

Article

'I Heard Music': *Mansfield Park*, an Opera by Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton

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Abstract: When composer Jonathan Dove first read Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*, he immediately saw its operatic potential. In a newspaper interview, he is quoted as saying that the novel 'haunted me for years'. He was particularly affected by Fanny Price and her predicament. When the opportunity came to write the opera, Dove worked with librettist Alasdair Middleton to create an operatic work that builds on and reinterprets Austen's novel. It is a chamber opera, originally scored for piano duet, and although Dove later made an arrangement for a chamber ensemble, he retained the piano, identifying it as a sound world with which Austen was intimately familiar. In this paper, I track the transition from the printed page via the score and the libretto to the opera, and analyse the means by which Dove and Middleton create this popular adaptation, including telescoping the plot, using and adapting Austen's own language, incorporating music inspired by eighteenth-century glees, and using characters as a chorus, with music that enhances the impact and translates the powerful emotions on Austen's page into raw and urgent feelings.

Keywords: Jane Austen; *Mansfield Park*; opera; Jonathan Dove; Alasdair Middleton; adaptations

1. Genesis of the Opera

When English composer Jonathan Dove, whose works enjoy unprecedented success in the field of contemporary opera, first read Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*, he immediately saw its operatic potential (see details of Dove's career at his official web site: [Jonathan Dove: Biography n.d.](#)). In a newspaper interview, he is quoted as saying that the novel 'haunted me for years'. He was particularly affected by Fanny Price and her predicament. 'She often appeared to suffer in silence. Her reticence invited the music. Deep feelings, which she could not utter, were seeking expression' ([Smith 2015](#)). In a later article, Dove wrote, 'When I first read *Mansfield Park*, I heard music. That doesn't always happen when I read, and it certainly didn't happen with Jane Austen's other novels. But there's something about this particular book that provoked musical ideas' ([Dove 2017](#)).

It is, perhaps, counterintuitive that a character's reticence should be the impetus for the operatic imagination. Naturally, the silent words on the page of a novel cannot be simply set to music, but one might imagine that dialogue would translate more readily to a dramatic form than a character's repressed thoughts expressed in third-person narrative. It is true that soliloquies can be used to voice these thoughts in plays, and in music theatre, these can become powerful arias or *scenas* for a character alone on stage. However, the nature of Fanny's solitude is such that she is forced into uncongenial company most of the time, and even in the Austen novel, her point of view is not always in the foreground. Remarkably, it is this very silence that Dove identified as fertile ground for musical expression.



Received: 12 December 2024
Revised: 28 January 2025
Accepted: 5 February 2025
Published: 7 February 2025

Citation: Dooley, Gillian. 2025. 'I Heard Music': *Mansfield Park*, an Opera by Jonathan Dove and Alasdair Middleton. *Humanities* 14: 26. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h14020026>

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When the opportunity came to write the opera for performance at an English country house in 2011, Dove worked with librettist Alasdair Middleton to create an operatic work that builds on and reinterprets Austen's novel. It is a chamber opera, originally scored for a piano duet, and although Dove later made an arrangement for a chamber ensemble, he retained the piano, identifying it as a sound world with which Austen was intimately familiar. (One might note that the pianos Austen knew were very different to the modern grand pianos typically used for professional performances today.)

In this paper, I track the transition from the printed page via the score and the libretto to the opera, and analyse the means by which Dove and Middleton created this popular adaptation, including telescoping the plot, using and adapting Austen's own language, incorporating music inspired by eighteenth-century glees, and using characters as a chorus, with music that enhances the impact and translates the powerful emotions on Austen's page into raw and urgent feelings. I also look to the reception of the opera in a selection of reviews of various performances to gauge the effect the opera has had in performance over the fourteen years since it was first presented. And, perhaps ironically, I am trying to do this in writing, using only words.

2. The Boston University Performance

The opera has enjoyed outstanding success, with more than 20 performances since its premiere at Boughton House in Northamptonshire in 2011 ([Mansfield Park: Production History n.d.](#)). It will be performed by Victorian Opera in Australia in April 2025. However, I have not yet had a chance to see it live. In what follows, therefore, along with the vocal score, I rely on a full performance recorded in 2021 at Boston University which is available to view on YouTube ([Mansfield Park n.d.](#)). My impression of the opera is inevitably coloured by the performance with which I have become familiar, which, as far as I can tell, does this excellent opera full justice.

The production appears to have been conceived as a film rather than a live performance filmed. There is no audience in evidence. This would be explained, at least in part, by the timing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, live events were fraught with difficulties. Singing was especially problematic owing to the projection of airborne particles which is an inevitable result of projecting the voice. In this production, the singers are wearing surgical face masks. At first, this seems like an unfortunate hindrance, but as the opera proceeds, it comes to seem normal and is even, on one occasion, used to create a powerful dramatic effect.

