Luxurious harmonies: The Bon Marché Employee Concert Venue as a Site of Social Mobility
Pamela Feo (Boston University)

In Paris during the fin de siècle, on one or two nights of the year, approximately 6,000 finely-dressed audience members could be found in attendance at a special benefit concert. A chandelier glittered above, and the programs often featured famous guest artists. The venue, however, was not one of the highly-esteemed musical institutions of the city. It was the Bon Marché, Paris’s premiere luxury department store.

In Michael B. Miller’s work with the Bon Marché archives, he provides an in-depth study of the history of the store. In particular, he elucidates how its paternalistic model cultivated a sense of employee loyalty to the organization, while also enrolling employees into bourgeois values of respectability. In her book Composing the Citizen, Jann Pasler introduced the Bon Marché archival materials to musicological study. Her work focuses on documents such as concert programs, images, handbooks, and more, as she explores the employee instrumental and choral program. Pasler examines this program as a function of French national edification efforts, which sought to develop the knowledge and tastes of the working classes and thereby elevate their social and cultural practices to align with middle-class values.

In my paper, I bring the Bon Marché music program into the discourse of spatial theory by examining the store concert venue as a site of supposed social mobility, thereby building upon Miller and Pasler’s work by introducing new questions about the social and governmental aims of the store and its programs. I draw from Michel de Certeau’s conceptualization of the “fragmented” city and Henri Lefebvre’s model of his ideal unified city, positing that the store is formulated as belonging to the latter. Specifically, I show that de Certeau’s idea of subversive “tactic” versus dominant “strategy” is complicated by the Bon Marché’s music program, which functions as both. I contrast the store concerts with the cabarets of Montmartre, which I demonstrate to be fragmented, tactical sites, even as they remain the realm of the lower classes. In doing so, I argue that the conception of Paris as a unified city promises social mobility, but spaces of performance reveal the more textured reality of cultural practice acting as “strategy” cloaked in the guise of opportunity.