

In search of identities: ‘Foreigners’ in fin-de-siècle Belgian café-concerts

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Abstract:

This article reveals the substantial presence of all kinds of foreigners among the audiences in Belgian café-concerts and their position in ambitious urban and national politics in fin-de-siècle Belgian cities. Although ignored by academics for decades, Belgian fin-de-siècle café-concerts and their hedonistic atmosphere were highly influential, and even imitated, abroad. By combining quantitative and qualitative data from a wide range of research fields, it is possible to comprehend the café-concert and its audiences as transgressive identities, challenging concepts of social space, as well as nationalities, class and gender. By recognizing foreigners’ unique position in modern Belgian cities and also the café-concert as their favoured place for social encounters, new light is shed on the international community, urban economy, nationhood and modern identities.

Keywords: Café-concert, International Audiences, Foreigners, Migration, Transgressive Identities, City Marketing, Urban Redevelopment, Global Trade, Belgium, Nationhood

Introduction

When visiting the Antwerp café-concert ‘Palais Indien’ in 1886, the famous French theatre critic Jules Lemaître was impressed by its lavish interior and multicultural entertainment:

I saw in Antwerp something nearly perfect: Le Palais Indien. It was ornamented in a Babylonian and Sardanapalesque fashion. Compared to this, our Eden-Théâtre is the illustration of antique austerity. Le Palais offered sailors, returned after six months at sea, a summary of civilization’s supreme splendor. And to please them, there were songs in every language (1898, 311).

Located in Belgium’s main port city, the Palais Indien witnessed a cosmopolitan audience and opulent decoration that surpassed even the most sumptuous Parisian halls of the time. Several other Belgian café-concerts exuded similar opulence and cosmopolitanism. Named after famous Parisian and London entertainment halls, these Eldorados, Alcazars, Alhambras, Olympias et cetera emerged in major Belgian cities such as Brussels, Antwerp, Liège and Ghent from 1876 onwards.¹

According to theatre historian Lionel Renieu in his reference work *Histoire des Théâtres de Bruxelles* (1928), these café-concerts stem from the café-chantants of the 1830s, venues where alcohol and songs prevailed. Spectacular fairground attractions or *numéros*, in combination with musical entertainment and an occasional small piece or *piécette* at the end of the show while the audience was eating and drinking at tables in front of the stage, gradually led to the emergence of a variety bill (1928, 63). Late nineteenth century café-concerts with rows of chairs instead of tables in front of the stage, were labelled ‘music-halls’ by Renieu. However, this anglophone term was used only sporadically in Belgium where they were generally called café-concerts.²

Although this genealogy of Belgian café-concerts by Renieu is rather simplistic, lacks nuance and resembles Peter Bailey’s ‘pothouse to palace’ representation (1986, xiv), it offers an impression of a neglected genre of entertainment in Belgian urban history. Café-concerts were closely intertwined with everyday life in major fin-de-siècle cities. Moreover, Belgian café-concerts such as the Brussels ‘Eden-Théâtre’ were leaders in their genre, even being imitated in Paris,³ London, Liverpool, Manchester⁴ and Amsterdam⁵.

The Brussels Eden-Théâtre was singled out by the contemporary foreign press as being one of the most beautiful halls in the world due to its sophisticated orientalist exterior, the work of the Parisian architect Wilhelm Kuhnert, along with its luxurious orientalist interior of red and golden colors by Alban Chambon and many refined sculptures by Tasson. Its octagonal auditorium had decorated walkways, a luxurious foyer, illuminated winter gardens with refreshing fountains, tropical plants, artificial grottos along the edge, and simulated oriental fairy tales contributing to a hedonistic atmosphere (1928, 230).

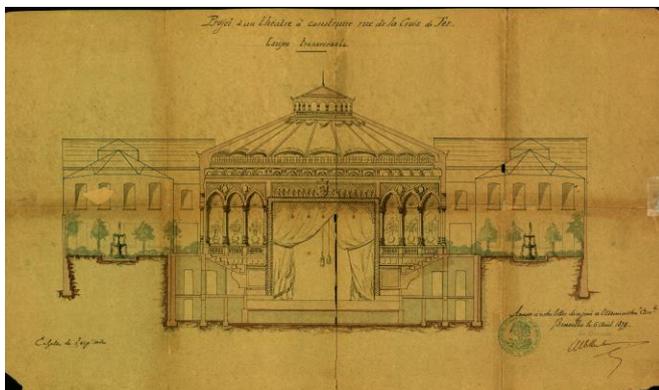


Image 1

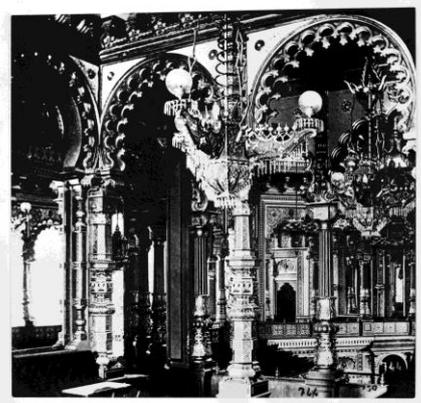


Image 2

Ten years after its inauguration, however, Brussels city council decided to level this architectural masterpiece. This decision was not objected to in the Belgian press. 'It never served the community'⁶ was one of the reasons given by the city council to settle its disastrous fate. The fact that the foreign press provided greater coverage of the activities in the Brussels Eden-Théâtre is an initial indication of a close connection between the Eden-Théâtre and so-called 'foreigners' (*étrangers* in French; *vreemdelingen* in Dutch). This connection is also illustrated by a quotation of Renieu (1928, 93) about the Brussels 'music-halls': 'Travelling foreigners (*étrangers de passage*), a notable part of the audience, prefer visiting them as they do not always understand the local language.'

