

### *Medical Music*

IN the Philosophical Magazine for May, 1806, we find that “several of the medical literati on the continent are at present engaged in making inquiries and experiments upon the *influence of music in the cure of diseases.*” The learned Dusaux is said to lead the band of this new tribe of *amateurs* and *cognoscenti*.

The subject having excited my curiosity, though I since have found that it is no new discovery, the reader ought to receive indulgently the profit of my discoveries; all which I do not wish to pass on him for more than they are worth.

There is a curious article in Dr. Burney’s History of Music, “On the Medicinal Powers attributed to Music by the Ancients,” which he derived from the learned labours of a modern physician, M. Burette, who doubtless could play a tune to, as well as prescribe one to his patient. He conceives that music can relieve the pains of the sciatica, and that independent of the greater or less skill of the musician; by flattering the ear, and diverting the attention, and occasioning certain vibrations of the nerves, it can remove those obstructions which occasion this disorder. M. Burette, and many modern physicians and philosophers, have believed that music has the power of affecting the mind, and the

whole nervous system, so as to give a temporary relief in certain diseases, and even a radical cure. De Mairan, Bianchini, and other respectable names, have pursued the same career. But the ancients record miracles!

Some years ago, the Rev. Dr. Mitchell of Brighthelmstone wrote a dissertation, “*De Arte Mendendi, apud Priscos Musices ope atque Carminum,*” printed for J. Nichols, 1783. He writes under the assumed name of Michael Gaspar; but whether this learned dissertator be grave or jocular, more than one critic has not been able to resolve me. I suspect it to be a satire on the parade of learning of certain German *eruditi*, who prove any point by the weakest analogies and the most fanciful conceits. The following summary will convey an idea of this dissertation.

Amongst barbarous or half-civilized nations, diseases have been generally attributed to the influence of evil spirits. The depression of mind which is generally attendant on sickness, and the delirium accompanying certain stages of disease, seem to have been considered as especially denoting the immediate influence of a demon. The effect of music in raising the energies of the mind, or what we commonly call animal spirits, was obvious to early observation. Its power of attracting

strong attention may in some cases have appeared to affect even those who laboured under a considerable degree of mental disorder. The accompanying depression of mind was considered as a part of the disease, perhaps rightly enough, and music was prescribed as a remedy to remove the symptom, when experience had not ascertained the probable cause. Homer, whose heroes exhibit high passions, but not refined manners, represents the Grecian army as employing music to stay the raging of the plague. The Jewish nation, in the time of King David, appear not to have been much further advanced in civilization; accordingly we find David employed in his youth to remove the mental derangement of Saul by his harp. The method of cure was suggested as a common one in those days, by Saul's servants; and the success is not mentioned as a miracle. Pindar, with poetic licence, speaks of Æsculapius healing acute disorders with soothing songs; but Æsculapius, whether man or deity, or between both, is a physician of the days of barbarism and fable. Pliny scouts the idea that music should affect real bodily injury, but quotes Homer on the subject; mentions Theophrastus as suggesting a tune for the cure of the hip gout, and Cato, as entertaining a fancy that it had a good effect when limbs were out of joint, and that Varro thought it

good for the gout. Aulus Gellius cites a work of Theophrastus, which recommends music as a specific for the bite of a viper. Boyle and Shakespeare mention the effects of music *super vesicam*. Kircher's "Musurgia," and Swinburne's Travels, relate the effects of music on those who are bitten by the tarantula. Sir W. Temple seems to have given credit to the stories of the power of music over diseases.

The ancients indeed record miracles; at least none in "the golden legend" appear to be more so than the tales they relate of the medicinal powers of music. A fever is removed by a song, and deafness is cured by a trumpet, and the pestilence is chased away by the sweetness of an harmonious lyre. That deaf people can hear best in a great noise is a fact alleged by some moderns, in favour of the ancient story of curing deafness by a trumpet. Dr. Willis tells us, says Dr. Burney, of a lady who could hear only while a drum was beating, insomuch that her husband, the account says, hired a drummer as her servant, in order to enjoy the pleasure of her conversation.

Music and the sounds of instruments, says the lively Vigneul de Marville, contribute to the health of the body and the mind; they assist the circulation of the blood, they dissipate vapours, and open the vessels, so

that the action of perspiration is freer. He tells a story of a person of distinction, who assured him, that once being suddenly seized by violent illness, instead of a consultation of physicians, he immediately called a band of musicians, and their violins played so well in his inside, that his bowels became perfectly in tune, and in a few hours were harmoniously becalmed. I once heard a story of Farinelli the famous singer, who was sent for to Madrid, to try the effect of his magical voice on the king of Spain. His majesty was buried in the profoundest melancholy; nothing could raise an emotion in him; he lived in a total oblivion of life; he sat in a darkened chamber, entirely given up to the most distressing kind of madness. The physicians ordered Farinelli at first to sing in an outer room; and for the first day or two this was done, without any effect on the royal patient. At length it was observed, that the king, awakening from his stupor, seemed to listen; on the next day tears were seen starting in his eyes; the day after he ordered the door of his chamber to be left open—and at length the perturbed spirit entirely left our modern Saul, and the *medicinal voice* of Farinelli effected what no other medicine could.

