Eating and the theatre

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There's no doubt that the English experience of going to an opera in the long 18th century was entirely unlike our own theatrical experience. The streets on the way to the building were dim (even if they were brighter than elsewhere in Europe), the auditorium was contrastingly bright and remained so throughout the performance, the theatre buildings smelt of damp, body odour, and urine, and the audiences were noisy, if engaged. Indeed, almost the only thing likely to appear familiar to us, is the title of the play or opera on the bill.

And one of those differences is the hour at which the performances began. The establishment of a starting time today rests almost always on external factors which require a standard curtain down across the London theatres. In the long 18th century we are faced with precisely the opposite; a fixed starting time, but a flexible curtain down time.

The material in this paper is part of a study for Yale University Press of the staging of opera, and it belongs to a chapter that deals with the audience experience of going to a performance. I'll be discussing London and London only; and will not be addressing the situation in the provinces. I'm going to deal separately with the evidence for three different aspects of the topic; meal times, theatre times, and finally the meeting between the two. As will become obvious, I'm attempting to establish general trends, and I'll be ignoring the endless variations and exceptions to every situation.

It will become apparent that there is no easy way to locate the information required to understand this topic, and of necessity, I'll be using *selected* quotations, but those that I *have* used are duplicated often enough in the sources for me to be able to suggest a trend. I also will not be mentioning secondary sources consulted along the way, but I'd like to make a blanket acknowledgement of them at this point.

Dining hours

Starting in the 17th century, almost inevitably with Pepys, it is clear that the first meal of the day, breakfast, was taken early, at least by modern standards, between 6.00am and 7.00am. This was followed by dinner, which took place at about noon. The last meal, supper, varied in its timing but was after about 8.00pm.[1] On 29 April 1668, Pepys went early to the office, 'at noon dined at home' with his Clerkes, and by 9.00pm was at Sir William Penn's before going home to supper.[2] It was dinner that was the main meal of the day; Monsieur Mission recounted that:

> The *English* eat a great deal at Dinner; they rest a while, and to it again, until they have quite stuff'd their Paunch. Their Supper is moderate: Gluttons at Noon, and abstinent at Night.[3]

The dinner hour stayed at around midday until the advent of tea, coffee, and chocolate, all of which make their regular appearance in the later 17th century. The newly introduced habit of taking a dish of one of these beverages, accompanied by some food, at about 11.00am, is often credited for putting the dinner hour back by the end of the century to sometime between one and two o'clock.

By the early 18th-century, dinner was around 3.00pm. In 1719, William Byrd recorded:

> I rose about 7 o'clock and read a chapter in Hebrew and in Greek in Lucia. I neglected my prayers, and had boiled milk for breakfast. The weather continued cold and clear. About 11 o'clock I went to Lord Islay's to take broth where my Lord Orrery came and stayed with us an hour. About one, I went to the Cockpit and from there to dine with Betty Southwell and Daniel Dering. I ate some boiled pork and we were very merry till 4 o'clock and then I went to Lady Guise's and sat with her till six then went to Will's and sat with Lord Orrery till eight and then I went to visit Mrs B-r-t but she was from home. Then to Mrs V-m-s where I stayed and ate some mutton cutlets and then walked home and neglected my prayers.[4]

This dining pattern is the one that dominates most of the first part of the 18th century; a lightish breakfast, some mid-morning refreshments, dinner - in this case, boiled pork

- in the early afternoon, and a late supper. However dinner seems to have been less substantial that it had been in the previous century.

As the 18th century progressed, the hour of breakfast became later; by 1772, Grosley reported that all citizens in general 'rise a little of the latest',[5] and in 1789, Archenholz recounts that the 'English live in the most remarkable manner; they rise late and spend most of the morning in the coffee houses.'[6] As a consequence, the dinner hour then moved to about 4.00pm, and supper was taken at about 10.00pm, a schedule that suited merchants who could then do business during the afternoon.[7]

But some time towards the end of the 18th century, the notion of tea and something to eat in the afternoon was introduced:

> The slices of bread and butter, which they give you with your tea, are as thin as poppy-leaves. But there is another kind of bread and butter which is usually eaten with tea, which is toasted by the fire, and is incomparably good. It is called toast.[8]

This took place at around 5pm and had the effect of altering both the timing and content of dinner and supper. By 1831, the French cook, Louis Ude, could recount that:

> In London, persons breakfast at nine, ten, eleven, and even twelve o'clock, and dine at eight or nine; between these meals comes luncheon, composed generally of cold meats, such as pates, fowls, pheasants, partridges, ham veal, brawn, and generally what ever is left [over from the previous main meal].[9]

And his further comments suggest that the loss of importance of the midday meal is complete:

> The repast itself is insignificant, and is only taken by certain young ladies, who wish to preserve the elegance of their figures, the beauty of their complexions, and above all the becoming manners of good society which interdict, as vulgar, eating at table like gluttons; for unless frequent meals ate taken, too much must be eaten at once.[10]

The main alteration in the long 18th century, then, is that the original dinner hour came to be occupied by lunch, while the later dinner hour almost cancelled out supper. Dinner continued to be the main meal, but was now taken in the evening.

Turning to **Theatre times**, we find in the later 17th century, the theatre began early in the afternoon. Pepys, on going to see Roger Boyle's *The Black Prince* on 19 October 1667, went to home to dine at noon, but although he 'came to [the playhouse] by 2 a-clock' the starting time of the play, 'yet there was no room in the pit.'[11] Of the 1690s, Colley Cibber was to record that the performances had moved back to start at about 4.00pm. [12] This recollection is bourne out by the declaration by Ned Stanmore in the theatre-referential opera *The World in the Moon* that the evening's four programme was more than 'half done' at 7.00pm.[13]

During the early part of the 18th century, the time continued moving later, so that when the theatre times first began to appear on the bills with any regularity, the advertised time is around 6.30pm, In 1786, *Werter* with *The Duenna* was announced for 'half after FIVE, Begin at HALF after SIX',[14] while in the same season, *Eloisa*, with *The Anatomist*, was advertised at 'A QUARTER after FIVE, Begin a QUARTER after SIX.'[15]

However, we shouldn't assume that performances got underway on time. A perennial problem, it was remarked on in 1667 by Pepys, who commented that 'by and by' the play began.[16] In 1771, Edward Piggott noted that the theatres (which at that stage advertised a 6.30 start) actually 'begin at seven,'[17] a complaint echoed by Johanna Schopenhauer, who commented in 1805 that although the evening was supposed to begin at half past six, it was always seven before the performance began.[18]

Once the bill was underway, it invariably lasted between 3 and 4 hours, a timing which is remarkably consistent from 1660 to 1860. The timing of the 17th century pieces suggests that they took closer to 3 hours, but the rise of the multi-item bill - usually, one mainpiece and one afterpiece, but with endless variations - meant that an evening of opera at both the playhouse and the opera house extended to about four hours. Most writers are surprisingly coy about recording the length of an evening at the theatre; however, Anne Larpent, on a visit to the opera in 1797 to see Paisiello's *Nina; or Love has turned her head*,[19] recorded that 'The scenery is wonderfull fine and well done, but what with staring at the spectacle & Company for 4 hours I got sickly and dizzy...'[20]; the

performance that night also included the ballets *Le Rendezvous* at the end of Act I, and *Sapho et Phaon* to close the evening.[21]

Writers are, however, less coy about curtain times; these confirm the convention of a 3 or 4 hour programme. Edward Piggott remarked in 1771 that the theatres 'finish at half an hour after ten'[22], and at a performance of *Didone Abbandonata* on 20 January 1775, recorded that the 'Dancing Good but I think well enough for an Opera, [however, they] are very inferior to the French Dancers; the Opera ended at half after ten'.[23] When the fire broke out at the King's Theatre in June 1789 'five minutes before ten o'clock,'[24] Oulton's afterpiece *As it should be* was still in progress at the Haymarket Theatre opposite, when the 'alarm of 'Fire' occasioned a disagreeable tumult.'[25] And in 1808, it was reported that the presentation of *Pizzaro* followed by *The Portrait of Cervantes* 'was over by eleven o'clock.' [26]

However, there are as many reports of late or misjudged finishes towards the end of the 18th century. For example, an hour long ballet was inserted between *A School for Scandal* and the two act English opera *Wilmore Castle*, with the result that the operatic afterpiece did not start until '*past Eleven o'Clock.*'[27] An apparently uncut *Magic Flute*, taken at slow speed in 1819, caused Leigh Hunt to declare that the opera was at least a third too long, since it did not finish until nearly midnight.[28] And Weber, attending the first performance of *Aladdin* at Drury Lane in 1826, recorded that 'The opera lasted - well, from seven to half-past eleven,' an exceptional length which he rightly observed, was 'enough to kill the audience and the work.'[29]