This production of the opera begins with silence. Fanny walks onto the stage. The only visible furniture is a single armchair, and a grand piano is centre stage. This piano is never played during the production, but it becomes a surprisingly flexible prop, used as a table, a desk, a carriage, and more.

I have not been able to view a copy of the libretto or the full score, but I have access to a copy of the vocal score ([Dove 2011](#)). It contains a few stage directions, but unless there is more information in the other sources, most of the settings and stage movements seem to be left to the discretion of the director of a specific production. One could therefore imagine many different approaches to staging and design. This Boston production makes no attempt at period authenticity in costume or set design. Characters are dressed in a way that expresses their status and personality—Fanny in a plain black dress, Maria elegant in black lace, Lady Bertram in black lamé, for example. Most are wearing mainly black, with the exception of Henry Crawford, elegant in tweeds. Photographs of other productions show more attention to the accuracy of period costuming, but there is rarely much scope in the various chamber opera venues for elaborate sets. The Boston setting uses dark neutral

colours, ambiguous spaces, mirrors, and imaginary obstacles. There is very little literal or specific set dressing.

3. Novel to Opera

There is a vast difference between a three-volume novel and a two-hour opera. There are inevitable adjustments, with details essential to the novel missing in the opera, while the music adds a new dimension which even the finest novel cannot provide.

The first step is the creation of a libretto. It would be at this stage that many of the important decisions about the translation of the novel would have to be made. Meagan Martin, in her doctoral thesis, has made a useful comparison of the respective outlines of the novel and the opera, summarising the ‘telescoping’ of the complex plot of the novel into the libretto (Martin 2019).¹

Fanny Price is a poor relation brought at the age of 10 to live with her aunt’s family, the Bertrams, at their stately country house, Mansfield Park. She has four cousins, all older, two boys and two girls, and there is another aunt, Mrs. Norris, living nearby, who is one of Austen’s most odious characters and who makes Fanny’s life a misery with her nagging and her criticism. The only person who bothers to get to know Fanny is her cousin Edmund, who treats her with kindness and respect. Fanny comes to love him deeply but without hope.

In the novel, the early chapters provide the background and context for the complex and many-layered narrative to follow. We read the history of the three Ward sisters and their marriages and subsequent, or consequent, fates; the decision by Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park to adopt his ten-year-old niece Fanny Price and bring her to live with his own family, in order to provide some relief to the needy family of one of his sisters-in-law; and the part played in this decision by his other sister-in-law, the meddling, self-important Mrs. Norris, married to the local Anglican minister. The death of her husband some years later causes a change at Mansfield, bringing a new family to Mansfield Parsonage. The new minister’s wife has a younger brother and sister who visit and are introduced to the Mansfield Park family. Meanwhile, Maria, the eldest daughter of Sir Thomas, becomes engaged to a rich young man, Mr. Rushworth, of Sotherton. All this information is presented at a leisurely pace, although no words are wasted.

In the opera, this background is implied with extreme economy by observation of a typical scene at Mansfield Park, the home of the Bertrams. When the opera begins, Maria is already engaged to Mr. Rushworth, and the Crawfords are about to arrive. The characters interact and react. Fanny (who at this point in the novel has ‘just reached her eighteenth year’ (Austen 1934)) is at everyone’s beck and call, submitting to commands and insults with a meekness that only occasionally flares (in this production) into a quickly suppressed truculence.

Dove’s musical idiom is very much of the twenty-first century rather than the nineteenth. His music is approachable and expressive, but there is little of what would readily be identified as melodies by listeners accustomed to operas by Verdi and Puccini. However, neither is it atonal in the way of much ‘difficult’ mid-twentieth century music by composers like Alban Berg and Arnold Schoenberg. He occasionally makes references to styles of music contemporary to Austen, for example, by using the piano in both versions of the accompaniment, and including ‘glees’, as I discuss later.

As the opera begins, the piano accompaniment proceeds, with busy syncopated rhythms, beginning in C major but modulating often as new characters join. Sir Thomas is introduced reading a letter, singing single words rather than sentences: ‘Antigua, profit, estate . . .’ (MP Opera 1:1:40–47). Mrs. Norris can never resist an opportunity to scold or criticise Fanny, or to flatter her other nieces, Maria and Julia. Their mother, Lady Bertram,

is obsessed with her pet pug. The music suggests agitation and discord, until her cousin Edmund approaches Fanny with kind words and a book they used to read together (MP Opera 1:1:80ff.). Their bond does not need to be explained. It is further emphasised by the scornful mockery of Fanny by Edmund's younger sister Julia, encouraged by her Aunt Norris.