As a consequence, this research aims to reveal the substantial presence of all kinds of foreigners among the audiences in Belgian fin-de-siècle café-concerts. Their presence might explain the ignorance of both the Belgian press and academics⁷ towards fin-de-siècle café-concerts and brings to the fore Belgian fin-de-siècle cities' cosmopolitan attractiveness with an international dimension that is generally overlooked in Belgium and abroad, even to the present day. Belgian fin-de-siècle café-concerts played a major role in developing this attraction, indicated by the interconnection between Belgian migration data, café-concert networks, politics, urban planning and attractive initiatives such as international exhibitions, which was reflected in the international composition of its audience.

To date, the presence of foreigners in the audience composition of similar entertainment venues was mainly pointed out in studies by scholars such as Robert W. Snyder (1989), Robert C. Allen (1991), Richard Butsch (2000), Brooks McNamara (2002) and Robert M. Lewis (2003), regarding the American counterparts of the Belgian café-concerts or 'music-halls', the 'concert saloons' or 'vaudeville theatres'. These American studies paid special attention to German, Irish and Jewish immigrants, whereas academic studies regarding the British music halls (Bailey 1986 & 1994, Kift 1991, Maloney 2003) and French café-concerts (Condemi 1992), primarily approached the composition of the audience from the perspective of social class.

However, inspired by Michel Foucault's deconstruction of basic categories including 'homosexual', 'woman', 'race', and 'the worker' (1978), stringent audience distinctions based on race, gender and social class have been steadily criticized (Butsch 2003, 17). French art historian T. J. Clark already indicated, in his acclaimed publication *Painting of Modern Life* (1984), the emergence of so-called *nouvelles couches sociales* in the Parisian café-concerts, revealing a social alliance between lower and upper classes as the bourgeois capitalist consumption industry generated a new class of waitresses, clerks, shop assistants, artists et cetera, whose social mobility resulted in a rather transgressive identity.⁸ The transgressive features of the café-concerts, with their seductive decorations, space for carnivalesque amusement and discretion appeared to be the perfect habitat for these transgressive identities. Subsequently, this article indicates how Belgian fin-de-siècle café-concerts and their transgressive audiences set the stage for a permissive hedonistic atmosphere, stimulated by the presence of an international clientele.

Recently, the Scottish scholar Paul Maloney recognized similar cosmopolitan features in Glasgow's most iconic cultural venue in *The Britannia Panopticon Music Hall and Cosmopolitan Entertainment Culture* (2016), which indicates a growing recognition of the intercultural features in the studies of music hall, and which is the result of an impressive rise of research in historical tourism, travel studies, migration studies and urban history. The results of research within these disciplines into the development of the Belgian fin-de-siècle are invaluable for this article as they contextualize and embed the limited number of sources indicating foreign presence in Belgian café-concerts. The limitation of these sources demands a more creative exploration of data regarding audience composition. This data can be found, for example, in newspapers, contemporary literature and rare playbills, posters and postcards of the Belgian café-concert, safeguarded in private or rare collections such as the *Vliegende Bladen* or *Feuilles Volantes*. Combined with sources such as contemporary tourist information or guides to world exhibitions, only indirectly related to the café-concerts, a network of heterogeneous data concerning café-concert audiences can be gathered, enabling the transgressive nature of the composition of their audiences to be detected.⁹

In response to Richard Butsch's 2003 'Historical Research Agenda', this heterogeneous, interdisciplinary and qualitative approach makes it possible to represent audiences in a contextual and natural setting, rather than theoretically or 'laboratory-constructed' audiences. The approach in this article resembles the multi-method perspective on qualitative audience approaches of several Flemish research projects, such as 'The Enlightened City' (2005-2008) on historical media audiences of the twentieth century, within a 'New Cinema History' movement. In 'Triangulation in historical audience research: Reflections and experiences from a multi-methodological research project on cinema audiences in Flanders,' Daniël Biltreyst, Kathleen Lotze and Philippe Meers present this methodology as a combination of ethnographic methods, methods derived from political economy, socio-geography, and programming analysis.

Research results indicating the presence of social segregation based on class, race and political preferences in film culture in interbellum and post-war Flanders (2012, 708), illustrate, however, a distinction with the café-concert culture in fin-de-siècle Belgian cities, as will be indicated in the text below. Subsequently, this observation demands further interdisciplinary examination in the future. The focus of this article lies, however, on the identification of a growing international community – instead of local communities – in Belgian café-concerts; the article intends to demonstrate their interconnection with urban culture and ambitious nationhood, directed by Belgian politics and its economy.¹⁰

This article starts by outlining foreigners' attraction to Belgium and their socio-geography, based on recent historical research into the presence of foreigners in major Belgian cities and on innovative techniques, such as HGIS (Wouters 2017, 40), that enables researchers to trace dynamic geographical positions of foreigners in Belgium's 'rurbanity', a unique socio-geographic position on the continent, stimulating transnational mobility in the cities, separated from the working class in the countryside (De Block & Polasky, 328).

Furthermore, this research reveals the attraction of these foreigners towards Belgian café-concerts by highlighting three different viewing contexts: an attractive intercultural viewing context with a cosmopolitan and transgressive atmosphere, network and playbill, an event-induced viewing context with café-concerts organized in relation to attractive international events and a spatial viewing context, attracting foreigners with architecture and location designed to stimulate social encounters.

Consequently, this article intends to corroborate the fact that identities and practices are clearly not static across time and space, something again posited by Butsch in his 2003 'Historical Research Agenda'. This contribution is therefore proof that a 'search for identities' of café-concert visitors as well as Belgian cities and even the Belgian nation is something carried out in vain. It considers café-concerts as being the ultimate habitat of fin-de-siècle transgression in modernity, resulting in Berman's legendary quote from his book on the 'Experience of Modernity' (1982): 'All that is solid melts into air'.

1. Foreigners in 'le pays des kermesses'

Finally! Paris can stop feeling jealous of Brussels! We have our own Eden-Théâtre! Mabile, Frascati, Cremorne – they are dead – long live Eden! Hammam is outdated. Splendid windows, dazzling ceilings, sparkling foyers, wondrous staircases, giant palm trees; gypsies, horn killers, guitar players, exuberant bars where beautiful Spanish, Russian, Swedish, Italian and various other servants work ... And above all, the astonishing Italian ballet 'Excelsior'... more than enough attractions... All of Europe will be present at the Eden!

