

# Baroque and Roll

**Julie Webb meets Frank Underwood and Gillie Tunley, a duo dedicated to recreating the 18th-century music loved and performed by author Jane Austen**

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It is not every day you try to conduct an interview while half-listening to *Mr Beveridge's Maggot* in the neighbouring room. Nor have I often been met, on the threshold of a modern north Oxford apartment, by a man in truly splendid Regency costume. Suffice it to say that a morning with Frank Underwood and Gillie Tunley, the duo who call themselves *Austentation*, is a far from dull experience.

The maggot in question is not, of course, a rather repulsive fishing accessory but a dance tune first published in the 17th century, and one that almost every reader, I should think, would recognise from the BBC's 1995 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which it is played on the first occasion that Darcy deigns to partner Elizabeth.

As his impromptu keyboard performance demonstrated, Frank's musical accomplishments and historical knowledge (he was a student at Brasenose, thereafter becoming a lecturer in the Humanities) are ideally suited to the discovery and interpretation of the songs and tunes which Jane Austen (1771-1817) might have heard, or performed herself at home.

"At some point Jane received instruction in dancing, and playing a keyboard" said Frank. "This would have been a harpsichord or spinet initially, but with the music changing in style the pianoforte started to come in."

Readers familiar with Austen's *Emma* will remember the excitement and admiration occasioned by the arrival of Jane Fairfax' mysterious pianoforte from Broadwood's.

"What she played was what she heard, or what she got from circulating lending libraries. The fact that she copied out by hand so much of the music which we have been researching in the library of her last home, Chawton, shows that it was for other people to play - she was a good arranger, and had a very high standard of performing"

Increasingly, these kinds of tunes and arrangements employed the newly popular 'romantic guitar' played by Frank on the duo's recently compiled CD, which draws from the domestic entertainment repertoire of Jane's time.

"It treads a path between high art and folk song" says Frank, "not strictly classical, more baroque and roll!"

Entitled 'An Innocent Diversion' - a phrase used in *Pride and Prejudice* by Mr Collins - the recording, and the collaboration which produced it, had their roots in the setting up two years ago of the Oxford Jane Austen Group.

I was surprised to discover that the Austen family had extensive connections with the city; Cassandra senior, *nee* Leigh, mother of Jane and her seven sibling, grew up in Oxford and met her husband-to-be there.

"Jane's father, the Reverend George Austen, was a don and Proctor of St John's College - he was known as 'the handsome proctor'. At that time dons were not allowed to have wives living in college, so when he married he took the option of a living at Steventon," Frank explained.

"His sons, James and Henry, both came up to St John's and for about eight months at the age of nine, Jane was educated in the city at a small school run by a relative of her mother's, Mrs Cawley, who was the widow of a Principal of Brasenose.

"Her little establishment, of about 20 or 25 girls, was at the *Angel* - a large coaching inn just over Magdalen Bridge and the first stopping place for young men coming up from London. These were met by 'ladies of the town' as often as not!

"Mrs Cawley probably occupied the back part of the inn, so that she could take her pupils out into Merton Street and High Street without compromising their respectability - they may have boarded out, rather than living on the premises, and probably trooped up to the Carfax Assembly Rooms twice a week for their dancing lessons," Frank added.

Typically, Jane was not impressed with what she saw of the great university, remarking on dismal chapels, dusty libraries and greasy halls that gave her the vapours for two days afterwards.

Luckily for her, Mrs Cawley's school moved to Southampton - possibly, says Frank, because of an outbreak of disease - but both she and her sister became ill there and had to return to Steventon.

After that Jane went for a short time of the Abbey School at Reading, where, around two centuries later, the other half of *Austenation*, Gillie Tunley, was also a pupil.

"The headmistress in Jane's time was a Mme Latourelle, who had a cork leg and a liking for gin" said Gillie, who trained in opera, singing mezzo-soprano, and has a day job lecturing in English. "Her real name was actually Sarah Hackett."

This school may have been the model for Mrs Goddard's in *Emma*, where, Jane writes, girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education without any danger or coming back prodigies.

As is well known, Jane never married, but her affair with a Dublin law student, Tom Lefroy - later Lord Lieutenant of Ireland - who lived in Steventon with an aunt for 18 months, may have inspired her, Frank and Gillie suggest, to write the lyrics for *The Irishman*, the final track on their disc. It features in national song collections and has been widely recorded.

The copy at Chawton is in Jane's own handwriting, with the music - a folk tune, *Rakes of*

*Mallow* - at the top, incorporating a keyboard accompaniment and guitar chords.

At the bottom is written 'Miss Jane Austen, Steventon 1796' - a date immediately after or during the period when she broke up with Tom. No other writer's name appears on the sheet, but further research is needed to confirm the attribution.

Also on Austentation's CD is *Plaisir d'Amour*, which turns out to be older than I had supposed: "We wanted the tracks to be accessible, tuns that people go away humming" says Gillie. "*Plaisir d'Amour* was said to be Marie Antoinette's favourite and was in a collection brought back from France by Jane's cousin Betsy, who married a French aristocrat."

Not a good move in the circumstances.

Other hummable inclusions are *Greensleeves*, *The Water is Wide*, Handel's *Silent Worship*, *Yellow Haired Laddie* (currently doing the rounds at local folk sessions), and a Bach prelude.

Since getting together in May 2011, Austentation have performed among other venues, at the Jane Austen Festival in Bath, and at Brighton Pavilion - details of the forthcoming engagements can be found on their website.

*(transcribed for <http://www.austentation.org>, January 2012)*