I now prepare to give the reader some *facts* which he may consider as a trial of credulity.—Their authorities

are however not contemptible.—Naturalists assert that animals and birds, as well as “knotted oaks,” as Congreve informs us, are sensible to the charms of music. This may serve as an instance:—An officer was confined in the Bastile. He begged the governor to permit him the use of his lute, to soften, by the harmonics of his instrument, the rigours of his prison. At the end of a few days, this modern Orpheus, playing on his lute, was greatly astonished to see frisking out of their holes great numbers of mice; and descending from their woven habitations, crowds of spiders, who formed a circle about him, while he continued breathing his soul-subduing instrument. His surprise was at first so great, that he was petrified with astonishment; when having ceased to play, the assembly, who did not come to see his person, but to hear his instrument, immediately broke up. As he had a great dislike to spiders, it was two days before he ventured again to touch his instrument. At length, having conquered, for the novelty of his company, his dislike of them, he recommenced his concert, when the assembly was by far more numerous than at first; and in the course of farther time, he found himself surrounded by a hundred *musical amateurs*. Having thus succeeded in attracting this company, he treacherously contrived to get rid of them at his will.

For this purpose he begged the keeper to give him a cat, which he put in a cage, and let loose at the very instant when the little hairy people were most entranced by the Orphean skill he displayed.

The Abbé Olivet has described an amusement of Pellisson during his confinement in the Bastille, which consisted in feeding a spider, which he discovered forming its web in the corner of the small window. For some time he placed his flies at the edge, while his valet, who was with him, played on a bagpipe: little by little, the spider used itself to distinguish the sound of the instrument, and issued from its hole to run and catch its prey. Thus calling it always by the same sound, and placing the flies at a still greater distance, he succeeded, after several months, to drill the spider by regular exercise, so that it at length never failed appearing at the first sound to seize on the fly provided for it, even on the knees of the prisoner.

Marville has given us the following curious anecdote on this subject. He says, that doubting the truth of those who say it is natural for us to love music, especially the sound of instruments, and that beasts themselves are touched with it, being one day in the country I inquired into the truth; and, while a man was playing on the trump marine, made my observations on a cat,

a dog, a horse, an ass, a hind, cows, small birds, and a cock and hens, who were in a yard, under a window on which I was leaning. I did not perceive that the cat was the least affected, and I even judged, by her air, that she would have given all the instruments in the world for a mouse, sleeping in the sun all the time; the horse stopped short from time to time before the window, raising his head up now and then, as he was feeding on the grass; the dog continued for above an hour seated on his hind legs, looking steadfastly at the player; the ass did not discover the least indication of his being touched, eating his thistles peaceably; the hind lifted up her large wide ears, and seemed very attentive; the cows slept a little, and after gazing, as though they had been acquainted with us, went forward; some little birds who were in an aviary, and others on the trees and bushes, almost tore their little throats with singing; but the cock, who minded only his hens, and the hens, who were solely employed in scraping a neighbouring dunghill, did not show in any manner that they took the least pleasure in hearing the trump marine.

A modern traveller assures us, that he has repeatedly observed in the island of Madeira that the lizards are attracted by the notes of music, and that he has assembled a number of them by the powers of his instrument.

He tells us, also, that when the negroes catch them, for food, they accompany the chase by whistling some tune, which has always the effect of drawing great numbers towards them. Stedman, in his expedition to Surinam, describes certain sibyls among the negroes, who, among several singular practices, can charm or conjure down from the tree certain serpents, who will wreath about the arms, neck, and breast of the pretended sorceress, listening to her voice. The sacred writers speak of the charming of adders and serpents; and nothing, says he, is more notorious than that the eastern Indians will rid the houses of the most venomous snakes, by charming them with the sound of a flute, which calls them out of their holes. These anecdotes, which may startle some, seem to be fully confirmed by Sir William Jones, in his curious dissertation on the musical modes of the Hindus.

“After food, when the operations of digestion and absorption give so much employment to the vessels, that a temporary state of mental repose must be found, especially in hot climates, essential to health, it seems reasonable to believe that a few agreeable airs, either heard or played without effort, must have all the good effects of sleep, and none of its disadvantages; *putting the soul in tune*, as Milton says, for any

subsequent exertion; an experiment often successfully made by myself. I have been assured by a credible eye-witness, that two wild antelopes used often to come from their woods to the place where a more savage beast, Sirajudaulah, entertained himself with concerts, and that they listened to the strains with an appearance of pleasure, till the monster, in whose soul there was no music, shot one of them to display his archery. A learned native told me, that he had frequently seen the most venomous and malignant snakes leave their holes upon hearing tunes on a flute, which, as he supposed, gave them peculiar delight. An intelligent Persian declared he had more than once been present, when a celebrated lutenist, surnamed Bulbul (i.e. the nightingale), was playing to a large company, in a grove near Schiraz, where he distinctly saw the nightingales trying to vie with the musician, sometimes warbling on the trees, sometimes fluttering from branch to branch, as if they wished to approach the instrument, at length dropping on the ground in a kind of ecstasy, from which they were soon raised, he assured me, by a change in the mode.”

Jackson of Exeter, in reply to the question of Dryden, “What passion cannot music raise or quell?” sarcastically returns, “What passion *can* music raise or quell?”

Would not a savage, who had never listened to a musical instrument, feel certain emotions at listening to one for the first time? But civilized man is, no doubt, particularly affected by *associations of ideas*, as all pieces of national music evidently prove.

The RANS DES VACHES, mentioned by Rousseau in his Dictionary of Music, though without anything striking in the composition, has such a powerful influence over the Swiss, and impresses them with so violent a desire to return to their own country, that it is forbidden to be played in the Swiss regiments, in the French service, on pain of death. There is also a Scotch tune, which has the same effect on some of our North Britons. In one of our battles in Calabria, a bagpiper of the 78th Highland regiment, when the light infantry charged the French, posted himself on their right, and remained in his solitary situation during the whole of the battle, encouraging the men with a famous Highland charging tune and actually upon the retreat and complete rout of the French changed it to another, equally celebrated in Scotland, upon the retreat of and victory over an enemy. His next-hand neighbour guarded him so well that he escaped unhurt. This was the spirit of the “Last Minstrel,” who infused courage among his country-

men, by possessing it in so animated a degree and in so venerable a character.