This quotation was the subtext of a sketch in *La Caricature: publication de la Librairie illustrée* on January 20, 1883. Similar traces of relief and, at the same time, clear suggestions of critique towards Brussels, can be seen in the *Zierikzeesche Courant* on November 27, 1880, when a similar venue was about to be built in Amsterdam:

Devout and worried fathers no longer have to fear the trips of their adult sons to dreadful Brussels when this magnificent enterprise is finalized, (...) However, one could ask oneself: What will become of this new enterprise? Why this urge for recreation and excess? Is it really necessary to turn Amsterdam into a little Brussels?

Both quotations reveal Brussels' international reputation when it comes to festivities, exuberance and splendor, attracting *l'Europe entière* (all of Europe). Its hedonism was notorious as revealed in the Dutch quotation. In *La Belgique* (1903), the famous art critic Camille Lemonnier characterizes Belgium as a country notorious for its hedonism at festivities such as the traditional local funfairs or *kermesses*. The author attributes this love

of uninhibited pleasure-seeking to its Burgundian background (1903, 14). The Parisian newspaper *Le Monde Illustré* echoes this observation by Lemonnier and characterized Belgium as being both ‘sick of parties and fun’ and the ‘land of the ‘kermesses’ (funfairs)’ on 28 August 1880, when reporting on the festivities of the country’s 50th anniversary of independence. This national jubilee, the ‘fifty years’ or ‘cinquantenaire’ festival, took place at a brand new park in Brussels, completed with monumental buildings to house a national exhibition and peripheral events (Janssens 2001).



Image 3

For King Leopold II, these festivities were a stage on which to present Belgium as a prosperous and attractive industrial superpower. At that time, the country followed the classic model of industrialization in Europe, together with England and Germany (Strikwerda 1997, 14). Belgium was established as a neutral state in order to buffer its surrounding competing powers. It was therefore regarded as a safe and liberal haven for political refugees like Karl Marx. With Brussels as the country’s capital and financial center, it was very well-positioned between the industrial Ruhr area of Germany, growing industrial cities of northern France such as Lille and Roubaix, and growing commercial centers such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, London

and Paris. To maximize this fruitful geographical location, Belgium’s well-developed railway system was one of the densest in the world, in which Brussels was an international node. It was connected to the port of Antwerp, Belgium’s main port and commercial center as well as the gateway to the Netherlands; connected to Ghent with its textile industry and to Bruges and from there to London; connected to Liège, encompassing a part of Belgium’s ‘industrial belt’ and from there to Germany; connected to Namur and from there to Luxembourg, Switzerland and Italy; connected to Mons and Charleroi and from there to Paris and the rest of France. Moreover, Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp had a unique bilingual position with both Dutch and French speaking inhabitants, which made these cities easier to access for people speaking both Romance and Germanic languages.

Its political, geographical and cultural position stimulated the arrival of a large number of foreigners to Brussels and Belgium, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Not less than 9% of the registered population of Brussels had a foreign nationality in 1880, which was (significantly) higher than in capitals in surrounding

countries (6.7% in Paris in 1910, 3% in London and 1.8% in Amsterdam) (Wouters 2017, 44). Antwerp for example, hosted 5,000 registered foreign inhabitants in 1850 and more than 8,000 in 1880 (Greefs & Winter 2016, 64). However, registered foreigners in Brussels counted only for twelve to 20% of all immigration in the city at that time (Wouters 2017, 42). Belgium received a large number of temporary foreigners as well: tourists and so-called travelling foreigners or *étrangers de passage*, who were attracted by temporary positions resulting from festivities or seasonal labor available in tourist accommodation; the result of an urban circular migration network. Consequently, Belgium was rarely a final destination but rather a stage or node in broader migration trajectories. In 1880 for instance, the majority of these foreigners in Brussels were French (42%), followed by German (27%) and Dutch people (11%) (Wouters 2017, 45). Besides these majorities, many more nationalities could be found in Belgium. Henri Nizet's novel *Bruxelles Rigole... Moeurs exotiques* (1883) for example, gives an account of a *colonie exotique* in the Brussels Eden-Théâtre with its Portuguese, Greek, Brazilian, Russian, American, Hungarian and Romanian people.

The majority of foreigners were male, single and young. Apart from that, these foreigners were characterized by diversity, depending largely on widely differing economic contexts in Belgian cities. Brussels, as a capital, attracted a large number of French-speaking white-collar workers, with its administrative services and skilled craftsmen involved in the production of luxury articles (Wouters 2017, 45). Industrial cities such as Liège attracted specialized English engineers, while the port of Antwerp attracted German businessmen connected to retail, finance and assurance services (Greefs & Devos 2000, 108 and 117), as well as international artists studying at the Antwerp Art Academy (Greefs & Winter 2016, 70). This Academy awarded a bursary to the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, funded by German businessmen (Pelckmans & Van Doorslaer 2000). During his stay, an account of Van Gogh's visit to the Antwerp café-concert Scala was documented in a letter to his brother Theo Van Gogh on December 6, 1885:



Image 4

Yesterday I was in the Scala café-concert, something like the Folies-Bergères — I thought it was tedious and hackneyed, of course, but — I amused myself looking at the audience. There were magnificent women's heads, really extraordinarily fine, among the worthy bourgeois folk in the back rows, and on the whole, I find what they say about Antwerp true indeed, that the women are good-looking here. Ah! I'll say it again, if I could only get the models I want! What leaves me quite cold are the masses of German girls, all manufactured from a single model one would say, that one sees at the café-concerts.¹¹

In spite of a male majority, this quotation reveals the presence of women at the café-concert, more specifically German and Antwerp girls. Female foreigners were often either prostitutes or governesses while domestic servants constituted the most common profession after prostitution.¹² In Belgium, these foreign prostitutes generally served French-speaking upper-class men (Wouters 2017, 45), and a specific group of domestic servants, the 'governesses', educated children in French-speaking bourgeois families to stimulate their language skills and the family's international relations (Verbruggen 2017, 33). A certain level of education was required to be able to mingle with the higher classes and resulted in transgressive identities, and this identifies the ambivalent status of many foreigners. A similar ambiguity characterized café-concerts like the Scala, Palais Indien or Eden, venues which these women probably visited. In fact, the gold and marble decoration was, in reality, nothing more than wooden and plaster trompe l'oeils. Other female foreigners worked as waitresses in hotels, restaurants or bars (Greefs & Winter 2016, 71) or on stage as artists,¹³ where they served upper-class men and women. Café-concerts sometimes mentioned their presence explicitly on their playbills with messages such as 'We speak English/Man spricht Deutsch' or 'Service fait par les dames' (Jonckheere 2017, 72 & 102).