Dove writes that 'for a lot of the time, the characters sing in Jane Austen's own words' (Dove 2017). This is true, in a sense; there are many words taken from the novel, as well as some phrases. Occasionally, there is a whole sentence. There are approximate quotations from the novel in this scene, drawn from a passage in Chapter 2:

Fanny could read, work, and write, but she had been taught nothing more; and as her cousins found her ignorant of many things with which they had been long familiar, they thought her prodigiously stupid, and for the first two or three weeks were continually bringing some fresh report of it into the drawing-room. (MP 18)

These 'fresh reports' that Maria and Julia had been bringing their mother and aunt in the novel are turned into reminders, by Julia, of 'how remarkably ignorant you were, Fanny, when you first came', eight years before the action of the opera. 'You couldn't put together a map of Europe, or tell any of the principal rivers of Russia by name' (MP Opera 1:1:89–95). This malicious teasing continues, encouraged by Aunt Norris, for more than thirty bars, with a short interruption by Lady Bertram, remarking that 'Fanny is improved', and Sir Thomas agreeing, followed by Julia's memory that 'you started to cry, and Edmund had to try to dry your tears with a gooseberry pie' (MP Opera 1:1:111–119). But Edmund and Fanny are still occupied looking at the book. Edmund sings, 'Look, the passages I underlined. Remember?' Fanny replies, 'I remember, Edmund, you were kind' (MP Opera 1:1:128–134).

The gooseberry pie, like many of these elements, is selected from a range of incidents in the description of Fanny's arrival at Mansfield eight years before. It barely matters that Edmund did not actually offer Fanny the gooseberry pie; in the novel, we are merely told that 'vain was even the sight of a gooseberry tart towards giving her comfort; she could scarcely swallow two mouthfuls before tears interrupted her' (MP 13), and this happens before Edmund has been particularly mentioned. Middleton has conflated these various elements very cleverly to create a sketch of the household and the interactions between the characters, in the process changing 'tart' to 'pie' to create the rhyme with 'cry' and 'dry'.

Other imaginative devices by which the opera compresses the content of the novel include 'Volume Two, Chapter Four: Some Correspondence'. As Douglas Murray notes, 'Eighteenth-century epistolary fiction spurred the novel-as-a-genre's interest in multiple consciousnesses, and Alasdair Middleton's libretto makes use of epistolary techniques' (Murray 2016). The scene begins with Julia Bertram and Henry Crawford singing by turns the text of letters they are writing, culminating in what is not exactly a duet, although they are singing at the same time. They are joined by other characters writing letters—revealing, daring, angry, passionate by turns. Some of them end by singing 'I will never send this letter', and Fanny, responding to Edmund's letter about Mary Crawford, sings the unforgettable words from the novel, 'Fix, commit, condemn yourself' (MP 424), followed by 'I will not send this letter . . . It is getting dark'. The epistolary novel that was common in Austen's day, and that she experimented with in her *Juvenilia*, is used to full dramatic effect here.

4. The Adaptation: Words and Music

Adapting a literary work to music cannot be a straightforward act of transcription, even if it is already a dramatic work. In an interview about his 1980 operatic version of

Iris Murdoch's play *The Servants and the Snow*, the composer William Mathias said, 'music always must take over. This is an awful phrase, but the music must almost eat the words up if it's going to work' (Duffie 1985). Sometimes, in *Mansfield Park*, as we have seen, most of Austen's sentences are 'eaten up', although words and even whole phrases can sometimes survive the transition.

The music begins when the full cast appears and sings the opening title: 'Mansfield Park: Chapter One: The Bertrams Observed'. The observers are Mary and Henry Crawford, standing back from the action, proxy audience members. They are not yet actors in the narrative.

At the beginning of each scene, the number and title of the 'chapter' is announced by differing combinations of characters in this way. The characters who are not acting in a particular scene are often recruited as the chorus, sometimes singing words that are out of character. This ad hoc chorus sometimes expresses the majority view—for example, in Chapter Seven, 'Lovers' Vows, how can it offend? Lovers' Vows, they are only pretend' (MP Opera 1:7:46–52)—or the narrator's point of view, in 'Chapter the Last'—'Let other pens dwell on misery and guilt' (MP Opera 2:7:6–14)—reversing the two nouns from the first sentence of Austen's last chapter, presumably for the sake of rhyming 'guilt' with 'tears are spilt'.

