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Music-Cultural Exchange and the Nineteenth-Century Salon
18-19 July 2022, Institute of Art History, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague
Katherine Fry

The international symposium Music-Cultural Exchange and the Nineteenth-Century Salon brought together researchers concerned with the place of music and music-making within individual salons of the nineteenth century, and with the cultural work of musical salons as sites of female agency and authorship, cultural exchange and colonial encounter. Going beyond a focus on ‘mainstream’ musical centres such as Paris, Vienna and Berlin, the presentations foregrounded marginalised European sites and spaces, as well as musical salon cultures in Latin America and the United States. Organised by Anja Bunzel and Nancy November in collaboration with Markéta Kratochvílová, the format was intended to evoke the cosmopolitan and convivial atmosphere of the salon, while still accommodating online presentations and questions. Held within the intimate surroundings of the Musicological Library of the Institute for Art History at the Czech Academy of Sciences, the event combined academic papers and discussion with two carefully programmed live concerts.

A special panel on ‘The Mid-Nineteenth Century Salon in the Americas’ (convened by Laura Pita) addressed an overlooked area in scholarly discussions of nineteenth-century musical salon culture. Luisa del Rosario Aguilar-Ruz began the panel with a paper on ‘Print Music and German Commercial Networks in Mexico and Latin America in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, which charted the material infrastructures and networks that facilitated the expansion of a sheet music market distributing European and Mexican repertoire. While this paper foregrounded the work of German travellers in the establishment of commercial musical networks in Latin America, Fernanda Vera Malhue’s presentation homed in on the Spanish-born Chilean musician and salonnière Isadora Zegers (1803-1869), whose connections with international composers and virtuosos – such as Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Henri Herz and Vincent William Wallace – played a central role in the formation of an elite cosmopolitan musical scene in Santiago de Chile. This was followed by papers by Yianela Pérez Cuza on the development of a distinctive repertoire of popular piano dances during the colonial era in Santiago de Cuba; and by Laura Pita on the celebrated Venezuelan piano virtuoso Teresa Cerreño, whose childhood performing career and public image owed much to the semi-private performance spaces of salon gatherings in Caracas, New York and Havana.

The topic of the Latin America salon was addressed from a different angle by Cornelia Bartsch in her paper on French composer Darius Milhaud, who resided in Rio de Janeiro for two years during the First World War as Attaché of the French Ambassador to Brazil, Paul Claudel. Interpreting Milhaud’s memoirs and compositions inspired by Brazilian melodies and rhythms, Bartsch interrogated the private spaces of sociability frequented by the composer as sites of musical mapping and boundary crossing that merged both with the ‘public’ musical life of Rio de Janeiro, and with the geopolitical work of diplomacy. The notion of the musical salon as an in-between space linking intimate sociability with political agency also came through in Anja Bunzel’s presentation on ‘Slavic Reciprocity and Cultural Transfer in František Palacký’s (Musical) Circle’. Drawing on research into Palacký’s writings, correspondence, diaries and personal library, Bunzel charted the transnational Slavic engagements of this important figure in the Czech national revival. In so doing, Bunzel emphasised the cultural work of collecting as a key facet of musical salon culture, revealing how ‘private’ music-making was closely bound up with the task of cultural preservation.

The salon as a space of female musical agency and gentility emerged as a significant theme in many of the papers, often in ways that intersected with issues of class and race. Candace Bailey’s presentation, for instance, explored the documentary record of women’s music making and salon life in mid-nineteenth-century New Orleans as contained in a short-lived print supplement initiated in the city in 1849: *La Violette: Revue Musicale et Littéraire*. Expanding out

from the journalistic evidence, Bailey's analysis led to insights into the diverse milieu of musical salons and the distinctive prominence afforded women composers in the French Quarter at mid-century. Wiebke Thormählen tackled the seemingly ephemeral nature of 'private' musical performance and musical experiences by turning to material objects and artefacts preserved in elite British homes, specifically that of the Duchess of Buccleuch (formerly Lady Elizabeth Montagu, 1743-1827). Applying pressure to the concept of 'cultural exchange', Thormählen discussed the cultural institution of the British aristocratic salon less as a welcoming gateway for 'foreign' singers and virtuosos entering London's oft-celebrated cosmopolitan musical environment, more as a hierarchical space in which the performance of "othering" primarily served the interests of the female host.

The remaining papers ranged widely in terms of geographical locale, addressing salon culture in nineteenth-century Austria, Greece, Finland, New Zealand, Romania and Serbia. The character and scope of the salon diverged across these various contexts, resulting in an occasional lack of cohesion, as well as slippage between the musical salon and the parlour. The repertoire under consideration was equally diverse, something well reflected in the two concerts, which were performed by Barbora de Nunes-Cambráia (mezzo-soprano), Václava Hájková (soprano), Vanda Šipová (soprano), Jiří Knotte (piano), Marie Al-Ashabová (piano), Žofie Vokálková (flute) and Barbora Plachá (harp). The first concert gave delegates an opportunity to hear mid-nineteenth-century Mexican and Cuban piano music, solo songs, duets and trios, as well as repertoire characteristic of Isodora Zegers's salon in Chile. The programme concluded with excerpts from virtuosic piano works by Carreño, Franz Coenen and Gottschalk. The second concert brought to life the musical and literary society of Palacký's Prague and featured Italian songs and German Lieder by Joseph Dessauer, Václav Jan Tomášek and Leopold Eugen Měchura alongside Czech-language songs interspersed with spoken excerpts from Palacký's diary and poetry (recited by Miroslav Zavičár). Also included in the programme were harp pieces and piano duets found within the bound musical albums of Palacký's wife Teresie (herself an admired amateur harpist), and a four-hand piano piece and song by the Czech musician and translator Josefina Brdliková. Taken together, the concerts lent a tangible dimension to many of the conference themes and showcased forgotten repertoire once popular within these bygone milieus.