Besides foreigners from abroad, some people were also perceived as being foreign if they were born outside the city they lived in, worked in or visited. In other words: Belgian people could also be considered foreign. Newspaper articles, for instance, used the label of *vreemdeling* or *étranger* for so-called 'provincials'.¹⁴ Like foreigners from abroad, they often belonged to the middle or higher classes, as they were mainly businessmen, tourists, military officers or students moving from one town to another for a limited amount of time. Military officers¹⁵ and students¹⁶ frequently attended café-concerts, as playbills and newspapers advertised special evenings for their colleagues. The presence of travelling businessmen (so-called 'voyageurs') and tourists at the café-concerts is seen when we consider that hotels often housed a café-concert in their facilities (Jonckheere 2017, 83), and is shown too by travel guides, such as the Baedeker, noting café-concert opportunities.¹⁷

A large portion of foreigners, tourists, white-collar-workers, businessmen et cetera, were middle or upper-class and lower-class foreigners often worked in environments where they came into contact with foreigners of a higher class: shipping companies, bars, hotels,

restaurants, shops, brothels and especially café-concerts. A transport and service retail sector stimulated the interaction between classes, nationalities and gender, resulting in *nouvelles couches sociales* (Clark 1984, 258). As indicated in the text below, the permissive atmosphere of the carnivalesque café-concerts with their international artists and audiences and female bar staff, further stimulated this transgression of identities.

But where did the local working class go when compared to French or British café-concerts/music-halls? Why are there no traces of the local working class in fin-de-siècle Belgian urban café-concerts? It is remarkable that Belgian cities such as Brussels, and Antwerp to a lesser extent, reveal evidence of so-called urban slums. Whereas the industrial revolution in Britain resulted in a rural exodus from the countryside to the city, a large part of the Belgian working class remained in the countryside. This was due to its dense public mobility network that at the same time served the international mobility of foreigners. It transformed every piece of land in Belgium into a potential building plot for laborers and facilitated daily transport to urban industries. For instance, more than 10,000 workers commuted between the countryside and the industrial city of Liège, and the labor market of Brussels, the capital city, extended into several provinces (De Block & Polasky 2011, 313). This phenomenon of ‘rurbanity’, introduced by De Meyer and Smets in 1982, reveals a carefully planned spatial ambiguity unifying the modern and traditional, the urban and rural and turned Belgium into an exception with regard to urban history. Rurbanity explains, at the same time, the remarkable absence of working-class people in Belgian café-concerts as they were mainly attracted to local activities in their own parish, such as the popular *kermesse*. Only provincial, national and international exhibitions succeeded to a certain extent in coaxing them out of their beloved parish or hometowns. However, foreigners didn’t identify with these local and traditional ‘kermesses’ and were attracted to more international cultural contexts such as the café-concerts.

2. Cultural Viewing Context: International hedonism

By the late nineteenth century, transportation systems as well as new communication technologies stimulated migration and international networks. As a result, Belgian café-concerts were increasingly embedded in transnational cultural networks as regards management and artists, resulting in well-known and attractive Babylonian environments for the increased number of foreigners in the cities. German entrepreneurs such as Poppelsdorf in the Brussels Walhalla and the Folies Bergère (Renieu 1928, 393), and the notorious Dutch conductor J.-J. Heetwinkel in the Antwerp Palais Indien (Convents 2000, 235), illustrate these transnational exchanges at management level. However, with Brussels being traditionally closely connected to Paris, French connections were obvious. For example Comy, who used to be the *administrateur* in the Parisian Folies Bergère, was the managing director of the Brussels Eden-Théâtre between 1880 and 1887. Furthermore, Messenger, the conductor of the Eden in 1880, used to be the director of the Paris Opéra (Renieu 1928, 230). In addition to French, German and Dutch connections, British people were involved as well. Barrasford, who was running an English music hall imperium at the

time, thus owned the Brussels Alhambra from 1907 to 1911, more specifically the ‘Royal Palace Théâtres Compagnie’, connecting halls in Paris, London and in fifteen cities elsewhere in Britain. Renieu noted how this enterprise ensured its artists a tour across more than 20 different halls (Renieu 1928, 457).

Specialized international professional magazines, such as *Der Artist*, *The Encore*, *The Music Hall and Theatre Review*, *Editeurs et Artistes*, *l’Artiste*, *L’Information*, *Journal des Théâtres et Concerts*, *Music-Hall Revue* and *Revue Hebdomadaire Belgo-Hollandaise* highlighted the latest trends in varieties and facilitated the exchange in international contacts of both impresarios, artists and management of variety venues in Belgium and abroad. *The music hall and theatre review* included, for example, the following publicity on the reverse of the review in June 1901: ‘clever people are wanted for all parts of the world’, followed by the names of ‘great managers’ such as B. F. Keith, F. F. Proctor and Hyde & Behman for American attractions, Harry Rickards for Australia, Frank de Jong for South Africa, M. Marchand at the Folies Bergère for Paris and Directors Dorn & Otto at the Winter Gardens for Berlin. Numerous names and contact details of Belgian and international halls, impresarios and artists were listed in the same magazine. An advertisement by the Beal Agents mentioned that they were agents in the Eldorado and Scala in Antwerp, the Eden-Théâtre, Théâtre de la bourse and Cirque royal in Brussels and the Eden-Théâtre and Tivoli Théâtre in Liège. Again, these sources illustrate the international value of attractions staged in Belgian café-concerts.¹⁸