In 'Chapter Four: Landscape Gardening', anyone familiar with the novel will notice that, as part of the chorus, Fanny voices the majority view that Mr. Rushworth's estate of Sotherton will be improved if they 'Put statues where the oak trees grew' and 'Do everything we can do/to make the boring old view new' (MP Opera 1:4:61–67), whereas she is upset and quietly outraged by this attitude in the novel. 'Cut down an avenue!', she says to Edmund. 'What a pity! Does it not make you think of Cowper? "Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited."' (MP 56). No doubt to keep the narrative more straightforward and easier to digest in the span of two hours, this attitude of Fanny is not expressed in the opera.

However, she is not part of the chorus that sings about 'Lovers' Vows' in Scene Seven, and her opposition to acting is expressed directly: 'I could not act anything if you were to give me the world', and on being pressed, replies emphatically, and in angular descending intervals: 'Oh no, I will not act' (MP Opera 1:7:151–154). Edmund, on the other hand, does not sing in the chorus at first, but at the end of the scene, despite having voiced his opposition to the play, joins in when they sing, 'Lovers' Vows, exciting, risqué! Lovers' Vows, it's only a play.' (MP Opera 1:7:174–180)

The very next scene shows Edmund consulting Fanny about his decision to change his mind and act for Mary Crawford's sake, so that she is not put into the awkward situation of acting in a romantic role opposite a stranger. Fanny is dismayed by this change, and she speaks as firmly as her habit of deference allows. The words in the Chapter 16 of the novel are 'I am sorry for Miss Crawford; but I am more sorry to see you drawn in to do what you had resolved against, and what you are known to think will be disagreeable to my uncle' (MP 155). This is almost exactly what she sings at this point in the opera, with only a few words elided.

The music, recitative-like, follows the rhythms of their speech, and with the pauses between the musical phrases, it enhances the impact of the scene. Fanny's brief response, 'Oh cousin', when he appeals to her for her approval—'I am not comfortable without it'—speaks volumes in both the novel and the opera. And when she concedes that Mary Crawford 'will be very glad. It will be a great relief to her' and Edmund takes it as agreement, this is almost exactly what happens in the novel, although their conversation is longer.

The last paragraph of Chapter 16 of the novel describes and inhabits Fanny's emotional state after Edmund has left her with the kind, conciliatory parting exhortation, 'Do not stay here to be cold', which are also his parting words in the opera. In the novel, this is followed by a powerful paragraph of free indirect discourse:

... He had told her the most extraordinary, the most inconceivable, the most unwelcome news; and she could think of nothing else. To be acting! After all his objections—objections so just and so public! After all that she had heard him say, and seen him look, and known him to be feeling. Could it be possible? Edmund so inconsistent! Was he not deceiving himself? Was he not wrong? Alas! it was all Miss Crawford's doing. She had seen her influence in every speech, and was miserable. The doubts and alarms as to her own conduct, which had previously distressed her, and which had all slept while she listened to him, were become of little consequence now. This deeper anxiety swallowed them up. Things should take their course; she cared not how it ended. Her cousins might attack, but could hardly tease her. She was beyond their reach; and if at last obliged to yield—no matter—it was all misery now. (MP 156–157)

This is translated into a 35-bar passage in the opera. Jarring parallel fifths in triplets in the piano accompany one of the few solo passages in the opera. Fanny sings her thoughts directly:

Edmund to act! Edmund to play a part! Where is his strength, where is his resolution now? How they will triumph. How she will triumph. Her eyes are armies, her sighs, a clarion call. Before her softest look the towers of independence fall. And I? What do I matter? Let things take their course. I care not how! It's all misery now! (MP Opera 1:8:44–76)

In the opera, Fanny is rarely given a chance to express herself even privately before she is interrupted. This scene, where Fanny is for once alone on the stage (or film set), is rendered even more powerful in the Boston University production because it is the only scene where a singer is not wearing a face mask. The mezzo-soprano playing Fanny, Gabrielle Barkidjija, faces the camera, voicing her misery directly, where in the novel it is 'indirect discourse' (*Mansfield Park* n.d., 45.20–49.27). This is one example of how music can translate the powerful emotions conveyed on the printed page into raw and urgent feelings affecting the listener (and viewer), with great economy, using fewer words, the jarring intervals in the music expressing her agony.

5. Gleees and Ensembles

The musical style, as I have said, is not particularly representative of Austen's era, although there are sections which reference musical forms of the time. The most obvious is the glee, defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music* as 'a choral composition in a number of short self-contained sections, each expressing the mood of some particular passage of the poem set, the music predominantly harmonic (i.e., in blocks of chords), rather than contrapuntal.' Technically, a glee is unaccompanied and sung by male voices, but it is clear from the use of the term in *Mansfield Park* that this is not always the case, and publisher John Bland published a large collection of 'Ladies' Gleees' in 1789 (An 2011)². Certainly, women are singing in the glee in Chapter 11 of the novel, as discussed below, and they are standing around the pianoforte, which may or may not be used for accompaniment.

