

Versailles, 300 years of live performance, 8 million visitors

This episode of the Early Music Podcast follows our 21 May REMAin Connected conference about Cultural Tourism. One of our speakers was Denis Verdier-Magneau, Director of Cultural Development at the Château de Versailles. He has kindly agreed to speak with us about the cultural offer of the Château de Versailles and its relationship with Château de Versailles Spectacles, the company in charge of spectacles and concerts.

The palace, the museum, and the domain usually welcome more than 70% of foreign visitors. But due to the COVID crisis, its frequentation has become mainly French and local, with few visitors from neighbouring countries. Besides the visits of the buildings and the gardens, the Château de Versailles has an exhibition policy: the most recent one is on the 18th century painter Hyacinthe Rigaud, famous for his portraits of the kings of France. The Château also has an editorial policy that spans from guidebooks to scientific publications.

Versailles is obviously linked to Louis XIV, the Sun King. When building the castle, his goal was to make it a physical spectacular representation of his absolute power. Furniture, textiles, paintings, gildings that decorate the castle showcased the best of French artisans' work. Everything was meant to demonstrate the king's power and put him in an almost God-like position. Every form of art was used by the king and served to illustrate his power, and live music was at the centre of such ostentation. From small concerts in private rooms to big performances in front of the whole court, from chamber music to military parades, music was ever-present.

Nowadays, that tradition is being reactivated by Château de Versailles Spectacles, a private company that exists since 2003. They organise many events but most concerts and spectacles in the Opéra Royal, sacred music concerts in the Chapelle Royale, and Les Grandes Eaux musicales every summer in the gardens.

CVS did not appear out of nowhere; it was created in the continuity of previous departments and organisations that oversaw the live shows taking place on the Domaine. At first, it was a Department of Music integrated to the Château de Versailles. Then, the Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles was created, taking on all musical aspects, from creation, production to research and diffusion. But there was a real need for a company that could find revenues to finance the creation of spectacles, concerts, and operas: a first company was created that then became Château de Versailles Spectacles. To finance their programming, the Château de Versailles allowed it to use the gardens to organise Les Grandes Eaux de Versailles during the summer – the money from this event is then used to produce and create the spectacles that are part of CVS' season.

While CVS organises the spectacles, the Château de Versailles has a more educational role. Its goal is to bring historicity to the use of music in Versailles, with exhibitions or conferences. This role is in line with one of the staples of the cultural offer of the Château de Versailles: making it accessible to everyone, from schools, disabled visitors, to regulars and subscribers. The Château also welcomes gala reception, dinners, or charity events, once again reactivating the tradition of the soirées and receptions of the French kings' court in the 18th century.