It is true that some of the later curtain down times appear to have been benefits; Johanna Schopenhauer reports that

> these performances often last until one o'clock, for in order to extend the fullest hospitality to the public, all sorts of odds and ends are crammed into the intervals - sometimes a song, sometimes a dance. These usually please the "higher" spectators, have to be repeated two or three times, and take a great deal of time.[30]

One o'clock was early when contrasted with the debacle of Curioni's Benefit at the King's in 1830; this is recorded to have finished around 2.00am, a time which is

perhaps not surprising considering that the programme included the whole of Cimarosa's *Gli Orazj e Curiazj*, an act of Rossini's *Il Turco in Italia*, and an abridgement of the ballet set to Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*.[31]

Collision

But as will be by now clear, the theatre starting time and the dinner hour were set in a collision course. Returning to William Byrd, it can be seen how the theatre sat in relation to the rest of the day:

> About 11 o'clock I went to my Lord Orrey's, where I drank a dish of chocolate.... Then I went to Mr. Southwell's and sat there an hour and then went to Mrs. U-t-n to dinner where was my Lord Harry Powlett and my Lord Bellenden. I ate some boiled beef. After dinner we went to Mrs. U-m-s and from thence to the playhouse in Lincoln's Inn, Mrs Lindsay having made me take a ticket, and at the play I sat by my Lady Bouverie. After the play, I went to Court and from thence with my Lord Tyrconnel to supper where was Mr. Johnson and Mr. Archer. I ate some chicken and asparagus, and sat and talked until one o'clock and then I went home and neglected my prayers.[32]

As Byrd's account suggests, while dinner was in the middle of the day there was no problem; here, its timing sits easily between a dinner of boiled beef, and a supper of chicken and asparagus. In 1678, it was only the casual attitude to revivals that made an audience late:

> *But when a Play's reviv'd, you stay and dine,*
> *And drink till three, and then come dropping in.*[33]

In other words, by the time 3 o'clock had arrived, the entertainment at the theatre was well underway, and members of the audience could not be thought of as seriously attending the play, they were just 'dropping in'. But at least they got there. So also did the brethren of the 'Antient and Honourable Society of Free Masons' who met at 2.00pm to dine at the Theatre Tavern, and then went on to the play.[34]

And there was time afterwards to do other things. On occasion, Byrd's supper was replaced by a visit to the coffee house; after a visit to Covent Garden on 8 February 1718, he drank and 'stayed until 11 o'clock'.[35] Other evenings saw post-theatre visits to both the Court and coffee house, as well as the occasion on 5 March 1719 when,

after the entertaiment at Drury Lane, he 'went to Will's and sat there until ten, when Mrs. S-t-r-d called for me in a hack and we went to the bagnio where I rogered her but once and neglected my prayers.'[36] Clearly, not all went home or to brothels; Legg's *Low-Life* records that in the hour after midnight, 'Persons of Quality' could be found 'ordering their Chairmen to carry them to Publick Gaming-Tables',[37] and William Parke records supping with Lord Barrymore after the opera, who at midnight then departed for 'one of the clubhouses, where noble members pass the night in play,'[38]

However, by 1805, it had become a matter for comment that the theatre started too early at 6.30pm because most of the population did 'not have their main meal of the day until about six'[39] and by 1808, Louis Simond could complain that 'the hour of dining is precisely that of the play'.[40] Leigh Hunt pointed out that, with the later dining hour, the theatre managers should give up the attempt to give the crowds a spurious money's worth.[41] By 1827, there were complaints in *The Times*; it was felt that, as managers were in the habit of 'giving three distinct pieces in one evening, the commencing at seven o'clock, and being obliged to remain until 12, and sometimes nearer one in the morning, there was little enjoyment to be had.'[42] By the 1830s, the curtain down time became so late that Hunt declared that the playbills ought to carry the note 'Night-caps and breakfast in the lobbies.'[43]

Conclusion

The problem was, however, insoluble. The theatre managers needed to give value for money, and to do that, they felt that the 3 to 4 hour multi-item bill had to continue, regardless of when it actually ended. And worse, there were moves to extend the apparently unextendable; Arnold, at the English Opera House, began to put 4, rather than 2 or 3 items on the bill.