One very effective use of this kind of ensemble singing is the entirety of 'Chapter Three: Sir Thomas Bertrman's Farewell'. The words of this short scene—only 65 bars of music—are entirely invented, and the musical setting is reminiscent of 'Soave sia il vento', the farewell trio from Act 1 of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*:

Sleep, ye tempests! Waves, be calm!
 Keep Sir Thomas safe from harm.
 Blow sweetly, ye breezes, flow softly, you waters,
 Keep Sir Thomas Bertram safe for his wife and for his daughters.
 O Ships, keep safe our precious freight.

Check the tear that pendant trembles
 In the brimming, o'ercharged eye,
 Husband, Parent, Uncle, Guardian,
 Cheerful wish a fond goodbye.

The first part of the glee is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, changing to $\frac{4}{4}$ in the second part. Unusually, there are no key changes; the whole scene is in E major. With the exception of the Crawfords and Sir Thomas himself, the entire cast sings this homophonic chorus, and the scene includes interludes by Sir Thomas as he sails away (in this production, standing on the piano as if it is the prow of a ship), explaining why he must leave and instructing them all to behave, 'Always saying what is proper, Always doing what you ought.' They repeat 'goodbye', and there is a pause, and darkness. (MP Opera 1:3:45–65)

Then, at the beginning of the following scene, the remaining cast is shown in the same attitudes for an instant, then perceptibly relaxing their formal postures of farewell before a slightly mischievous scampering figure in the piano accompaniment introduces the next scene, and they sing 'Chapter Four: Landscape Gardening', leading into the visit to Sotherton and all the discord that event generates in Sir Thomas's absence.

In the novel, his departure is described in quite a short passage as well, covering little more than a page at the end of Chapter 3. The reactions of Lady Bertram and her daughters are described, the mother concerned for her own sake but without 'any alarm for his safety, or solicitude for his comfort, being one of those persons who think nothing can be dangerous or difficult, or fatiguing to any body but themselves', and the daughters 'much to be pitied . . . not for their sorrow, but for their want of it' (MP 32). Fanny, on the other hand, is 'grieved because she could not grieve' (MP 33).

All this explanation is silent in the opera. There is no stage direction at the beginning of Scene Four, so the relaxation that is evident in the video must be an interpretation made in this Boston University production. The vapid sentimentality of the lyrics, added to Sir Thomas's pompous exhortations to his family as he leaves, enact the insincerity of the family's feelings.

Another example is a glee in the background to a dialogue between Edmund and Fanny in 'Chapter Six: Music and Astronomy'.

In Chapter 11 of the novel, Mary Crawford is at the window with Fanny and Edmund, discussing the future: the forthcoming marriage of Maria and Mr. Rushworth, and Edmund's ordination, 'when being earnestly invited by the Miss Bertrams to join in a glee, she tripped off to the instrument, leaving Edmund looking after her in an ecstasy of admiration of all her many virtues, from her obliging manners down to her light and graceful tread' (MP 112).

Fanny and Edmund stay at the window looking at the stars for some time, until the glee begins and Fanny 'had the mortification of seeing him advance too, moving forward by gentle degrees towards the instrument.' Typically for an Austen novel, the actual piece of music being performed is not specified.³

In the opera, this scene is compressed somewhat. Maria, Julia, Henry, and Mr. Rushworth are singing in homophonic four-part harmony, which is clearly intended to give the

effect of a glee in the early nineteenth century's style, with the addition of a simple chordal accompaniment:

Music and starlight, grant me rest,
 With my head on the heart of the one I love best.
 Music and starlight, grant me rest,
 With my hand in their hand and my head on their breast. (MP Opera 1:6:9–16)

Mary is not part of the ensemble at this stage. Mr. Rushworth continues singing the melody alone, 'in the background', while 'in the foreground', Mary and Edmund discuss his forthcoming marriage with Maria and, implicitly, Edmund's ordination. When Rushworth begins the melody, the piano accompaniment changes to a complex arrangement of crotchet triplets in the bass and quaver triplets in the treble. Then, the group of four join again, singing the same words and melody but in canon, marked '*pp* in the background', with an even more rhythmically complex accompaniment. Meanwhile, Edmund and Fanny discuss astronomy at the window. (MP Opera 1:6:40–60)

Then, Henry addresses his sister Mary: 'Will you not sing us something?' (MP Opera 1:6:61) Her response, after another refrain of 'Music and starlight' and more conversation between Edmund and Fanny, is to interrupt the serene and sentimental mood of the glee with a brief 'song':

What woman could contented be,
 With a love that is not mastery?
 How can I not smile to see
 The heart that others ache for, break for me? (MP Opera 1:6:74–82)

This catches Edmund's attention, and after the first two lines, he tells Fanny their stargazing will have to 'wait till this is finished' (MP Opera 1:6:77–78).