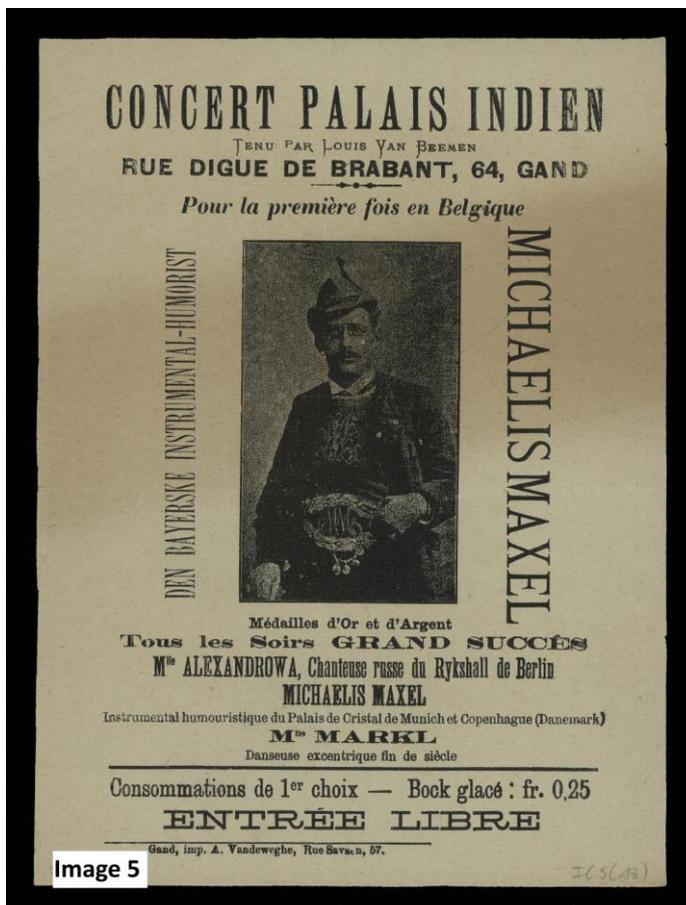


Image 5

It is no surprise therefore that famous international attractions were staged in Belgian café-concerts. French singer and star Yvette Guilbert¹⁹ as well as the Parisian quadrille with the infamous La Goulue, Nini-Patte-en-l’air Grille d’Egout, performed in Belgian café-concerts even before they reached their stardom at the Moulin Rouge.²⁰ Artists even crossed the Atlantic, as was the case with the American serpentine dancer Loïe Fuller²¹ and the trapeze artist Miss Leona Dare, who experienced a near-fatal fall in the Brussels Eden in 1881.²² In the Dutch Press, *De Goessche Courant* of 21 August, 1883, the Eden-Théâtre in Brussels was considered to be at the same level as Crystal Palace in London and the Parisian Folies Bergère when

announcing a forthcoming performance of a Hungarian Gypsy Band.

Except for songs, which were performed in different languages, café-concerts mainly staged highly sensational attractions which appealed to bodily senses rather than the mind. Crying and laughing with comedians, fearing for acrobats, being seduced by sensual singers and dancers or being deceived by illusionists: the entire body of both artist and spectator was engaged. Bodies, as opposed to words, spoke a universal language that was easy to understand by foreigners. These bodily encounters often resulted in seductive and transgressive sexual activities. The fact that Heetwinkel, the conductor of the Palais Indien, was suspected of 'commerce in white slaves', and that the alcohol supplier of the Eden-Théâtre in Brussels was arrested for dealing in prostitution, suggests the downside of these affluent café-concerts. This drawback corresponds both to the tactility of its hedonistic interiors and to the profile of the majority of foreigners: male, young and single. This was again noticed by Camille Lemonnier, as he claimed that it was mainly 'la jeunesse dorée' ('the gilded youth') who embraced the Antwerp café-concerts, often after a 'short and polite visit to the opera'. They did enjoy the songs performed three months earlier at the stage of the Parisian halls Les Ambassadeurs or l'Horloge, but they enjoyed even more the sequined mini dresses of the singers and trapeze artists. Lemonnier suggests with a wisp of irony that these distractive attractions were very popular among wealthy businessmen: 'A taste for distraction exists among all classes but mainly among businessmen, whose leisure time is so restricted' (1888, 147). However, not all visitors were single young men, as illustrated by this quotation in a Dutch newspaper, *Het Weekblad van Haarlemmermeer* on 24 December 1880, commenting on threats of inaugurating an 'Eden' in Amsterdam, similar to the one in Brussels:

All will be decent in the beginning. The threat of fear will be avoided – but soon things will run like they did in Brussels. An increasing number of Nymphs will act impudently and then... poor mother, keeping a watchful eye on your ill child, poor women, she will be waiting for you, in vain, in your salon, for her faithful (?) husband!

In 1886, after the bankruptcy of the company that funded the construction and exploitation of the Eden-Théâtre in Brussels, the city took on full ownership having been a shareholder previously. Nevertheless, Eden's poor reputation was one of the reasons to shut it down only four years later, despite an English company²³ and an important Dutch brewery²⁴ being interested in investing and exploiting it. Countering a notorious reputation wasn't only something undertaken by the Eden-Théâtre of both Brussels and Ghent (Jonckheere 2007, 118). Even Barrasford's Alhambra was transformed in 1909, only three years after its opening, into a 'family theatre' resulting in single women being banned from it. Subsequently, however, its popularity waned and two years later the curtain came down over Barrasford's stage in Brussels for the last time (Renieu 1928, 457). This trend reflects very closely the marketing efforts by drama theatres, variety venues and early cinemas in

the US from the mid nineteenth century to the 1920s to systematically de-masculinize and pursue respectability.²⁵

