

Facilitating Social Emulation: Music in the London Pleasure Gardens, 1660–1859

Pleasure gardens first came to prominence in early eighteenth-century London as venues where visitors from diverse social strata could promenade about the walks, enjoy entertainments, and see and be seen. Chief among such venues were Vauxhall, Ranelagh, and Marylebone Gardens. Writing in 1709, Daniel Defoe distinguishes seven social classes in England, including a group he describes as “the middle sort . . . who live the best, and consume the most . . . and with whom the general wealth of this nation is found.” Recognizing the potential to profit from the newfound wealth of the “middle sort,” entrepreneurs marketed new leisure activities to them. On trips to the gardens, visitors might consume overpriced refreshments in addition to paying the modest cost of admission, affordable for even the poorer classes. The attendance of royal family members also enticed visitors. Music presided over the experience, and special pavilions—called orchestras—were built for musical performances.

The commercialization of leisure responsible for the rise of the gardens continued into the nineteenth century, but entertainments and venues underwent significant changes. Not all gardens evolved: Marylebone closed around 1778, followed by Ranelagh in 1803. Additions to Vauxhall’s entertainment offerings—such as ballooning (made possible by late eighteenth-century scientific advancement) and the flourishing of martial displays and battle reenactments during the Napoleonic Wars—ensured its continued popularity into the nineteenth century. The factors behind Vauxhall’s 1859 demise are numerous and complex, but include mounting noise and crime complaints from nearby residents.

My dissertation examines music’s important position in the gardens and the ways in which it facilitated social emulation: the process whereby the “middle sort” could imitate their social superiors, and could themselves be admired and imitated. It traces the history of the gardens and their music—with eighteenth-century emphasis—beginning with the Restoration in 1660 and ending with the 1859 closure of Vauxhall (the first and longest operating pleasure garden). Deeper understanding of music’s function in the gardens provides a necessary foundation for discerning music’s unique role in the broader commercialization of leisure so characteristic of English life throughout the eighteenth century and beyond.

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