

BOOK REVIEW

Matthew GARDNER and Alison CLARK DESIMONE: *Music and the Benefit Performance in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020.

Klára Škrobánková

THE phenomenon of benefit performance is peculiar. If one engages in British and Continental eighteenth-century theatre and music research, one can be sure to find multiple mentions of benefit performances. Nevertheless, finding a book dedicated solely to the phenomenon, explaining its context, regional variants, and genre transformations has been nearly impossible. The new publication *Music and the Benefit Performance in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, edited by Matthew Gardner and Alison Clark DeSimone, aims to fill in this gap, intricately introducing the British benefit performances.

The book consists of an introduction and twelve chapters grouped in five parts, focusing on networks and repertoires (Part I), benefits outside London (Part II), the public image (Part III), charity benefits (Part IV), and the audience (Part V). Despite this thematic division, the publication is also chronological. It begins with the establishment of benefits in the late seventeenth-century spoken theatre and concludes with the case study of Mozart's visit to England in 1764. The authors predominantly examine the benefit performances from a musical, and not only (evident) theatrical perspective. They combine the approaches of musicology, teatrology, and, in particular, historiography, to thoroughly describe commercial music-making, which grew so popular that it spread through the whole of Europe and North America.

The first and longest part, entitled: "Musical Benefits in the London Theatre: Networks and Repertoires," introduces all the major features of benefit performance: the pricing, marketing techniques, the audience, and places where the benefits were performed. Kathryn Lowerre's opening essay focuses on the theatrical and musical benefits at the turn of the eighteenth century. It pays particular attention to a few special benefits, which the author has supplemented with financial records thus illustrating the prices of the tickets and how they were distributed. Lowerre points out that the selling of the tickets sometimes resembled a popularity contest, with the actors peddling the tickets to their friends, patrons, and fans. Elizabeth Barry, the tragic actress, is first introduced here as an example of a performer who could negotiate the terms

of the benefit performance in her contract. She profited significantly and pioneered the way for other artists who sought to improve their financial status. Barry is often mentioned throughout the volume as an actress handling her financial affairs well, yet the context stays the same, proving to be rather repetitive and not bringing any new information to the reader.

The following study by Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson analyzes London theatre benefits between 1700 and 1725, paying close attention to the musical elements in benefit evenings. The authors importantly notice that many benefit performances included a pantomime afterpiece, and that these evenings usually gained more attention than those containing only songs and dances. The emphasis on spectacle is a crucial finding that is further developed in subsequent chapters of *Music and the Benefit Performance in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, highlighting the motivation of the audience to visit benefit performances and the strategies of those organizing the benefit evenings. However, in Baldwin and Wilson's chapter, a significant problem in the publication emerges for the first time. When describing a certain phenomenon, for example the inclusion of comical scenes in the benefit performance, the authors list several actors or musicians who used this strategy to profit. To support their thesis, Baldwin and Wilson continue to provide a list of different artists and their strategies; a list of who went where and did what that spans rather many pages. This makes the reader wonder whether it would not be better to compile a list of benefit performances and dedicate more time to analyzing the strategy itself, without the never-ending list of occurrences.

This is by no means solely the case of this chapter. Robert G. Rawson's study of concertos and the instrumental benefits in early Hanoverian London suffers from the same issue. It is a pity, as Rawson's findings of the short-lived popularity of the satirical approach towards opera seria and the formal development of these satires are highly interesting and novel. They do not deserve to be somewhat lost in the many mentions of the actors' mobility and various staged genres. This is further accentuated by Vanessa L. Rogers's chapter about ballad opera development, which follows Rawson's article. Instead of listing all ballad operas that gained their popularity (or inadvertently failed) because of the benefit performances, Rogers chooses John Hippisley's ballad opera *Flora* and provides the reader with a thorough case study of the piece. Rogers's findings are a valuable contribution towards the study of Gay's *Beggar's Opera* and its effect on the theatrical life of the 1720s and 1730s London. Among the many fascinating findings, the author addresses the cross-dressed performances of *Beggar's Opera* and informs the reader that "the first cross-dressed version of the work was billed as 'The Metamorphosis of The Beggar's Opera for the benefit of Mrs Nokes,' 11 March 1730, at the Little Haymarket Theatre" (p. 96).