3. Event-induced viewing context: foreigners' economic value

The international dimension of the café-concerts attracted many foreigners. They were therefore often closely intertwined with international events. The inauguration of the Eden-Théâtre in Brussels in 1880, for example, took place in the shadow of the Cinquantenaire festivities. During these festivities another café-concert was erected for this special occasion in one of the two major halls in the park. This 'Théâtre de Bruxelles-Kermesse' was a temporary enterprise under the direction of Ambreville, a famous comedian from Brussels (Renieu 1928, 484). National and international exhibitions in the capital and nearby cities such as Ghent and Antwerp brought about the establishment of new café-concerts. These events attracted large numbers of international people. One American observer commented that 'all the world went to Brussels' attracted by the world exhibition in 1910, to which 27 countries contributed (Laqua 2013, 1-2 & 31). Foreigners were also attracted to these exhibitions by the opportunities created to work in new or temporary hotels, restaurants, pubs and café-concerts at the exhibition ground or in the city (Caestecker 2000, xiv-17). Thus the Brussels world exhibition in 1897 stimulated the opening of the 'Olympia-Bourse' and 'La Gaîté du Nord', and the one in 1910 the opening of café-concerts 'Les Folies-Bergère', 'Le Kursaal' and 'le Vieux-Dusseldorf'.²⁶ The world exhibition in Antwerp in 1885 most likely generated the advent of new café-concerts such as the 'Eden', 'Scala', 'Le Palais Indien' and 'Café-Arabe' and, on the occasion of the world exhibition in Ghent in 1913, a dance hall transformed into café-concert called 'Wintergarten' (Jonckheere 2017, 131).

Some of these event-induced café-concerts outside the exhibition terrain were highly ephemeral and lost popularity or even disappeared shortly after the end of the exhibition. While the Brussels Eden-Théâtre made a huge profit of 200,000 francs in 1880, it faced financial problems only one year later (Renieu 1928, 231). Artists were no longer properly paid and the venue began to show significant infrastructural problems when its main chandelier²⁷ and plaster ceilings fell down.²⁸ Nevertheless, the Eden-Théâtre in Brussels maintained a certain attraction after its peak year in 1880, as several Belgian cities opened their own 'Eden' in the following years: Ghent opened one in 1883 (Jonckheere 2017, 69), Antwerp in 1884²⁹ and Charleroi in 1885 (Mardaga 1994, 602). *La Flandre Libérale* reported on 17 October 1883 the presence of several dignitaries at the inauguration of the Ghent Eden-Théâtre and quoted: 'At last, Ghent is acting like the others: it has its own Eden-Théâtre (...) One of those modern curiosities attractive for foreigners.' This quotation emphasizes the importance of café-concerts when it came to the marketing of cities, as they attracted foreigners and brought wealth to the city. They were part of a larger network of strategies that illustrated the emergence of city marketing policies in Belgium.³⁰ The following quotation in *Gazette van Gent* on 26 March 1884 demonstrates how the presence of foreigners in the city was associated with progress by the end of the nineteenth century:

Attracting foreign visitors to a city appears to be one of the best options of bringing prosperity to a city (...). It appears that city governments have an obligation to make sacrifices accordingly, to the extent that resources allow, to give the city as much as possible an attractive view, which encourages people to visit it, or causes them to decide to settle there.

Being aware of the economic added value of foreigners, cities started to stimulate associations such as 'Bruxelles-Attractions' (1886)³¹ and 'Gand-Attractions' (1895)³² with the following objectives:

To attract as many foreigners as possible (...) to encourage prosperity and to benefit and expand retail trade in particular; to combine business with pleasure during foreigners' stays and to introduce them to the arts, industry and trading specialties.³³

Members of the Bruxelles-Attractions association included Charles Buls, the mayor of Brussels, and managers of prominent hotels, cafés and restaurants (Vandamme & Verhoeven 2018, 226). These associations organized public concerts, balls and contests in Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp in order to make the city as attractive as possible to foreigners. Bruxelles-Attractions was, for example, connected to the emergence of a new concept of entertainment in Brussels, the 'Pôle Nord/Palais d'Eté'. This venue, which opened its doors in 1894, offered an ice rink during the winter and, during the summer, a café-concert with a refreshing 'summer garden' (Renieu 1928, 265).



Image 6

Buls had already developed this idea in 1890 and the prospect of a new luxurious café-concert in the city stimulated the city council to demolish the Eden-Théâtre.³⁴

Local attraction associations were also closely connected to international exhibitions and supported the extension of a hospitality industry that both attracted and engaged many foreigners. Supporting a hospitality industry countered the urban economic malaise of the 1880s. The city council claimed in 1890 that a better economic

situation finally gave them the opportunity 'to stop closing our eyes to what happened in the bars of the Eden.'³⁵ Nevertheless, the city council continued supporting attractive venues for foreigners in Brussels, given its share in the construction of the Palais d'Eté in

1894. The relation between city councils, café-concerts and attractive associations illustrates, in addition to matters of local or regional pride (Laqua 2013, 32), the mutual competition between Belgian cities (Vandamme & Verhoeven 2018, 224). Eventually, a non-governmental organization, *La Ligue Belge de Propagande pour Attirer les Visiteurs Etrangers* ('Belgian propaganda league to attract foreign visitors'), promoted Belgium as a tourist destination from 1908 onwards (Vandamme & Verhoeven 2018, 227) and subsequently encouraged foreigners to visit Belgian cities, exhibitions and at the same time their café-concerts.

4. Spatial Viewing Context: stimulating social encounters in space and place

Apart from an international network, a permissive atmosphere, a close connection to international events or international presence in city centers, café-concerts attracted foreigners through attractive architecture and interesting locations. An abundance of lighting in the auditorium, mirrors, galleries and a foyer, all facilitated social encounters in Belgian café-concerts and consequently the social mobility audience members.³⁶ Seeing, and being seen, were crucial at the café-concert. The above-mentioned quotation by Van Gogh, commenting on Antwerp and German girls in the audience, illustrates both the importance of women and of the audience adjacent to the stage.

