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**Music and Medicine. A Conference Report**

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## **MUSIC MEETS MEDICINE. A Conference Report**

When two scholars from different disciplines enjoy exchanging experiences and ideas, it can get very productive. When they also happen to be friends and share the same wavelengths, then the possibilities grow exponentially. The differences between our fields of research do not form an abyss, since we are both in the realm of humanities, but there is still enough of a gap to create an exciting dynamic flow and generate inspiring output. This encounter of a medicine historian and a musicologist coupled with our respective specific interests made us want to organise a conference together, which would be centred on musicological and historical approaches to the marriage between music and medicine. With one of us being a member of the Austrian-based Association for Social History of Medicine (Verein für Sozialgeschichte der Medizin, henceforth VSM), our project turned into the 2021 edition of the VSM's annual symposium. The full title of our enterprise was *Music and Medicine. Musicological and Medical-Historical Approaches* and was to take place from 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> November 2021. Along with the institutions we ourselves are part of (Department of Music and Department of History and European Ethnology at the University of Innsbruck, Austria), our partners in crime were the abovementioned VSM, Research Centre Medical Humanities at the University of Innsbruck and the Music Collections of the Tyrolean State Museum Ferdinandeum. The financial support came from the Vice Rectorate for Research, Research Platform Centre Interdisciplinary Gender Studies and the Faculty of Philosophy, all University of Innsbruck.

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The real challenge wasn't quite to gather enough quality submissions, but to stage a successful event in the middle of the ongoing pandemic, something that most of our colleagues worldwide have been grappling with over the past two years. With an international conference, such as ours was going to be, the probability that we would have to abruptly change the original format of the event was considerably high and in the back of our minds we were on alert. As the situation worsened around the world, it was clear that we had no choice, least of all because our list of contributors counted people from various countries and continents, eliminating the possibility of everyone being able to come to Innsbruck and the marvellous conference venue, the House of Music. We also had to decide against a hybrid event, since it did not make much sense to have some people on site and most of the others speaking from their homes, a solution that would significantly hinder the communication flow and give advantage to one group, taking it away from the other. A hybrid event would also be technically extremely demanding and would not offer the kind of quality that would be proportional to the effort. We wanted everyone to have the same conditions, so we switched to a fully online event, a format that, although irritating and party-breaking on the one hand, on the other makes the content accessible to many people who couldn't have made the trip. Indeed, we had more than a hundred registered participants from many corners of the world.

In the last ten years, the collaboration between music and history has intensified, especially in the Anglo-American part of the world. Cultural studies approaches in the history of the body and of emotions have proven to be particularly productive. In terms of medical historiography, however, there is a clear need to catch up. Music was already a popular topic in earlier medical history, not least because of the passion of some representatives of medicine for music and famous composers (especially of classical, bourgeois musical works) as well as for history. However, musicology and music historiography have hardly benefited from the socio-



historical perspectives in medical history under the sign of the patient history turn since the late 1990s, and more recent methodological and conceptual considerations within musicology and multidisciplinary sound studies have so far hardly been noticed, even in the cultural historically oriented fields of medical history.

Our concept was to open an interdisciplinary door for a dialogue between contributors from the fields of medical history and musicology interested in historical questions. The call for papers was multifaceted and covered a broad spectrum of topics, with the following as focal points: music and body, the historical ear, therapy, trauma and violence, music and medical spaces, musicians as patients and vice versa. We received numerous submissions, covering various historical epochs and a multitude of topics, and it certainly wasn't easy to assemble the final list. The part of a conference organising that probably everyone hates is sending rejection letters. We ended up with eight panels, distributed over three very full days. We wanted to frame the conference with a musicological keynote and a historical closing comment, giving voice to two renowned experts in the respective fields. In discussing music and medicine, there are many clichés and myths, something that we wanted to avoid at all costs. One of the most perpetuated myths, unfortunately very much alive and well in our day as well, is that of music having only positive and uplifting properties. The fact that the nature of music is far more complex is still not as widely known as it should be, thus we wanted our audience to be treated to a keynote on music as a protagonist of violence, delivered masterfully by Morag Josephine Grant of the University of Edinburgh, under the title "Bleed a little louder: Sound, silence and music torture". The closing comment was given by Daniel Morat, historian at the Freie Universität Berlin, who wove a wonderful tapestry of what we heard during the conference. We were also to have a supporting programme organised by our colleague Franz Gratl in the form of an evening concert that did take place at the Tyrolean State Museum Ferdinandeum in Innsbruck, but due to technical difficulties it wasn't streamed live, instead being offered to the conference participants in a time-delayed video stream. Those of us who were in Innsbruck managed to attend and enjoy the sound of a violin built by the famed Tyrolean master Jakob Stainer (1619–1683) and played for the occasion by Annegret Siedel in a programme that ended with Bach's magnificent *Chaconne*.

The conference took us on a very enriching voyage, in English and in German. We heard, among others, about Swedish sanatoriums, diabetes in opera, Nazi educational films, asylums across Europe, Dutch psychiatry, shaman drums of Amazonia, the acoustics of war in the Middle Ages, sexuality and sexology, Telemann's music for taking the waters, music therapy, hypnosis and trance, music torture in Chile during the Pinochet regime, music pedagogics, dealing with stress of performing, we even had a peak into the English kitchen recipe books

of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> One important outcome of our conference was that the historical change in the perception of the human body became apparent, in that the way in which music was ascribed a negative or positive effect on body and mind was in each case embedded in specific historical contexts. The breadth of methodological approaches represented at the conference was fascinating. Normative texts such as manuals, various instructions, and recipes were used as sources, as were biographies and autobiographies, musical works, and films. Microhistorical in-depth studies were presented, as well as art-historical and film-historical analyses. The following entanglements between our disciplines elaborated at the conference deserve further attention. Firstly, regarding the research field of music and sound history, the integration of the phenomenon of medicine into a sonic landscape is now on the agenda. Secondly, the conference strongly accentuated the research field of music and gender: for example, a medical-historical / gender-critical consideration of the high male voice, as well as medical-historical critique of genius and virtuosity. Thirdly, several contributions intertwined music and medicine with religion and spirituality, thus further broadening our perspective. The spectrum ranged from the organ in the asylum to the influence of confessional dispute on musical sanctification and healing debates, to ethnomusicological research on Sufi, South American healers, and shamans.

We gained insight and updates into the current approaches from both musicology and history, and it was very interesting and engaging to see what angles these disciplines use and the perspectives they choose to deal with a particular topic. A lot of valuable feedback was given and, as it is usually the case when time is limited, very fruitful discussions had to be cut off. Organising an academic conference is always stressful, but seeing it develop the way ours did is extremely rewarding and for that we are quite grateful to all the speakers, the chairs and everybody who took part in the discussions. We are now looking forward to reading the conference papers turned scholarly articles, because together with our colleague Marina Hilber (University of Innsbruck and President of the VSM) we are editing the next volume of the journal *Virus* (open access, published by the VSM), which will contain these contributions once they have passed the peer-reviewed process.

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2        You can find the full conference programme and abstracts of single papers here <https://www.uibk.ac.at/musikwissenschaft/aktuelles/events/2021/pdfs/programm-mit-abstracs-und-bios.pdf>.