

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ian Bradley. *Water Music: Making Music in the Spas of Europe and North America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Illustrations. 240 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-532734-2.

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## Light and Bubbly

In the academic world, ponderous topics often produce ponderous tomes. In the case of Ian Bradley's latest work, a light, bubbly subject—spa towns and the music produced and played at them—produces a light and bubbly text. Bradley's obvious fondness for his topic wells up out of the text and spills over in numerous, enthusiastic anecdotes and details.

Bradley seeks to draw a serious connection between spas—sites of leisure, flirtation, tourism, gambling, and generally libertine behavior—with the music composed and performed at them. He surveys seven spa towns, Bath, Baden bei Wien, Baden-Baden, Karlsbad, Bad Ischl, Buxton, and Saratoga Springs, from the late seventeenth century until the present. Bradley wants to invest these towns with music-historical importance: he inquires, "Was there, indeed, a distinctive 'water music' that came from contact with the mysterious springs and geysers bubbling up out of the earth and the rituals that surrounded the bathhouses and drinking halls?" One can sense some reluctance in the fairly watery response: "The distinctive ambience, atmosphere, and companionship that spas provided were all vital to the creative process but the actual presence of the waters themselves was not a major influence" (p. 25). For art music, then, spas seem to have provided composers with welcome leisure, socializing, or quiet time. Long have musicians sought inspiration in nature and solitude to compose. Gustav Mahler's Forest House and Franz Liszt's retreat to Rome come to mind; these were places where musicians could truly be in silence. Unsurprisingly, bustling entertainment sites

like spas did not often provide the context necessary for real focus on composition. The music that reigned ascendant in many such sites—operetta—says more about spas' clientele than the great composers or performers who frequented such places.

Bradley provides contextual information about the towns, describing the sites' origins as spas, their emergence as tourist attractions, and their eventual decline. At first music accompanied bathing in or drinking the waters, then became more general entertainment. Indeed, in the seventeenth century, dancing often was prescribed as a curative activity. Generally, Bradley describes the geographical location of the spa, its particular kind of water, and the construction of a tourist infrastructure around it. For example, Bradley introduces the shrewd impresario/manager of the Bath spa, Richard Nash, who saw the potential to keep customers longer if they could be diverted while at Bath. To this end, this early entrepreneur scheduled daily performances in the Pump Room, which occurred without fail for longer than three hundred years. Regular subscription and benefit concerts took place at the spa as well. To draw a more moneyed clientele, Nash also imposed a dress and etiquette code. Tunbridge Wells, a rival spa of Bath in the eighteenth century, also gets brief treatment in this chapter, at the end of which Bradley compares English spa orchestras negatively in comparison to those of the Central European spas to which the book next turns.

The spa town Baden bei Wien shared humble origins

with towns like Bath; in the 1500s and 1600s, bathers often broke into bawdy songs, which dried up as imperial Habsburg patronage transformed the site into an aristocratic retreat by the 1700s. Indeed, Bad Ischl, another imperial favorite, became Emperor Franz Josef's summer retreat for eighty-three of his eighty-six years; he received a nearby villa as a wedding present. Because of the considerable amount of wealth and power embodied at Central European spas, musicians, including Ludwig Ritter von Köchel, Christoph Willibald Gluck, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart began to visit Baden bei Wien and other retreats, particularly during the summer months, in search of patronage. Mozart also sent his wife Constanze to the spa for cures and in this way won himself solitude in Vienna to compose. This is a representative example of the indirect way in which spas contributed to art music.

Ludwig van Beethoven also retreated to another German-speaking spa, Baden-Baden, less to use the waters than to walk through the forests in solitude. While at Baden-Baden, Beethoven worked on several pieces, including the Fifth Symphony; the String Quartet in E-flat; and in particular the String Quartet in A Minor, whose third movement expresses the healing and recovery that Beethoven experienced in the peaceful solitude he found in the hills and forests surrounding Baden-Baden. Bradley offers an unusually detailed description of this movement's Lydian mode and prayer chorale to illustrate its recuperative message.

Baden-Baden became a mecca for serious musicians by the 1860s and 1870s, where they sought to relax and unwind. Spas like Baden bei Wien and Bad Ischl became famous sites for operetta, largely to draw customers away from Vienna as a site of musical entertainment. The success of this gambit led to the "silver age" of operetta post-World War One through the early 1930s, when librettists vied for contracts at the "Operettenbörse" ("operetta stock exchange") that Bad Ischl had become. This competition for clientele was expressed not only through different kinds of musical offerings, but also, as Bradley briefly discusses, the generally cosmopolitan nature of such places, which changed drastically with the beginning of the Franco-Prussian war, when the French abandoned German-speaking spas.

By the early twentieth century, most spa towns were in decline. The arrival of the gramophone was important to these places, as it could provide continuous music, and the new technology's omnipresence at spas underlined the ongoing centrality of music to the spa experi-

ence. But it also indicated the boredom and eventual obsolescence that live performers often experienced at spas, where their performances served much the same function that Mozart's chamber music had done two hundred years earlier: as aural wallpaper against which guests carried on their conversations. Bradley comments that musicians' lives were characterized by drudgery and depression. In addition to recorded music, another way in which music was kept alive at spas, despite their decline as retreats, was through music festivals, as in the case of the Buxton Festival, founded in the 1960s. In 1972, Buxton closed as a working spa, but the festival continues to produce recently composed or rarely staged operas, like Zoltán Kodály's *Háry János*. Similarly, Saratoga Springs enjoyed a brief revival post-World War Two with the introduction of contemporary music concerts at Yaddo, a mansion in town, but the establishment of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center in 1966 signaled the town's end as a spa.

The book is chock-full of amusing anecdotes, photographs taken by the author, and historical caricatures and cartoons. Among the tales Bradley recounts are Johannes Brahms's long pursuit of Klara Schumann at Bad Ischl; Richard Wagner's eternal hypochondria and his unsurprising dissatisfaction with the results of his cures at Teplitz; and the strong possibility that the famous letter Beethoven wrote to his mysterious "immortal beloved" was penned from Teplitz, while she was probably at Karlsbad. These anecdotes are the backbone of the book's nature as *divertissement*. Bradley writes with enthusiasm and cites some diaries and letters of spa visitors but does not engage with secondary texts, or generally, a broader historical context. A more serious indication of the book's scholarly shortcomings is Bradley's dismissal of an eighteenth-century spa musical director's belief in music's curative powers as an "extraordinary piece of medical gobbledegook" (p. 36).

Perhaps most telling is the last chapter, in which Bradley describes the shift from the function of diversion and entertainment to less social and more narcissistic pursuit of self-care, and the corresponding shift from operetta to "spa music"—usually electronic, indebted to relaxation tapes, space music, and the like (p. 201). This shift underlines the book's general argument, that spa music served a clear function derived from its clientele. Because of its accessible tone, numerous anecdotes and images, and disengagement from the scholarly literature, the book will be of more use to the general reader than the specialist.

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