

TAKING THE SOUNDS OF HOME AROUND THE WORLD



Our enjoyment of music at home has been revolutionised.

Sound is fundamental in our homes. If you closed your eyes and walked into your home, you would likely recognise it from its sounds. Maybe it's the radio or television in the background, maybe it's children playing, maybe it's the buzz of the oven, the heating, someone playing a musical instrument, or the sound of rain on the roof.

Sound is integral to our homes. It sounds obvious, and it is obvious.

But that sound has got lost in history. It is harder to imagine what a typical home sounded like hundreds of years ago. Fires crackling perhaps. People chatting. Kitchens clangling. But what about the music? Without radios or smart speakers, what did people listen to, and what did it sound like?

Jeanice Brooks, Professor of Music, has been addressing this question and bringing the sounds of people's homes from past generations back to life. Her focus for this

has been British homes in the Georgian period of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

"The big difference in domestic music making is that it's music that people are doing for themselves – that's one reason it's so interesting," she said. "People engaged with music in a very different way from today. There was no radio or recorded sound in the home. But music became an increasingly important part of the ideal home, and people who were educated

1 Matthew Stephens and Jeanice Brooks at the *Songs of Home* exhibition in Sydney

2 A portrait of Jane Austen

3 The *Songs of Home* exhibition in Sydney



learned musical skills so that they could provide it.”

Through her research as part of the Sound Heritage project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Jeanice has worked with historic houses to explore how music featured in domestic spaces.

She explained: “I have worked with historic house museums as they are the spaces that are still at least partly intact. It’s been important to investigate the physical spaces and think about the interactions between music senses and historical culture. I have looked at how to bring experiences of music back to life in a way that’s meaningful to modern day audiences.”

At home with Jane Austen

Jane Austen’s House Museum has proved integral in Jeanice’s research. The Hampshire cottage where Austen penned her novels gives a different perspective from the grandeur of many of the preserved historic houses.

“Unlike some of the really grand places I have worked in that are like palaces, the Austen house where she lived for the last 10 years of her life gives a more modest perspective,” explained Jeanice. “She was living in the steward’s house on the estate of her wealthy brother. It gives you a different perspective on a different kind of domestic life.”

As part of her research, Jeanice has worked with the Hartley Library to digitise all 18 of Austen’s family music books, making them freely available online. They provide an insight into some of the music Austen knew and performed for pleasure at home, bringing the sound of her home to life.

Jeanice added: “Austen was not a virtuoso pianist but she was competent. That was widespread among her class – to be able to

read music and play music at home. Austen’s music books are mostly solo voice and solo piano. She didn’t play for others in the way the picture is often painted in her novels. Mostly she played in the mornings, by herself, for pleasure.”

Heading Down Under

Jeanice is recently back from Australia where she co-curated an exhibition in Sydney about music at home in the first 70 years of the colony.

In 2015, she began working with Dr Matthew Stephens, from Sydney Living Museums. They worked together on the Sounds of Home exhibition.

“While lots of British domesticity gets exported, it changes as soon as it arrives,” said Jeanice. “Matt and I decided to do the Sounds of Home exhibition to explore this process. How did the sounds of home change to adapt to new surroundings? What other sounds were integrated or displaced?”

The exhibition started with the story of Woollarawarre Bennelong, a musician and a

senior Aborigine at the time of the first British settlement in Australia in 1788. Bennelong visited London shortly after the First Fleet arrived in New South Wales.

As part of the exhibition, Austen’s music books travelled to Sydney to demonstrate music in the British home at the time, as an example of what women of her class and education would have experienced and of the kinds of music that went to Australia in the minds and luggage of British immigrants.

“We displayed Austen’s music books next to instruments and objects belonging to Elizabeth Macarthur, who went out to Australia with the first governor,” explained Jeanice. “The exhibition was about taking our understanding about what young women played at home, and moving it to the other side of the world.”

The Songs of Home exhibition ran from August to November last year.

Jeanice is now putting her research on music in the home in the Georgian era into a new book, called *At Home With Music*.