But why did it suddenly matter? Throughout the period we've been dealing with, the attitude to theatre going has been extremely casual. Indeed, one of the reasons for there being such doubt about the actual starting times of performances is that it was an agreed convention, and was not usually included on the bills.

And it is easy for us to underestimate the extent to which theatrical attendance could be a drop-in affair. Typical of this attitude is that of Byrd, who after a dinner of milk at 2.00pm in 1719, tells us that he:

> put several things in order and wrote spoke English until 6 o'clock and then I called at the playhouse which was very full because it was the first time of acting. However I did not stay but went to the coffeehouse where I sat with my Lord Orrery about 8 o'clock, and then ate some milk and bread for supper.[44]

There was nothing doing at the playhouse, so he went off to the coffee house. Some also came only for part of the programme; the inveterate theatre goer Isaac Reed mentions leaving early on numerous occasions, including the day in 1762 when he saw *Love for Love*, but not stay to see '*Fortunatus* the Entertainment,'[45]

And nothing illustrates this casualness better than the issue of half price tickets. For those who wanted to arrive late, or who could not afford full-price tickets, half-price tickets were made available, traditionally between Acts III and IV of a 5 act drama. The audience member therefore saw the last two acts of the mainpiece, plus the afterpiece. So much an accepted part of the theatre routine was it, that attempts to abolish it by the theatre managers led to two major series of riots, and by the end of the century, those who purchased the more expensive half-price tickets even had a room set aside in which to wait. Reed was only one of many who often arrived to take advantage of the half-price tickets, seeing in 1762 for example, 'the 2 last Acts of *Every Man in his Humour* with [Arne's opera] *Thomas and Sally*.'[46]

But by the early 19th century, it is clear that people did not really want to arrive half way through a revival of *A School for Scandal*. They did not want to leave *The Magic Flute* before it had ended. It is also clear that the audience was starting to value the 'whole work'. It is well-know that opera texts had, until this point, been unstable; for example, in a text advertised as Metastasio's opera *Ipermestra* in 1754, only 6 out of the 20 aria texts were original to the libretto, while the 1765 *La Clemenza di Tito*, advertised as a having a score by Cocchi, also contained arias by Sacchini, Galuppi, Hasse, Guglielmi, Abos, Scarlatti, and Giardini. But when Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* appeared in London, it became important to advertise it as 'The Music entirely by MOZART, without any addition whatsoever.'[47]

In opera terms, then, we are now dealing with what has become the notion of a stable work of art, a trend ultimately to be the work of art as monument. In technical terms, this is not surprising; even if the audience had wanted it, musical developments, in particular those towards the operatic scena, made aria substitution on large scale impractical. And now that it had become important to hear the whole work, the choice for diners was to have a heavyish tea *before* the theatre, or a large supper after it; there was no longer an option to dine at the fashionable hour, and be late.

