

Historically Informed Gardening

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Who is in the garden? Part II

If we set out to visit the great gardens of the 17th and 18th centuries, some figures familiar to musicians will soon appear. At Versailles, perhaps the most influential garden of its time was created to support the vision of Louis XIV of himself as the Absolute Monarch. Originally the site of a modest hunting lodge, Versailles was a far from ideal spot to create a paradise on earth. It was low-lying and swampy, lacking the height to convey water by gravity to feed the splendid fountains. A lackey had to run in front of the king on his perambulations to



Louis XIV in his seminal role of Apollo in Ballet de la Nuit 1653 *

signal when to turn the fountains on and off when he turned the corner, as the gravity-fed system was unable to support more than one at a time in all its glory. However, these difficulties merely served to demonstrate the king's power over nature, part of his own brand of garden rhetoric used for political ends. The emblem of the sun, personified by the king himself on stage, was used in the garden to anchor the very structure of the garden, stretching as it did to the west, to the horizon. The axis of power stretched from the king's terrace to eternity, dominating the whole

* (Gouache sketch by Henri Gasse) Bibliothèque Nationale - Paris, France



Louis XIV's 'Sun King' symbol on main courtyard gate at entrance of castle of Versailles

scene, making any limits to his kingdom impossible to imagine. Garden rhetoric indeed!

Louis' life-time gardener Le Nôtre had been poached from his previous employer Le Fouquet, who had dared to up-stage the king in garden terms at Vaux-le-Vicomte. The opening party for the gardens and château nearing completion at Vaux featured a lavish banquet accompanied by entertainments from Lully and Molière. Louis never forgave his finance minister for this breach of decorum and the unfortunate man spent the rest of his life languishing in jail, while the master garden designer Le Nôtre was head-hunted to create Versailles.

At Versailles alterations and developments were continuous and on-going. Elaborate expensive schemes would be started, then abandoned when Louis changed his mind. New garden features, outdoor theatres surrounded by fountains and green architectural features, menageries, labyrinths, grottoes, walks and statuary



Louis XIV (1638-1715), by Hyacinthe Rigaud (1701)



Grotte de Thétis - venue for royal musical garden entertainment

came and went as his schemes progressed. The Grotte de Thétis was the scene for many a royal musical garden entertainment. Unfortunately this delightfully elaborate garden structure was demolished to make way for La Chapelle, but surviving prints show a perfect setting for royal divertissements.



La Chapelle - replaced Grotte de Thétis as the garden of Versailles went through continual development

English reaction against the Absolutism of French garden design came early in the 18th century. If Louis had consulted 'the genius of the place' at Versailles there might have been nothing but a bog garden. The English 'landscape' movement worked with nature, not against it. You could call them the first truly green gardeners. Using art to temper the natural folds of a valley or create a serpentine lake



Château de Versailles, France