

Elizabeth Weybright

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What Nineteenth-Century Women’s Music Collections Can Show Us

A subset of Jane Austen fandom involves the author’s sheet music collection. CD recordings feature music she owned, and public-facing news articles announced the online accessibility of digital images of her music books. The collection has played a role in scholarship as well; Patrick Piggott, Robert Wallace, Pierre Dubois, Gillen D’Arcy Wood, and Mollie Sandock have considered the repertoire it includes in order to offer insights on Austen’s musical achievements and her treatment of music in her novels. This paper explores how a closer look at the material characteristics of well-preserved music collections like Austen’s, many of which are hand-copied, might yield further insights into the musical lives of nineteenth-century women as well as their representations in literary writing.

I will discuss the in-person archival research I have conducted in several collections of nineteenth-century women’s music, with emphasis on the Austen family collection as well as music once owned by Mary Elizabeth Lucy (1803-1889), author of fascinating memoirs. I argue that remarkable variations in extra-musical markings and notational habits as well as accidental blemishes—candle wax drippings, tears, spills, etc.—suggest intimate insights into each owner’s everyday musical practice. Jane Austen’s own music, for example, is pristine and efficiently copied with careful directions for musical expression, while a communal book is riddled with rips and spills, having clearly been used during family parties. These differences suggest that while certain aspects of her musical practice were of personal importance, music also played a role in her family life and entertainment. Austen’s and Lucy’s music collections are physically marked by the lifelong pursuit of music as an important part of interior as well as social life. To appreciate the diversity in material evidence of musical life found in these archives is to complicate accounts that would flatten amateur women’s musicianship in the nineteenth-century to a narrative of mercenary accomplishment.