

Music at Crystal Palace

Though Crystal Palace, when it opened in Sydenham in 1854, was never specifically designed to host concerts it became however, quite quickly, the most important public music performance venue in the United Kingdom. The first book to reconstruct its musical history, *The Musical Life of Crystal Palace* by M. Musgrave¹, offers a unique survey of British musical life stretching from the Victorian period to the eve of the Second World War. He writes that "For almost fifty years the orchestral concerts conducted by Michael Manns provided weekly performances which set new standards and introduced a range of new repertory (not least British) unparalleled anywhere in its time. The giant choral festivals offered performers and listeners a musical experience of an entirely new kind, as well as opening up the choral literature (especially of Handel) to vast new audiences."

As the Crystal Palace Museum states: "Music was first performed in the small music court in the south nave. With the advent of the Triennial Handel Festivals a great orchestra was constructed in the west end of the centre transept. This enabled great sacred choral works to be performed by many groups such as the Sunday School Union and Non Conformists etc. On the east side there were later constructed the concert hall and theatre to serve other musical interests such as brass band competitions and operatic works. There is no doubt that in the second half of the C19th Crystal Palace was THE centre of the music world. Dvorak, Liszt and Sullivan came to perform their works. By the turn of the century much had changed and John Phillip Sousa the American march king was feted at the Crystal Palace. Between 1855 and 1895 the Saturday concerts had seen performed nearly 200 symphonies, 600 overtures, marches and other works. In all over 350 composers had been heard."

In this central transept was the 4,000-piece Grand Orchestra built around the 4,500-pipe Great Organ with concert room holding over 4,000 seats.

A 1905 Croydon² handbook for residents and visitors described the scope of the musical activity.

"During recent years the Crystal Palace has become more and more an institution for the amusement, as well as the education, of the people at large. High class dramas are produced at the Theatre; great concerts, amongst which may be reckoned the Triennial Handel Festival, in the Handel Orchestra or in the Concert Room; open air concerts in the North Tower Gardens; cinematograph shows, cafe chantants on the Terrace; monster firework displays, balloon ascents; carnation society's shows; rose and flower shows; cage bird shows; Hollyhock Society's shows and many others of a similar nature."

However with the destruction of Crystal Palace by the fire of 1936 much of this great musical experience was lost and forgotten. In 1961 an outdoor stage was constructed and the Crystal Palace Garden Party festivals came into being. Then in 1996 the architect, Ian Ritchie, designed what became known as the 'Rusty Laptop', and this concert bowl was also built within

¹ *The Musical Life of Crystal Palace*: Michael Musgrave, Cambridge University Press 1995

² A colourful overview of Crystal Palace in 1905 produced by Bygone Croydon Archives on 1 August 2016

the park. Sarah Edmonds³ describes these musical developments, starting with a description of the Laptop:

“It was intended to discreetly blend in with the “Paxton landscape” and, despite its unmistakable impact up close, I suppose it does...: The first concert on the Laptop took place in 1997, but the (very) high point of the park’s musical legacy was during the hippie-saturated 70s, when the Crystal Palace Garden Party festivals brought the likes of Pink Floyd, Elton John, The Beach Boys and Bob Marley to our leafy little corner of South London..... The huge oxidised monster of a stage, flanked by its upright speaker towers at either side like guard dogs and surrounded by a murky pond, wouldn’t look out of place in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

The stage, which would go on to host the Garden Party performances, was built in 1961 by the Greater London Council, on the same site as the Rusty Laptop now stands. Originally it was a just a temporary platform, but managed to last long enough to see the park through decades of legendary musical performances – from Pink Floyd to The Pixies.

The first of the Garden Parties was staged in May 1971 and got off to a flying start, boasting Rod Stewart’s The Faces and Pink Floyd among others on the first bill. In the same year Elton John, Fairport Convention and Yes made an appearance at the second Garden Party. The Beach Boys followed in 1972.,The cherry on the cake came in 1980; when Bob Marley and the Wailers sauntered onto the stage to perform... This was to be one of Bob’s final performances before his untimely death in 1981.

After 1991, the big concerts were shifted into the brand new sports centre where The Sex Pistols, Bruce Springsteen and Coldplay all played there in the noughties; .

The Laptop was therefore host to smaller musical events and concerts but is now seldom if ever used as it has fallen into disrepair.

However last year was the relaunch of the Crystal Palace Overground Festival, a free festival of music, theatre, poetry as well as many other events. 10,000 visitors were expected at this festival in June 2017 and it will be held again this year in 2018.

From the V&A archives

³ Back in the Haze:The Transmitter, Issue 27 March 2013 Sarah Edmonds



Front cover of music sheet for *Farewell to the Exhibition*, an air with variations for the piano-forte, composed by Ferdinand Sommer. Performed before the Royal Family at the Crystal Palace on 14 October 1851. Illustrated with scene of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert with two of their children, attending the performance.

