free of dangerous imaginations, but also to give pleasure to her family and her friends and the company and, and to also on the topic of class show that she had this leisure time.

She didn't have to work or cook or do anything that she could just play the piano and this reflected well on her family, you know, reflected their class very well.

Zan: Well, because I mean like a concerto is also not like a, like a Scotch or Irish reel that takes two minutes [00:13:00] concerto can be quite extensive. The time commitment alone is kind of, kind of daunting.

Diane: People are like shifting around in their chairs like, okay, um, are we, are we almost done? Oh, she's still going.

Lidia: Right, we're thinking like three movements and she plays all of it. That's like 20 25 minutes, right?

Zan: Yeah, people are like, I was not prepared for this. I just, you know, should have grabbed a snack before we sat down.

But one of the things that I think is really interesting is that we do have another public performance from Mary in Austen's novel. And this is a little bit later. This is at the Netherfield Bonk. And in this scene, singing rather than piano playing is the focus of the performance. And Austen writes, Mary's powers were by no means fitted for such a display.

Her voice was weak and her manner affected. This is a much less flattering performance for Mary, specifically because her voice is called out as weak. Is it

safe to assume that Mary is [00:14:00] playing the piano while accompanying this singing? And why do you think Austen would set the singing scene as a musical counterpart to the concerto scene?

Lidia: Yes, so we can assume that she's playing the piano accompaniment to her own singing here. So, coming back to that passage that you just read, um, at the Netherfield Ball, she tries to do music the way young ladies are supposed to. So, in that scene when it opens, um, it says, when supper was over, Singing was talked of, and Mary, after very little entreaty, decided to oblige the company.

So this is all good and right, that a young lady is supposed to, um, kind of read the room, see, you know, what, what people want to hear, and then go and, and do that. And usually it was this kind of very particular kind of female music making, which was ballad singing, or singing an aria with your own piano accompaniment.

And she's just not good at that. And I think that's what the narrator points out when she says her powers were by no means fitted To such a display. [00:15:00] So she's good along concerto, but when it comes to this very, much more female identifying kind of music for this period, music making for this period, um, she's not good at it.

That's not her skillset. And I think what's more is that the narrator observes that, quote, such an opportunity of exhibiting was delightful to her. So she also wants to, like, perform, you know? And, uh, this runs back into that, the class issue of, like, uh, musical performance being the purview of, of the working class.

And, um, she's, she's only supposed to want to play in as much as it is appreciated and wanted by, by the people around her.

Diane: It's supposed to be like, oh, no, I couldn't, oh, oh, okay, just one song, okay, okay.

Zan: This is also feeling a little bit like what we talked about with Mary's harp, where Mary Crawford is very much so playing an aesthetic instrument and, and her performance is very aesthetic [00:16:00] minded, right?

Edmund is like, yeah, I'm here to air quotes, listen to the music, right? He's actually just watching Mary play. . Whereas, um, Mary Bennett is trying to do not an aesthetic performance, she's trying to do like a performance performance, right? She's trying to do, you know, take the stage, take the attention, and it's kind of, it's kind of different.

And I can see that, that do, that difference a little bit more.

Lidia: And it's, it's a very good point to bring up this sort of aesthetic nature of music performance. We have to remember that Mary Bennett is the only plain one, right? So then again, this adds another layer, uh, to the performance. Uh, where she's compared unfavorably to her sister, right, as we understand Lizzie Bennett to be much prettier than Mary Bennett.

And so the auditor is also the viewer, right, watching, watching these performers and poor Mary Bennett. She's just not very pretty. And, uh, this does not help her musical performance.

Diane: Part of what the audience is looking for is not just, not just what they're getting. [00:17:00] Orally, but also what they're getting visually, right?

It's sort of like, you're taking in this whole tableau of a beautiful woman at the instrument, and, oh, there's a little bit of a soundtrack playing in the background whilst you admire her.

Lidia: Right, right.

Diane: It's one of those scenes where you kind of play it in your head and you just feel so bad for her. And you sort of hope that, I hope she doesn't realize how nobody is into this.

Obviously, it's not the case. Obviously, she does know because she's told like, okay, that's enough and sort of ushered away from the instrument.

Zan: Yeah. Yeah, I think, I think that that line, when it's delivered in any adaptation from, from her father, you've exhibited enough kind of that, that line is just, that is soul crushing, you know?

Lidia: Yeah, yeah, she, she's probably one of the more talented characters in Austen's novels when it comes to musical skill. I think if we're just talking about fortepianists, I think Mary Bennett seems to really know what she's about and to study thoroughbass, I mean, this is, it's not an easy skill to have and [00:18:00] To be self taught at it, I, I imagine, too, is, is something to be admired.