Encounters between members from a different social background took place in intimate and discrete places, enclosed by palm trees and grottoes in winter and summer gardens. Bars, tables and alcohol further instigated encounters. A gathering of daring businessmen, collaborators at exhibitions, artists, sailors, shop assistants, waitresses, governesses et cetera, often foreigners working in urban circular migration networks, found in café-concerts a place to network and build both intimate and professional relationships. The space itself stimulated the possibility of transgression, making it possible to either climb or descend the social ladder. This suggests that café-concerts served both as a place for pleasure-seeking, as well as for developing international business and private networks. For example, the Persian Shah was taken to the Antwerp Scala on 25 June 1889, before visiting the mines and steel industry in the southern part of Belgium, accompanied by the Belgian King Leopold.³⁷

In addition to space, place was also a factor in promoting social encounters between foreigners in Belgian café-concerts. Many of the café-concerts were located in the vicinity of railway stations, where numerous hotels for travelling foreigners were situated.³⁸ Other café-concerts, however, were located in city centers, where permanently registered foreigners lived (Wouters 2017, 46) and where tourists and exhibition visitors gathered in the evening. Finally, a third type of café-concerts were those located in recently transformed residential areas. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, public limited companies, generally supported by the city council,³⁹ transformed so-called popular and unhygienic areas into Hausmannian projects and turned city grounds into speculative projects (Bijzonder Bestemmingsplan 2004, 11).

For example, in the late 1870s, the Notre-Dame-aux-Neiges quarter on the edge of the city center and close to the Royal Palace of Brussels was transformed from a popular neighborhood into a residential area, comprising residential houses, hotels, a shopping gallery, a public bath, a stone circus, a theatre and the café-concert Eden-Théâtre (Bijzonder Bestemmingsplan 2004, 11). These new places of consumption and pleasure were let by the public limited company of the Notre-Dame-aux-Neiges neighborhood, founded by Kuhnen, architect of the Eden-Théâtre (Renieu 1928, 230). The construction works were executed by the 'Compagnie Immobilière de Belgique' (C.I.B.) with King Leopold II as one of the main shareholders (C.I.B. 1963, 12-14). At the same time, the C.I.B. was involved in other similar transformation projects, such as the redevelopment of 'Antwerp South' and the Ghent 'Zollikofer de Vigneplan', which again included modern consumption places such as several café-concerts.⁴⁰

The Brussels Eden-Théâtre, which was the most ambitious café-concert in Belgium (and, apparently, at some point, even in the world), was not a grass roots project; instead, it was clearly promoted by the city as well as by King Leopold II albeit indirectly. This venue was perfectly suited to the festivities of his nation's fiftieth anniversary. The splendor of the Eden-Théâtre was conceived of as a reflection the young Belgian nation's wealth and novelty. However, when these festivities had ended, these establishments conveyed something else altogether: a seductive and decadent nation, with great international ambitions yet desperately trying to hide its increasingly costly shortcomings. In other words, the spaces and places of the café-concerts also reflected the search for the identities of its divergent cities and of the nation as a whole.

Conclusion

This article has revealed the substantial presence of all kinds of foreigners among the audiences in Belgian café-concerts. Thanks to its unique geographic position, a dense transportation network, liberal urban and national politics and a tradition of carnivalesque festivities, Belgian cities were an ideal operational base for all kinds of foreigners with café-concerts as a favorite gathering point. Attracted by their location, architecture, international artists, international management, non-linguistic amusement and a permissive atmosphere, café-concerts were popular among foreigners visiting or working in Belgium, for both short and longer periods.

Politicians understood the value of café-concerts and their attraction to foreigners and turned a blind eye to their easy virtue as long as they helped to counter the urban economic malaise of the 1880s. The presence of foreigners in the city stimulated prosperity by developing a lucrative service retail sector consisting of hotels, restaurants, bars and café-concerts, and increasing the opportunities to participate in a booming international trade thanks to globalization and colonization. Café-concerts were consequently part of a marketing strategy in urban redevelopment and the international positioning of a young and ambitious liberal nation, and therefore also closely interwoven with international activities,

development projects and associations for attracting foreigners, conscientiously directed by local and national leaders.

Whereas local communities were absent from Belgian café-concerts, the international community was very much present, however hard to define because of their transgressive identities which challenged nationality, class and gender. Foreign white-collar workers, businessmen, dignitaries, military officers and students met foreign prostitutes, waitresses, shop assistants, artists, servants, sailors et cetera in these café-concerts where professional or intimate relationships were built, amid an atmosphere of hedonism and discretion that stimulated social encounters.

The absence of a local or clearly defined audience and a notorious hedonistic atmosphere probably played a role in erasing the fin-de-siècle café-concert from Belgian history for decades. Even though further research is needed on the development and consequences of transgressive relationships in fin-de-siècle Belgium, exploitation of lower-class women by higher-class male visitors and the position of the café-concert as a professional network space, this article has demonstrated the overlooked position of Belgian café-concerts and their position within a young nation with expanding cities and international ambitions. Or to rephrase the words of the Brussels Mayor Charles Buisson, it is time 'to stop closing our eyes to what happened in the bars of the Eden.'

Biographical note:

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List of images:

1. Transvers section of the Brussels Eden-Théâtre, 1879, City Archive Brussels.
2. Interior of the Brussels Eden-Théâtre, s.d., Archives d'Architecture Moderne Brussels.
3. Sketch in *La Caricature: publication de la Librairie Illustrée*, January 10, 1883, BnF.
4. Postcard of the Antwerp Scala, s.d., Private Collection.
5. Flyer of the Ghent Concert Palais Indien, s.d., University Library Ghent,
6. Summergarden at the Brussels Palais d'Été, s.d., Archives d'Architecture Moderne Brussels.

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Notes:

¹ Renieu mentions 1876 as the year when the café-concert Eldorado was inaugurated and the year that many more café-concerts opened their doors in Brussels. See Lionel Renieu, *Histoire des*

Théâtres de Bruxelles. Depuis leur origine jusqu'à ce jour. (Bruxelles: Editions Culture et Civilisation, (1928) 1974) 194. For more information on the dates and addresses of other Belgian cities, see Evelien Jonckheere, *Kijklust en Sensatiezucht: een geschiedenis van revue en variété* (Antwerpen: Meulenhof/Manteau, 2009).

