

Boxwood and Brass at the BSECS annual conference

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The 43rd annual conference of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies focused on 'Pleasures and Entertainments'. This struck me as a very apt theme for a conference on the eighteenth century, which is often characterised as a century of pleasure – in contrast with its adjacent centuries, where people apparently took themselves very seriously indeed. A regular fixture of the BSECS conference is the concert, which always epitomises the Society's very eighteenth-century ethos of mixing scholarly discussion with conviviality.

This year, the concert featured Boxwood and Brass, performing a programme entitled 'Wind Music from the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens' – a location of Georgian 'Pleasure' (with a capital 'P') if ever there was one! Some of the programme had recently been performed at the Foundling Museum (reviewed on this site), but this shorter, pre-dinner programme omitted some of the more concertante music and instead featured Georg Kaspar Sartorius's arrangements of Airs from Mozart's Magic Flute.

Boxwood and Brass is a period instrument ensemble performing wind music of the eighteenth century. The two clarinets, two natural horns and bassoon form a 'Harmonie', a wind band to perform the popular music of the time, which could sometimes include other instruments such as flutes, oboes, double bass or serpent. This Harmoniemusik would be performed at concerts and as background music, and a Harmonie would typically be the private band of a noble, or a military band attached to a regiment.

Boxwood and Brass seeks to recreate this music that is rarely performed nowadays. The spoken introductions by Robert Percival (bassoon) hinted at their scholarly approach but, like the music, these talks were also lively and entertaining. The music is undemanding to listen to, but is undoubtedly difficult to do well, especially on period instruments. The dry acoustic of the Maplethorpe Hall highlighted the distinctive tone of these instruments – this was instructive since, at the time, this music would often have been performed outside. The first clarinet part was invariably the most interesting, carrying the melody as well as the occasional cadenza, and Emily Worthington performed it characterfully. Her physically mobile performance also directed the group.

Harmoniemusik often consisted of arrangements of existing tunes, such as popular pieces from operas of the day. Sartorius arranged the pieces from *The Magic Flute* very idiomatically – one could almost have been listening to one of Mozart's own serenades, which are high-end examples of the genre. In the sixth piece in the set, 'How powerful is your magical tone!', the part of the magic flute itself was taken by Worthington's clarinet: a nice example of how these small ensembles had to be adaptable with their material.

This programme also included excerpts from Charles Frederick Eley's *Twelve Select Military Pieces* and James Brooks's *Thirty-Six Select Pieces for a Military Band*. For me, it was therefore the military rather than the Vauxhall connection (which was admittedly pretty loose) that really stood out from this programme. Historians of war in this period emphasise the importance of music in military life, and I have argued elsewhere that dance had a fundamental role in the eighteenth-century military: it was an important masculine accomplishment, which cultivated the ideal military body in a way that was analogous to drill. Many dances of the period had military titles, and the 'marches' performed here would have been equally at home at a social dance as at a military occasion. This connection between sociability and the military may seem surprising today, but it wasn't at the time. In fact, war loomed large at this conference on 'Pleasures and Entertainments', with several dedicated panels and frequent references in other papers. So this was yet another welcome respect in which Boxwood and Brass was the ideal choice for the BSECS annual concert.