And that she gets no praise, really, for it is, yeah, quite sad for us, you know, modern day readers. We, we feel sympathy, but I think that Austen's readers would have thought it was, she was funny and ridiculous.

Diane: So, we do get another concerto mentioned from Austen, when Marianne plays a concerto, Barton Park and Sense and Sensibility.

So, while Eleanor and Lucy Steele are discussing Edward, quote, Mary Anne was then giving them the powerful protection of a very magnificent concerto. The drama that's going on behind that conversation. Uh huh. So, what do you make of the parallels between Mary Anne and Mary's choice of the concerto as a piece for public performance and, you know, also just the perceptions of Mary Anne and Mary by the other characters?

Lidia: Yeah. No, this is a really good question, um, and really goes to show why we have to see the The whole [00:19:00] character in the, in the broader context of how they're behaving, right? Because, unlike Mary, Marianne uses music as a conduit for her mini and very big feelings, right?

Diane: Capital B, capital F, big feelings. Big feelings.

Lidia: Yeah. She's really. A product of the, the 18th century cult of sensibility. And so she's interested in, in nature and the sublime and knowing the world through her senses. Whereas Mary Bennett is, is kind of a nerdy enlightenment loser by comparison.

Like she's interested in acquiring knowledge through, through diligent studying and contemplation and knowing the world through her mind, right? So, where playing a long concerto contributes to the characterization of, of Mary as manly and ridiculous, for Marianne, it contributes her characterization as a big R romantic.

And, and [00:20:00] Marianne also doesn't seem to care who listens, right? She, when Marianne plays this concerto, she plays for, for her own gratification. Like, it helps the player The plot and the scene along like that, she's providing this sonic cover, uh, for the conversation that's happening. But, but really she's, she's not aware of what's going on.

She's just playing cause she, cause she wants to, she's playing for own gratification, whereas Mary wants to show off her skills and her virtuosity in a way that's, that's much more in line with how a professional musician, Who, of course, at that time would have been a man, would perform for an audience.

Diane: I consider it much less acceptable for a lady to be like, and now I will play you my concerto.

Whereas Marianne's just kind of like, I just happen to be here in the corner doing my thing because I don't want to talk to any of you people.

Lidia: Exactly. Yeah. And also, of course, Marianne that we have to remember is a lot prettier than, than Mary Bennett.

Diane: Oh yeah. Interesting. So it's like, it gives her maybe a little bit of latitude that Mary does not have with the audience around her as well.

Zan: Yeah. Oh, and, and this scene too is also taking [00:21:00] place. in kind of like the drawing room where there aren't men present. And so her performing at the concerto is kind of more, as you said, I mean, it's not, it's not a public performance for her. It's very much so like, it's just a bunch of ladies in the room.

Nobody's watching me, you know, nobody here cares. So she's, again, given a lot more latitude. And I think that makes sense in that context as well.

Lidia: That's such a good point. Yeah, to remember that, It matters a bit less. It gives her more latitude.

Zan: Well, this is, um, I don't know if this will make the tape or anything, but I have a board book of Sense and Sensibility, the BabyLit board book on Sense and Sensibility, and on one of the pages, it has Marianne playing noisy music, and on the other page, where it's trying to like, the opposite is quiet, and so it's her piano, and it's, but they have a piece of sheet music put on there, and it says, It's very noisy music by Beethoven.

Yeah.

And I think it's just so perfect.

Lidia: I don't know [00:22:00] that piece, but. That's great.

Zan: It feels appropriate to this scene particularly,

Lidia: right?

Diane: Well, Lidia, thank you so much for coming on again to talk to us about another Mary, a different Mary, and her music. So, you know, like, Mary's and

their music. This is, this is like you're the thing about Austen niche that you're doing now.

So where can our listeners follow you, find out about any cool projects you have going on, anything like that?

Lidia: Well, I'm on Instagram at Lidia AC. You can find me at my website, Lidia Chang. com.

Zan: Thank you again, Lidia, for coming on.

Lidia: Thank y'all. It's my pleasure.

Diane: Thank you again to Dr. Lidia Chang for coming on this episode.

You can find us on Instagram at the thing about Austen and on Twitter at Austen Things. You can also check out our website, [00:23:00] the thing about Austen.com, and email us at the thing aboutAusten@gmail.com.

Zan: Stay tuned for next episode when we'll be talking about John Thorpe's gig. Thanks for listening. Bye.