

The European Salon: Nineteenth-Century *Salonmusik*

A Conference at Maynooth University, October 2015

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From October 2nd to October 4th, 2015, the Music Department of Maynooth University (National University of Ireland) hosted an international bilingual conference on “The European Salon: Nineteenth-Century *Salonmusik*”, which was attended by scholars not only from Europe, but also from America and Australia. “The aim of this conference is to re-evaluate the significance of music composed for and performed in European salons and the extra-musical functions of the salon within the context of nineteenth-century socio-cultural discourse”, wrote Senior Lecturer Dr Lorraine Byrne Bodley, President of the Society for Musicology in Ireland, in her introduction to the conference programme. The concept of this interesting interdisciplinary conference was designed by Anja Bunzel, Irish Research Council Postgraduate Research Fellow of Maynooth University and chair of the conference committee, who also ensured the smooth running of the conference. The programme included plenary sessions, concert recitals and up to three simultaneous specializing sections grouped together according to systematic, chronological and regional topics.

There were several papers which analyzed various *genres* of salon music (*impromptus*, *Lieder*, chamber music etc.), its creation and performance, others investigated the relationship between poetry and music, questions of musical criticism and the intercultural reception and international adaptation of music. Here the exploration of salons as a forum of cultural exchange and as a space for *virtuosi*, but also for young musicians (including women) attracted appropriate attention. A still challenging chapter of the social history of music in this context was also discussed – the possibilities and limits of women composers and pianists in the 19th century. Lectures on regular musical *soirées* (open to a wide range of visitors) and to salons in the narrower sense of salon sociability (conversation in the circle of a *salonnière* in the French tradition, frequently combined with musical interests) included case-studies not only from Paris, Vienna, Prague, Berlin, Milan and London, but also from other salon cities in Europe and North America.

The analysis of the relationship between music and the sociable spheres of different description (private, public and mixed), of musical sociability’s interdependence with public life (salons and the stage, connections with journals, networking, the conditions of publishing

music) and with artistic and cultural concepts (such as romanticism) lent further dimensions to the debate. A completely different, but interesting perspective was provided by some papers on musical instruments used in salons and the development of mechanised music in the context of musical sociability in the 19th and early 20th century.

A recurring central issue was the analysis and clarification of the common clichés describing allegedly trivial “salon music” as contrasted with reliable reports of good music enjoyed and performed in salons by dilettantes and professionals. Hugo Riemann’s famous, but not very helpful negative verdict on “Salonmusik” in his “Dictionary of Music” was just one influential voice among others in the 19th century, who warned against a fashionable and superficial approach to music. Even if such a warning may have been justified in some respects, the debate about salon music has always been obscured by prejudice and lack of proper definitions. This dilemma is related to tendencies of generalization and exaggeration (fed by caricatures und literary satire) and to the different meanings of “salon” (elegant rooms, exhibitions, social gatherings of different types etc.). In the course of the sessions it became clear in that a scholarly evaluation of “salon music” and “musical salons” must take into account not only chronological aspects and the reliability of sources and definitions, but also the special context of any musical event, together with the factors shaping the communicative and performative space. Although – predictably – focal points, perspectives and assessments varied, the purpose of this conference was fully achieved: Checking and discussing theses and stereotypes in a refreshing debate and adding new insights, relevant contexts and rediscovered sources to the complex cultural phenomenon. The future discourse on music performed in salons and salon music will certainly benefit from this lively conference, and even more so, when henceforth at least some of the main papers will be accessible in print.

Highlights of this conference were lectures which combined scholarship and musical performance, such as the inspiring concert-recital on Joseph Joachim (1831–1907) (Prof. Katharina Uhde / Prof. Larry Todd), another one on music from the context of Jessie Hillebrand’s (1827–1905) salon in Florence (Prof. Michael Uhde / Prof. Katharina Uhde / Johanna Vargas) and finally the spirited *Lieder* recital by the great soprano Sylvia O’Brien, who brought to life Mme Pauline Viardot (1821–1910) as a diva, composer and arranger of music. Equally impressive were the important “keynote” plenary lectures. On the opening day of the conference, Professor Susan Youens brilliantly explored Viennese salon culture as

personified in Caroline Pichler (1769–1843) in her lecture “Salon culture, night thoughts, and a Schubert song”. As the concluding culmination of the conference on Sunday afternoon, Professor Harald Krebs introduced the pianist and composer Josephine Lang (1815–1880) in a profound and fascinating lecture, which included several songs composed by Josephine Lang, charmingly and authentically interpreted by his wife, the artist and scholar Sharon Krebs.

Sincere thanks are due to the friendly welcome which was given to the conference delegates by the University and Music Department staff. The special flair of the weekend had much to do with the wide range of interesting lecture-topics (which made one regret that one could only attend one section at a time) and with the opportunity of making the personal acquaintance of distinguished colleagues and interesting junior scholars in the venerable surroundings of the historical buildings of Maynooth University. Very pleasant were the informal, but inspiring talks over tea, coffee, fruit and biscuits during the conference breaks. It was remarked more than once that something of the old salon spirit seemed to have entered into many a conversation.