The way the music shifts attention between the characters is very ingenious, although it would also depend on the direction to ensure that the audience focusses on the foregrounded conversation or interaction at any one time. Another device that the opera uses is to pull out short phrases of dialogue and weave them into ensembles. After first meeting the Bertram sisters in Chapter 5 of the novel, Henry Crawford agrees with his sister that he likes the younger sister, Julia, who is not engaged, best: 'I shall always like Julia best, because you order me' (MP 45). Meanwhile, the Bertram sisters decide that Henry is 'not handsome', although they soon stop noticing that he is 'plain' and find him 'the most agreeable young man the sisters had ever known' (MP 44).

In Scene Two of the opera, these exchanges become, 'But I like Julia best, yes you like Julia best' on the Crawfords' part, and 'But he is not handsome, no he is not handsome' from the Bertram sisters. And these two refrains are sung concurrently, the two conversations happening at the same time, although one would be taking place in the Parsonage and one at the big house in Mansfield Park. (MP Opera 1:2:86–93) It is a very clever juxtaposition of the jumble of self-deception and duplicity in these four characters.

6. Narrator vs. Character

A consistent difficulty with the screen versions of Austen's novels is the treatment of the narrator's voice, which is such an essential part of Austen's idiosyncratic narrative style. In some films, the narrator's voice, which very often makes ironic remarks at the expense of the characters, is assigned to one of the characters. The difficulty is that this voice is of its very nature outside the characters' consciousness. It is possible that for Elizabeth Bennet to speak the line, 'a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife', as she does in the 1995 television adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, is not too

serious a transgression of this principle, because Elizabeth's voice is habitually similarly ironic. However, it is a problem which faces every enactment of these novels in particular, and perhaps of novels in general. A possible solution, but one which is rarely used in my experience, at least in recent screen adaptations, is to include a voice-over for the narrator.

The strategy that Middleton and Dove have often employed, which is more available in an operatic adaptation than in a spoken one (at least since the days of Aeschylus and Sophocles), is to use a chorus as the narrative voice, in this case, a chorus composed of the members of the cast not immediately involved in the action. Like Austen's narrative voice, which can dart in and out of a character's mind, the narrative thread of the opera can pass between cast members acting in their own characters at one moment, and then (often singing as part of an ensemble) acting as narrators or commentators on the narrative.

At the end of the opera, this device is used to striking effect. 'Chapter the Last' begins, as I have mentioned above, with the whole cast singing a sentence very close to Austen's 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery' (MP 461).' However, the chorus continues in a rather different vein:

Too soon the bough will break;
 Too soon the tears are spilt;
 Too soon the heart that never knew a grief will ache and ache.
 Let us learn to laugh;
 Learn to laugh and live and smile
 And while we can
 Learn to love. (MP Opera 2:7:15–39)

There is an instrumental interlude—flowing, *cantabile*—which introduces more direct, though still approximate, quotes from Austen's narrative voice, passing between all the characters except Edmund and Fanny. Austen's paragraph beginning 'I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion' and ending 'I only entreat everybody to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny as Fanny herself could desire' (MP 470) is summarised:

Let us abstain from dates.
 When does unchangeable passion alter?
 When does immortal devotion die?
 However long it takes
 Imagine that time gone by.
 Dates judge and dates condemn.
 Let us just say
 Some time later, the day dawned when . . . (MP Opera 2:7:62–85)

Then, the live action begins, with Edmund addressing Fanny: 'How blind I have been! O Fanny, my pale but certain star. I look for you, and there, where you have always been, you are' (MP Opera 2:7:86–94). Then, Fanny responds, not directly replying but echoing the narrative, 'Let no one presume to give the feelings of a young woman on receiving the assurance of that affection of which she has scarcely allowed herself to entertain a hope' (MP 471). In the opera, Fanny sings, in an expansive passage which is in marked contrast to the brief interjections she has been allowed elsewhere:

Let no-one presume to describe—description fails;
 Let no-one dare to imagine—imagination pales;

How I feel.

I had a love. A love? A hope. A hope? A dream, a distant dream.

I woke and found my love, my hope, my distant dream

Was real. (MP Opera 2:7:105–143)

Then, supplying the romantic consummation that the novel withholds, a short duet between Fanny and Edmund follows: ‘I look for you . . .’ (MP Opera 2:7:144–153). This duet, though it is a mere 10 bars long, is lyrical and very moving. These lyrics have to be supplied by the libretto as their conversation is not explicit in the novel. It is followed by the chorus, sung by the whole cast, which concludes the opera:

Let other pens dwell on misery and guilt.

