

**“For Music is wholesome the Doctors all think”:  
The curative and restorative function of music  
in eighteenth-century English spas**

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**Abstract:**

Just as baths and spa waters were either praised for their curative virtues or discarded for their supposedly harmful effects on the body and on morals, music in spa towns could often be regarded as a noisy and omnipresent nuisance in the same way that it could be extolled for its charm, its elegance and its recreational power. As shown in many reports, it was often denounced by some bathers for the disruptive tumult brought about by unwelcome band-players:

For when we arriv'd here at *Bath* th' other Day,  
They [the City-Musicians] came to our Lodging on Purpose to play:  
And I thought it was right, as the Music was come,  
[...]  
But the Lodgers were shock'd such a Noise we should make  
And the Ladies declar'd that we kept them awake. (Anstey 32)

Yet, it is also a common feature that music could rank as one of the many attractions afforded by notable English spas. Handel, we know, was a regular visitor at Tunbridge Wells and the fact remains that music and dance were an indispensable element in the social and cultural life of English spa towns, whether it be in Bath, Epsom, Scarborough or Tunbridge. Not only the cultural but also the social life of most bathers was organized around activities involving the presence of musicians or band-players.

Twentieth-century scholarship has largely contributed to researching into such diverse areas as types of music-making (welcome serenades, dance, concerts) repertoires (ancient or modern compositions), concert life or cultural policies of spa towns, not to mention the particular role played by major musicians like, in a spa like Bath, the Linleys, Venanzio Rauzzini, Franz Lamotte or Andrew Ashe. Singers of the calibre of John Braham or Gertrud Mara were also frequent guests, and compositions conceived for watering-places could almost

rank as a specific musical genre only comparable to the “Vauxhall songs” intended for London’s pleasure-gardens.

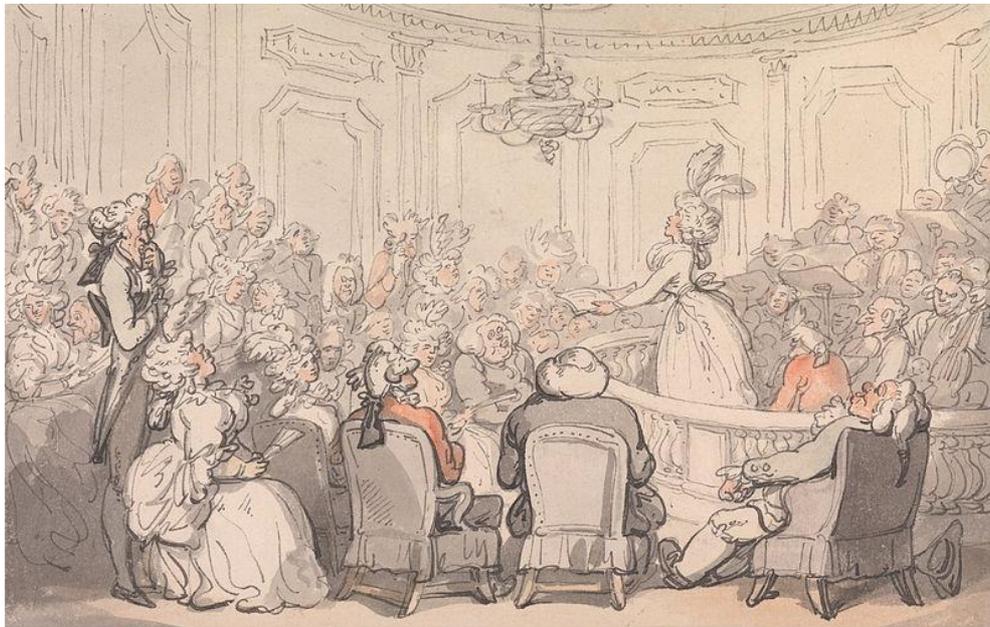
What this paper proposes to examine is the way music operates as a link between the two main functions of English spas, that of centres of pleasure and that of places of healing. In a context in which necessity and amusement were inextricably intermeshed, in which ailment and entertainment would inevitably go hand in hand, music could also be seen as a curative and restorative element, able not only to please the senses but also to bring spiritual and also, why not, physical comfort. This is at least what comes out of Christopher Anstey’s celebrated poetical epistles *The New Bath Guide: Memoirs of the B-r-n-s Family* (London, 1766):

For Music is wholesome the Doctors all think  
For Ladies that bathe, and ladies that drink. (Anstey 42)

[...]

Music calls me to the Spring  
That can Health and Spirits bring. (Anstey 58)

Without going as far as to hope to find traces of early forms of music therapy, this paper aims at showing that music, for all its potentially invasive power, could also be perceived as being conducive to major improvements in both physical and spiritual health.



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## **Biography:**

Pierre Degott is Professor in English Studies at the Université de Lorraine in Metz, where he mainly teaches eighteenth-century literature. His PhD (published at Éditions L'Harmattan) was a study on the themes and poetics of Handel's oratorio librettis. His current research is on the following subjects: 1. librettology and the reflexivity of the sung text; 2. the representation of musical and operatic performances in Anglo-Saxon fiction; 3. opera and oratorio in translation. Even though his research covers all eras concerned by operatic practise, he mainly concentrates on eighteenth-century musical forms (opera, semi-opera, oratorio, odes, ballad-opera, musical plays...). He has published about a hundred academic articles and organised several conferences, mainly on musico-literary subjects. He is currently the Dean of the UFR Arts, Lettres et Langues in Metz.

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