The next part of the book shifts its focus from London to the North of England and Edinburgh. In both chapters, the phenomenon of benefit performances becomes clearer as the setting outside of London, where the audiences were numerous and used to many forms of entertainment, enables researchers to see what a good marketing strategy was. Roz Southey examines the situation in Northern England, considering all the types of benefits: personal benefits and benefits for philanthropic or patriotic purposes. The author concludes that the music element was never as important as the element of appeal, which played a key role in the popularity of certain acts. The position of towns in the north had also played a role, establishing tour routes from London to Edinburgh or Dublin, adding to the complexity of the benefit organization.

The issue of patriotism and nationalism is further developed in Stefanie Acquavella-Rauch's chapter "Amateur Music-Making, Theatre Performances, and Benefit Concerts in Edinburgh." Acquavella-Rauch's contribution is one of the most valuable parts of the whole book, as it focuses on the not so often researched Scotland and the development of the theatrical culture under specific circumstances. One of the chapter highlights is the discussion of how the theatre-makers used to bypass the ban of "secular theatre performances" by embedding them into a benefit concert as a free rehearsal (p. 131).

Part three of *Music and the Benefit Performance in Eighteenth-Century Britain* on the public image and the benefits continues with the treatise of nationalism. In her chapter, Amanda Eubanks Winkler deals with the importance of the works of national composers when organizing a benefit performance, as the English music would often attract a larger audience. The popularity of Henry Purcell was even so immense that his music for the operas was performed during benefits, despite the popular belief that operatic music was not suitable for benefit evenings because it required intricate costumes, props, and other expensive set pieces. Contrary to Eubanks Winkler's essay on British national music, Alison DeSimone considers the impact of Italian music and travelling artists on the development of the benefit performances. DeSimone pays close attention to Margherita de l'Epine, who is mentioned throughout the book, and the effect her benefits had on accepting foreign, mostly Italian, artists.

The following part of the book turns to charity benefits, presenting a unique context in which the performances organized to support musicians and others in need were created. Triona O'Hanlon shows how charity benefits were of huge aid in early eighteenth-century Dublin to those who were struck by the poverty crisis. She predominantly researches the situation in Mercer's Hospital but also takes into context other Irish cities, such as Belfast and Cork, concluding that the Dublin benefits brought sacred music by Georg Frideric Handel to the local audiences.

Matthew Gardner's chapter on the English oratorio in eighteenth-century London continues with the study of religious music and its position in the British society. Gardner also focuses on Handel, describing the influence the composer had on the creation of a link between oratorios and benefit performances, and significantly, on the promotion of the idea that biblical themes can indeed be presented on stage without being accused of sacrilege.

The book's final part focuses on the understudied topic of audience and its role in trendsetting. John Irving presents a case study of young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's visit to London, mapping the successes and failures of Mozart's father Leopold in marketing the prodigy. This chapter illustrates the system of preparing a benefit evening extremely well and above all, provides an example of how the audience's excitement for novelty and variety dynamically changed over a short period of time. David Hunter's closing chapter then supplements the study of the audience with the selection of period letters and records that further develop understandings of the public reaction to the benefit performances.

Music and the Benefit Performance in Eighteenth-Century Britain is undoubtedly a significant addition to the research of British Restoration and eighteenth-century theatre. Even though the book explores one phenomenon, its chapters examine benefit performance from various perspectives. This provides a balanced study of the audience, popular subgenres, artists, and others. Even though the title promises an insight into the predominantly musical world, the publication significantly opens the door to understanding the performative lives of the eighteenth-century British Isles. The methodological approach towards the archive could indeed benefit from a better system that would utilize all contributors' apparent extensive archival research, but this is just a minor issue compared with the thorough, transcultural study of benefit performances.

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Klára Škrobánková, Masaryk University
klara.skrobankova@mail.muni.cz



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