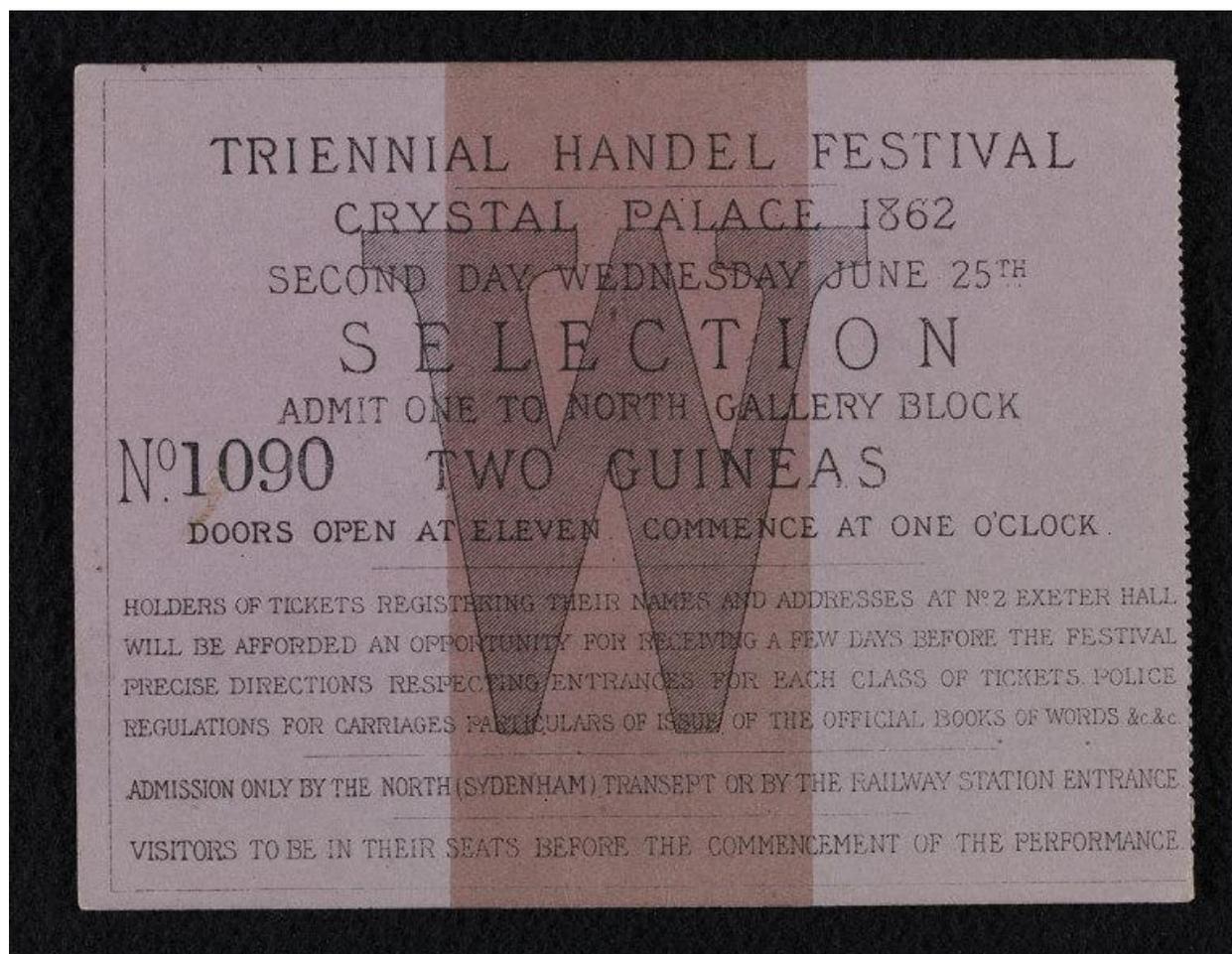


The polka sold with this music cover celebrates the opening of this beautiful building. Polkas were fast dances, in quick duple time with steps on the first three beats and a small hop on the fourth. They originated in Bohemia in the early 19th century and quickly spread throughout Europe. Polkas were first introduced to Prague in 1837 and then to Vienna and St. Petersburg in 1839, Paris in 1840, and finally London in 1844.

This photograph of 1854 shows the interior of the Crystal Palace in south London. The Crystal Palace housed the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in 1851. It was relocated from its original site in Hyde Park in central London to Sydenham in the suburbs of

south London. The British photographer Philip Henry Delamotte photographed the reconstruction of the Crystal Palace between 1851 and 1854.

This photograph shows the fountain, which was a popular meeting place during the exhibition. It also shows the transept. The Crystal Palace was the venue for various events such as exhibitions, music festivals and demonstrations of moving pictures. After the Festival of Empire in 1911 the building deteriorated further. Attempts to raise funds and to generate new interest in the building were mostly unsuccessful. The Crystal Palace was an unkempt relic from a past age by the time it was completely destroyed by a fire in 1936.



A two-guinea ticket for admission to 'Selection' on the second day of the Crystal Palace Triennial Handel Festival, 25th June 1862. Lithography and letterpress. Anonymous. England. 1862.