

European Salon Orchestra

How did fashionable hotels provide musical entertainment for their salon guests in a pre-radio, mid-19th century world?

Enter the European Salon Orchestra (ESO). Often comprised of the soloists from the respective sections of a local full-sized orchestra, these pocket symphonies featured a violin, viola, cello, bass, piano, flute, clarinet, trumpet and percussion, as well as a vocalist. Musical fare included excerpts from light classics, well-known theatrical tunes, and arrangements of many of the popular songs usually performed in parlor settings at social events among polite company. As the accompaniment to many a lunchtime conversation, one imagines there were few cymbal crashes!

The budding musical format received its greatest celebrity boost when word got out around 1870 that none other than Queen Victoria especially enjoyed the addition of the new musical format at tea-time. The ESO became all the rage in salons across still-aristocratic England and Europe. The palm trees often used as an exotic decorative touch in many of these salons lent their name to the trend as ESO's came to be known as Palm Court Orchestras, and reminded diners in England and the Continent of the long-reaching colonial ambitions of their respective nations.

As economical as the full-sized Palm Court Orchestras were, salon managers could further pinch pennies by condensing the format down to a pianist, violinist, bassist and singer, with the pianist often doubling up as vocalist, allowing even smaller venues to emulate their larger, tonier counterparts. Hello, Bobby Short!

The Great War, and the advent of radio and recording technology, sounded the knell for the ubiquity of the ESO. However, the stage was set for the live musical formats of the coming Jazz Age in America and their influence in spreading the expectation and enjoyment of live music in public venues is still with us today!