Too soon falls the dust,

Too soon comes the dark,

Let us learn to laugh and live and love

at Mansfield Park. (MP Opera 2:7:154–187)

Austen typically elides the description of the successful proposal which brings the plot of each of her novels to a close. In an article published in 2016, I wrote the following:

The six complete novels of Jane Austen are novels about learning to live and to love, not only the person one will marry but the life and the connections they bring with them . . . Happily-ever-after is a facile idea that Austen presents to us with one hand while introducing enough complexity and irony with the other to make us understand the inadequacy of the myth. (Dooley 2016)

Reading my words again, I am struck by the resonance with the opera libretto—‘Let us learn to laugh and live and love’—with which I was totally unfamiliar at the time of writing. Perhaps Middleton’s introduction of the phrases ‘too soon the bough will break . . . too soon comes the dark’ is the opera’s way of acknowledging the provisional nature of the happy ending, without breaking the romantic and, it might be said, somewhat nostalgic mood.

There may be a need for a different type of ending to the opera than the novel. There is little place for the irony of a passage like this, which concerns Sir Thomas Bertram’s response to Edmund’s intention to marry Fanny:

. . . the joyful consent which met Edmund’s application, the high sense of having realised a great acquisition in the promise of Fanny for a daughter, formed just such a contrast with his early opinion on the subject when the poor little girl’s coming had been first agitated, as time is for ever producing between the plans and decisions of mortals, for their own instruction, and their neighbours’ entertainment. (MP 471–472)

Is the kind of ‘entertainment’ that Austen wryly notes here out of place at the end of an opera? Or merely at the end of this opera? The answer no doubt lies in the opera creators’ vision—not only the vision, but the emotional effect of the novel on them. And although this is a subjective effect which will differ, sometimes greatly, between individuals, what a work of art can do consistently is move a great many people to feelings that will not be identical but will seem to go beyond an individual’s own life and concerns into some larger world of human existence.

Douglas Murray, in his 2016 article ‘Fanny Price Goes to the Opera’, proposes that the opera is successful in creating ‘a musical/dramatic analogue to Austen’s characteristic narrative technique: her ability to display simultaneously multiple consciousnesses within a social context’, and that Dove and Middleton ‘offer an updated version of the pleasures of Jane Austen: intelligence, impeccable workmanship, and irony-laced accounts of the life

and death of the heart', and that they 'advance an important reading of the novel'. His argument is that the opera really has no central characters, but is an 'ensemble opera', more *Canterbury Tales* than *Jane Eyre*, in that Fanny, 'the traumatized-triumphant heroine is only part of the bigger story that is *Mansfield Park*' (Murray 2016).

I wonder how much this might depend on choices made in production as much as in composition, but I think the final scene, though it ends emphatically with the words 'Mansfield Park' repeated by the whole chorus, definitely does focus on the union of Fanny and Edmund and the profound transformation to happiness which Fanny experiences. Certainly, Fanny is the central figure in the Boston University production: the watcher, the primary consciousness who focuses the attention.

This is not to say that other characters are negligible and, as Murray notes, the opera allows many points of view to be displayed simultaneously. And perhaps it is inevitable in an acted version, where the characters are literally seen, rather than just imagined, that the interpretation of a character becomes more definite, perhaps because of the choice of words and music for that character, but also the way that a particular actor plays the role. Mr. Rushworth, played by Jangho Lee in this production, is a more sympathetic character than in the novel, so that when Edmund and Sir Thomas sing, *sotto voce*, 'If this man had not twelve thousand a year he would be a very stupid fellow' (MP Opera 1:1:162–163), and Maria treats him with contempt, it seems unfair. Fanny's sympathy for him becomes an important part of her characterisation in the opera, as it is in the novel. On the other hand, Lady Bertram, played by Myka Murphy, is more or less a caricature in the opera, even more than in the novel, with her pug, which is just glanced at a few times in the novel, becoming a kind of *leitmotif*, of more importance than anything else in her life.

7. Reviewers on *Mansfield Park*

Reviews of various live performances of the opera have been mixed. Guy Dammann, reviewing a repeat performance of the first production with the initial cast at the Arcola Theatre, Dalston, as part of London's Grimeborn Festival, declared it 'not an unqualified triumph', but 'nonetheless, until a card-carrying modernist gives Austen the operatic treatment she deserves'; he conceded that the opera 'will do nicely'. Dammann was not expecting much from the opera, having 'shied away from Jane Austen adaptations' since the 1995 television series of *Pride and Prejudice*, finding that 'the sharp edges of Austen's characters tend to find themselves smoothed off for the screen' (Dammann 2011).