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[1] J. C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, *The Englishman's Food: a history of five centuries of English diet* (London, 1939/rev. 1959), 106.
[2] Robert Latham and William Matthews, eds., *The Dairy of Samuel Pepys*, IX (London, 1976), 178-9.
[3] *M. Mission's Memoirs and observations in his travels over England*, trans. G. Ozell (London, 1719), 313.
[4] William Byrd, *The London Diary (1717-1721) and other writings* (New York, 1958), 322-3.
[5] M. Grosley, *A tour to London or new observations on England and its inhabitants* , trans. Thomas Nugent (London, 1772), I, 108.
[6] M. D'Archenholz, *A Picture of England* (London, 1789), II, 105.
[7] M. Grosley, *A tour to London or new observations on England and its inhabitants* , trans. Thomas Nugent (London, 1772), I, 109.
[8] C. P. Moritz, *A Journey to England* (London, ??) .
[9] Louis Ude, *The French Cook, a system of fashionable and economical cookery* (London, 1831), 413.
[10] Louis Ude, *The French Cook, a system of fashionable and economical cookery* (London, 1831), 413.
[11] Robert Latham and William Matthews, eds., *The Dairy of Samuel Pepys*, VIII (London, 1974), 487.
[12] Cibber, *Apology*, 72.
[13] Elkanah Settle, *The World in the Moon* (London,),
[14] Playbill, Covent Garden, 26 October 1786, in Frederick Pollock, comp., *William Charles MacCready a memorial* (a collection of playbills, letters, and newspapers cuttings) US-Cn 264486, I.
[15] Playbill, Covent Garden, 21 December 1786, in Frederick Pollock, comp., *William Charles MacCready a memorial* (a collection of playbills, letters, and newspapers cuttings) US-Cn 264486, I.
[16] Robert Latham and William Matthews, eds., *The Dairy of Samuel Pepys*, VIII (London, 1974), 487.
[17] Edward Piggott, ms dairy in the Beinecke Library, Yale University. Quoted in Elizabeth Gibson, 'Edward Pigott: eighteenth-century theatre chronicler', *Theatre Notebook*,xlii/2 (1988), 65.
[18] Russell Jackson, 'Johanna Schopenhauer's journal: a german view of the London theatre scene, 1803-5,' *Theatre Notebook*, lii/3 (1998), 146.
[19] With a libretto by G. B. Lorenzi on the the play by B. J. Marsollier des Vivetières.
[20] Mrs Larpent's Diary, US-Cn HM 301201, I, 16 May 1797.
[21] *The London Stage*, V/3, 1963.
[22] Edward Piggott, ms dairy in the Beinecke Library, Yale University. Quoted in Elizabeth Gibson, 'Edward Pigott: eighteenth-century theatre chronicler', *Theatre Notebook*,xlii/2 (1988), 65.
[23] Edward Piggott, ms dairy in the Beinecke Library, Yale University. Quoted in Elizabeth Gibson, 'Edward Pigott: eighteenth-century theatre chronicler', *Theatre Notebook*,xlii/2 (1988), 66.
[24] *London Chronicle*, 16-18 June 1789.
[25] Walley Chamberlain Oulton, *The History of the London Theatres* (London, 1796), II, 52.
[26] *Covent Garden Journal* (London, 1810), I, 34.
[27] R Houlton, *A Review of the Musical Drama of Drury Lane for the years 1797-1800* (London, 1801), 77.
[28] Leigh Hunt, 30 May 1819.
[29] Lettter from Weber to his wife, 29 April 1826, quoted in EWW with no ref (but try Benedict).
[30] Russell Jackson, 'Johanna Schopenhauer's journal: a german view of the London theatre scene, 1803-5,' *Theatre Notebook*, lii/3 (1998), 147.
[31] *The Theatrical Observer*, No. 2657, 19 June 1830.

[32] William Byrd, *The London Diary (1717-1721) and other writings* (New York, 1958), 253-4.
[33] T[homas] D[uffett], *The fool turn'd critick* (London 1678), Epilogue.
[34] *The Grub Street Journal*, 7 Decmebr 1732.
[35] William Byrd, *The London Diary (1717-1721) and other writings* (New York, 1958), 77; the original of Byrd's diaires - there are versions in the Henry E. Huntington Library and the library of the Virginia Historical Society - is in a version of the code found in the 1707 version of William Mason's *A pen pluck't from an eagle's wing*.
[36] William Byrd, *The London Diary (1717-1721) and other writings* (New York, 1958), 239; a 'bagnio', according to John Fielding. The New London Spy (London, ?1794), 50, was originally a bathhouse , but has been abused, and are now places where the waiters pimp for the girls, and so on.
[37] Thomas Legg, *Low-Life; or one half of the world* (London, 1764), 3.
[38] William Parke, *Musical Memoirs* (London, 1830), II, 67-8.
[39] Russell Jackson, 'Johanna Schopenhauer's journal: a german view of the London theatre scene, 1803-5,' *Theatre Notebook*, lii/3 (1998), 146.
[40] [Louis Simond], *Journal of a tour and residence in Great Britain during the years 1810 and 1811* (Edinburgh, 1815), I, 94.
[41] Leigh Hunt 7 July 1831.
[42] *The Times* - quoted *Theatrical Observer*, No. 1798, 13 September 1827.
[43] Leigh Hunt 7 July 1831.
[44] William Byrd, *The London Diary (1717-1721) and other writings* (New York, 1958), 316.
[45] *Isaac Reed Diaries 1762-1804*, ed. Claude E. Jones (Berkeley, 1946), 20, 1 October 1763.
[46] *Isaac Reed Diaries 1762-1804*, ed. Claude E. Jones (Berkeley, 1946), 243, 10 November 1762.
[47] See LA CLEMENZA DI TITO; A SERIOUS OPERA, *IN TWO ACTS* AS REPRESENTED AT THE KING'S THEATRE, IN THE *HAYMARKET*. The Music entirely by MOZART, without any addition whatsoever. (London, 1806), GB-Lbl 907.k.7.(2).