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.

[Disseration Contents on next page]
Dissertation Contents:

I. Introduction
   A. Defining pleasure gardens: what they were, and where/when they existed
   B. Research goals/questions (i.e. identifying music’s roles in social emulation)
   C. Primary and secondary pleasure garden literature review
   D. Layout/methodology

II. The Restoration: Historical Antecedents to the Pleasure Gardens
   A. Preamble: socio-political context of the Restoration
   B. Private estates
   C. Tea gardens
   D. Spa towns paving the way for urban spas and pleasure gardens: music’s placement between the upper and lower walks in Tunbridge Wells

III. The Coronation of George Frideric Handel in Vauxhall
   A. The launch of Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens in 1732
   B. Erection of Louis-François Roubiliac’s statue of Handel at Vauxhall in 1738
   C. Handel statue’s role in cultivating the atmosphere of an imagined mythological past
   D. Statue/Handel’s commercial appeal at Vauxhall
   E. Symbiosis of commercial and political endeavors: Handel and his image as pro-Hanoverian political tools at Vauxhall

IV. Pleasure Garden Performances of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi’s *La serva padrona* in English Translation, 1758–1783
   A. Primary-source accounts of garden visits involving usurped social class
   B. *La serva padrona* (1733): performance data at Ranelagh (7 performances) and Marylebone (177 performances), relationship between the plot and social upheaval
   C. Pierre Bourdieu’s structural homology thesis (*Distinction*, 1979)
   D. Cultural Omnivore thesis as counterpoint to Bourdieusian homology (1990s sociology by Richard Peterson and others)
   E. Generic contrast: pleasure garden performance/reception of Thomas Augustine Arne’s *Artaxerxes* (1762)

V. James Hook: Prolific Composer and Performer at the Pleasure Gardens
   A. Hook’s annual collections of songs for Marylebone and Vauxhall (1767–c. 1807)
   B. Hook’s vocal dramas premiered at Marylebone (1769–1773) and Vauxhall (1773–1803)
   C. Hook as keyboardist: appointments as organist and composer to Marylebone (1768–1773) and to Vauxhall (1774–1820)

VI. Performances of Haydn’s Symphony “La Chasse” at Vauxhall, 1786–1795
   A. Links to the Music for the Royal Fireworks (from Handel chapter): outdoor music, martial instruments, and acoustics/architecture of orchestras
   B. The hunt as a cultural and musical topic: analysis of Haydn’s Symphony “La Chasse” (composed c. 1781) and its relationship to the hunt as masculine/aristocratic pastime
   C. Related elements from Haydn’s opera *La fedeltà premiata*
   D. The garden as musical and cultural topic

VII. Conclusion: Nineteenth-Century Venue Shifts and Evolving Entertainments
   A. Falling out of fashion: the closures of Marylebone (c. 1778) and Ranelagh (1803)
   B. Vauxhall’s evolving entertainments at the turn of the nineteenth century
   C. “Last Night For Ever of Vauxhall: Monday, July the 25th, 1859 . . .”