In the event, Dammann found that 'the opera's major insight is that for much of the novel Fanny Price is not a character, but rather a disappointingly thin echo for the pretensions of others' (Dammann 2011, p. 17). This is a puzzling observation. For one thing, to conceive an insight of this kind about the novel via the opera is an odd idea. Also, it seems to indicate a rather superficial understanding of the novel, perhaps encouraged by the opera's staging in this case—although without having seen this production, it is hard for me to tell.

Jonathan Dove himself was struck by the way that 'Austen offers clues to [Fanny's] feelings, but . . . Fanny does not express them. To me, her reticence invited music, a way of revealing those hidden emotions. . . . Fanny's pained silences gave me the impulse to write music for her' (Dove 2017). The way others behave towards Fanny is certainly a measure of other characters' mettle, but Middleton and Dove have contrived to give her a voice of her own—and perhaps the Boston production I am familiar with emphasises that fact by beginning the opera with nearly half a minute of profound silence where Fanny is alone on the stage.

Writing in the *Spectator* about a 2012 production by the Royal Academy of Music, reviewer Michael Tanner (like Maria Bertram on first meeting Henry Crawford in the opera)

did not mind it, but found it difficult to hear the lyrics, particularly those sung by the female characters, and looked forward to a production with subtitles (Tanner 2012). This difficulty is something I also noticed. My familiarity with the online production of the opera, which includes subtitles, means that I have been able to read the lyrics while watching the opera, but sometimes the word underlay seems to go against the rhythm of the text in such an obvious way that I have wondered whether it was deliberate, to connote insincerity or triviality. It seems to be more common with vociferous characters such as Mary Crawford and Mrs. Norris, when they are in full flight. It often happens high in the singer's range, as well.

Nick Boston reviewed a production by Waterperry Opera at St Marylebone Parish Church in London in July 2023, and described 'delightful period costumes' and 'clever techniques', concluding that 'this was a joyous outing for a consistently entertaining and cleverly constructed chamber opera' (Boston 2023). The same director, Rebecca Meltzer, crossed the globe for a production in Auckland in 2024, which was described by Simon Holden as 'a blissful performance of a most charming contemporary opera' (Holden 2024). Interestingly, one of the virtues of the production noted by Holden was the singers' 'really clear diction throughout, even in the ensembles'.

8. Can a Novel Be an Opera?

No. An adaptation of a novel into a film or a play or an opera will always be a separate work, and will never more than approximately correspond to the work which engenders it. It does both art forms a disservice to judge an adaptation merely by a standard of literal accuracy. Dove writes that 'the experience of reading Austen is always energising', and expresses a hope that the opera reflects 'something of the exuberant vitality of her writing' (Dove 2017).

A question that one is tempted to ask about an adaptation such as this is whether the new work has captured the essence of Austen's novel. But what does that mean? What is Austen's 'essence'? Wit, irony, penetration, perceptiveness, worldliness, but also deep sympathy with the feelings of her characters. These can occur simultaneously, but she can, of course, also speak without irony—and she often does. The 'essence' of Austen is somewhat elusive to define, and, significantly, it is not a stable quality. It will vary from reader to reader, and will even vary, over time, between the same person's perusals of the same novel.

Mansfield Park might be especially changeable in this respect. When I mention the novel, I find that people often say how their opinion of the novel has changed since first reading it: that they discover more depth and richness with each reading. In this way, Middleton and Dove's opera might be seen as another reading of this novel, or another medium for readers to approach it, as well as a work in its own right. The opera itself, as we have seen from the reviews quoted above, has generated a variety of reactions in performance. I have recommended the Boston University production of it to friends and colleagues, and I have found that most who are familiar with Austen's works are enthusiastic, while others have dismissed it as 'mere Gilbert and Sullivan'—perhaps echoing Dammann's faint praise that it is merely adequate, and awaiting the day when a 'card-carrying modernist' decides to create an adaptation of the novel.

I would like to recommend that readers of this article seek out the opera and decide for themselves. The Boston University production is available on YouTube (*Mansfield Park* n.d.), [25] and the opera is receiving an unusual number of productions for a twenty-first century work. When writing academic essays on literature, I often find it challenging to convey to the reader the nature and quality of my engagement with a work. Writing about

a compelling performance of a vividly realised adaptation of a magnificent novel feels even more like chasing after shadows.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In other respects, Martin’s work concentrates on ideas of questions of ‘fidelity’ to social norms in Regency England in performing the opera, which is of less concern to me here.
- ² Yu Lee An discusses ‘the changing social context of glees around the turn of the nineteenth century, when they began to move out of their original settings in gentlemen’s clubs . . . and to infiltrate domestic music-making in which women participated.’
- ³ There is only one piece of music mentioned by name in all of Austen’s novels, ‘Robin Adair’ in *Emma*.

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