² See search results on 'music-hall' in the Belgian digital newspaper database Belgica Press.

³ *La Caricature: publication de la Librairie illustrée*, January 10, 1883.

⁴ *The Era*, February 19, 1898.

⁵ *Zierikzeesche courant*, November 27, 1880.

⁶

https://archieff.brussel.be/Colossus/BulletinsCommunaux/Bulletins/Documents/Bxl_1890_Tome_I1_Part_5.pdf.

⁷ My PhD dissertation was the first academic monograph dedicated to the phenomenon of 'varieties' ('café-concert' and 'théâtre des variétés' in Belgium: Evelien Jonckheere, *Aandacht! Aandacht! Aandacht En Verstrooiing In Het Gentse Grand Théâtre, Café-Concert En Variététheater, 1880-1914* (Leuven: Universitaire pers, 2017).

⁸ T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984) 258: The notion 'nouvelles couches sociales' was probably used for the first time by Leon Gambetta in a public speech in 1872 in Grenoble.

⁹ De 'Vliegende Bladen' or 'Feuilles Volantes' are a special collection in the Ghent University Library. It consists of thousands of bourgeois ephemeralia collected by librarian Ferdinand Vanderhaeghen (1830-1913).

¹⁰ It has become a commonplace to state that cinema, modernization and urbanization are connected, especially since the so-called 'spatial turn' in cultural studies.

¹¹ Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, Antwerp, Sunday, December 6, 1885. Br. 1990: 549 | CL: 438 Digitized at <http://www.vangoghletters.org/vg/search/simple?term=antwerp> (last consultation February 15, 2019).

¹² 1880: Domestic servants (60% in Antwerp compared to 12% in Brussels) and prostitution (22% in Brussels compared to 6% in Antwerp): in Wouters, 'Migrants in the midst of city life,' 45 and Greefs and Winter, 'Alone and Far from Home,' 71.

¹³ See, e.g., protagonists in Charles Nizet's novel.

¹⁴ *Gazette van Gent*, March 26, 1884; See also a collection of newspaper articles on foreigners in Folder 'Gand-Attractions', *Collection Vliegende Bladen*, University Library Ghent: BIB.G.016413/1.

¹⁵ Lemonnier, *La Belgique*, 166.

¹⁶ *Flandre Libérale*, March 10, 1891.

¹⁷ See for example Karel Baedeker, *Belgique et Hollande. Manuel du voyageur* (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1881) 9.

¹⁸ *The Era*, March 6, 1886. For more information on European transnational theatrical networks, see Nic Leonhardt, 'Transatlantic Theatrical Traces: Oceanic Trade Routes and Globe-Trotting Amusement Explorers,' *The Passing Show* 30 (2013/14): 2-23. (1900-1929).

¹⁹ *Journal de Bruxelles*, October 9, 1890.

²⁰ Renieu, *Histoire des théâtres de Bruxelles*, 232.

²¹ *Journal de Bruxelles*, July 18, 1894: performance in the Brussels Alhambra-Eden; *Journal de Bruxelles*, November 10, 1899: performance in the Palais d'été in 1899.

²² *Journal de Bruxelles*, December 30, 1881.

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https://archieff.brussel.be/Colossus/BulletinsCommunaux/Bulletins/Documents/Bxl_1890_Tome_I2_Part_1.pdf.

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https://archieff.brussel.be/Colossus/BulletinsCommunaux/Bulletins/Documents/Bxl_1890_Tome_I1_Part_5.pdf.

²⁵ See, e.g., Butsch 'Bowery B'hoys and Matinee Ladies: The Re-gendering of Nineteenth Century American Theater Audiences,' *American Quarterly*, 46:3, September, 1994, 374-405; and Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences from Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge University Press, 2000)

²⁶ See Renieu, *Histoire des Théâtres de Bruxelles* for detailed information on each of these Brussels halls.

²⁷ *Amersfoortsche Courant*, March 22, 1881.

²⁸ *Zierikzeesche Courant*, June 8, 1887.

²⁹ *De Koophandel*, February 22, 1884.

³⁰ See Ilya Vandamme and Gerrit Verhoeven, 'How to sell a city? Urban tourism and the emergence of city marketing policies in Belgium (c. 1880-c.1980)' in: Brecht Dewilde (ed.) *Entrepreneurs, institutions and government intervention in Europe (13th-20th centuries). Essays in honour of Erik Aerts* (Brussels: ASP, 2018). For more international information on the importance of attractive shows in modern cities see Stephen V. Ward, *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities 1850-2000*. (London: Routledge, 1998).

³¹ Folder 'Bruxelles-Attractions', *Collection Vliegende Bladen*, University Library Ghent: BIB.VLBL.HFI.B.143.03.

³² Folder 'Gand-Attractions', *Collection Vliegende Bladen*, University Library Ghent: BIB.G.016413/1.

³³ Folder 'Gand-Attractions', *Collection Vliegende Bladen*, University Library Ghent: BIB.G.016413/1.

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https://archieff.brussel.be/Colossus/BulletinsCommunaux/Bulletins/Documents/Bxl_1890_Tome_I1_Part_5.pdf.

³⁶ *La Flandre Libérale*, October 17, 1883.

³⁷ *Le Soir*, 30 June 1889 and *Het Handelsblad*, 22 June 1889

³⁸ See for example *Indicateur général des Railways Belges: Répertoire des principaux hotels, restaurants et cafés* (1899) in: 'Bruxelles-Attractions' in BIB.VLBL.HFI.B.143.03.

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https://archieff.brussel.be/Colossus/BulletinsCommunaux/Bulletins/Documents/Bxl_1880_Tome_I1_Part_9.pdf.

⁴⁰ See Jonckheere, "'Gand a fini par faire comme les autres. » De opkomst van het café-concert en variététheater in de laatnegentiende-eeuwse Gentse "spektakelmaatschappij"' *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* 20, 2 (2017): 82 and Ronny De Meyer and Lut Prins, *Het Zuid (Antwerpen 1875-1890): Architectuur en maatschappij* (Schoten: Druk. Continental, 1993).