

## Plagiarism, fiddles and tarantulas

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Would you believe it, Mr. *Humblings*, I myself once cured a girl bit with a tarantula with this simple bassoon? – *Trut, turrut, phub, phub, bush!* - This was the air, Mr. *Humblings*, you shall hear it - *trut, turrut, phub, phub, bush:* ... I can assure you, Mr. *Humblings*, I drove away the evil spirit, and cured her of her tarantulism that night.<sup>1</sup>

'Dr Mead lived more in the broad sunshine of life than almost any man', wrote Dr Johnson of one of England's best-known 18th-century physicians. Richard Mead completed his conventional English education by a tour of Italy, where, at the age of 22, he took the degree of MD at Padua. During the following two decades he took the Oxford MD, became a fellow of the Royal Society and of the College of Physicians and embarked upon a spectacular career. Apart from the demands of his practice and of his royal patrons, he devoted much time to the study of poisons. His first publication was *A Mechanical Account of Poisons*, published in 1702 when he was 29, of which the second essay was entitled 'Of the Tarantula'. In it he describes the effects of the tarantula bite:<sup>2</sup>

although the pain of its bite is at first no greater, than what is caused by the sting of a bee; yet the ... patient within a few hours is seized with a violent sickness, ... [and] in a short time expires; unless music be called to his assistance, which alone, without the help of medicine, performs the cure.

For at the first sound of the musical instrument, although the sick lie, as it were, in an apoplectic fit, they begin by degrees to move their hands and feet; till at last they get up, and fall to dancing with wonderful vigour.

At this sport they usually spend twelve hours a day, and it continues three or four days; by which time they are generally freed from all their symptoms ...

This bizarre story was not new; not only had Florio told it in the 16th century and Henry Peacham retailed it to his Compleat Gentleman in the 17th, but - according to Alexander Malcolm<sup>3</sup> - even among the ancients 'The Cure of Diseases by *Musick* is talked of with enough of Confidence. *Aulus Gellius Lib.4. Chap. 13.* tells us ... he had read in *Theophrastus* that, by certain artful Modulations ... the Bites of Serpents or Vipers had been cured'. Richard Mead tentatively attributes the story's origin to Pythagoras, who was frequently cited by 18<sup>th</sup>-century commentators as a skilful exponent of the power of music. Jeremy Collier, for instance, must gladden every chief constable's heart when he tells how '*Pythagoras* once met with a Parcel of drunken Fellows, who were likely to be troublesom [sic] enough. He presently orders the *Musick* to play Grave, and chop into a *Dorion*: Upon this, they all threw away their *Garlands*, and were as sober and shame-faced as one would wish'.<sup>4</sup> Such stories abound, in fact 'The effects ascribed to [music] by the antient writers are almost miraculous; by means hereof diseases have been cured, unchastity corrected, seditions quelled, passions raised and calmed, and even madness occasioned'.<sup>5</sup> Even Malcolm acknowledges that 'the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Joel Collier' (John Bicknell): *Musical Travels through England* (London, 2/1775), 13-14

<sup>2</sup> *The Medical Works of Richard Mead, M.D.* (Edinburgh, 1762), i, 66-76 (68)

<sup>3</sup> *A Treatise of Musick, Speculative, Practical and Historical* (Edinburgh, 1721), 495-6

<sup>4</sup> *Essays upon Several Moral Subjects*, ii (London, 3/1698), 22

<sup>5</sup> 'John Hoyle' [John Binns the elder]: *Dictionarium Musica, being a Complete Dictionary: or, Treasury of Music* (London, 1770), 63-4

Historians, by saying too much, have given us Ground to believe very little. What do you think of curing a raging Pestilence by *Musick*? For curing the Bites of Serpents, we cannot so much doubt it, since that of the *Tarantula* has been cured in *Italy*'.<sup>6</sup>

Few 18th-century accounts deny that the tarantula's sting is fatal during the summer months, although 'in the winter it lurks in holes, and is scarcely seen; and if it does bite then, it is not venomous'.<sup>7</sup> Stephen Storace's 'genuine Letter from an *Italian Gentleman*' in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1753 suspiciously points out that 'it never happens that any man is suffer'd to die by such distemper, the priest of the parish being obliged to play on the fiddle in order to cure them; and it has not been known in the memory of man, that any one is dead of it',<sup>8</sup> but admits to having himself performed such a cure and to having been 'frightened' by the symptoms of the victim. Some 70 years later, Thomas Busby was able to attribute these symptoms to shock and the heat of the Italian summer, coupled with 'love of singularity',<sup>9</sup> but no such doubts appear to have beset earlier commentators, with the exception of Dr [Domenico] Cirillo, cited by 'Q. of Wigan'<sup>10</sup> as having attempted to refute 'the common opinion' which was frequently aired in the early part of the century in such newspapers as *The Post Angel*, *The Spectator* and *The Tatler*.

The most commonly described symptom is 'heaviness and stupor', developing into insensibility. Dr Mead lists 'a violent sickness, difficulty in breathing, universal faintness and sometimes trembling, with a weakness of the head', to which the anonymous author of a letter to *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1743 adds faintness of pulse and a 'wild look'.<sup>11</sup>

Although Storace's letter implies that the cure was the job of the parish priest, it is clear that it could be performed by any passer-by who could play the fiddle. There is no record of any other instrument being used (Collier's bassoon apart), although A.Z. relates that a gentleman's fever was allayed by his nurse singing 'a despicable ballad'.<sup>12</sup> The quality of the performance seems to have been considered relatively unimportant. Malcolm suggests that 'this cure is not performed by exquisite Art and Skill in *Musick*; it does not require a *Correlli or Valentini*, but is performed by Strains discovered by random Trials without any Rule.'<sup>13</sup>

Some commentators attribute the power to specific pieces of music. In Storace's letter, for instance, the author relates that he was instructed to 'play the tarantella'.<sup>14</sup> 'I asked what sort of tune it was? They answer'd, that it was a kind of jig; I try'd several jiggs, but to no purpose'. The bystanders taught him the correct tune,

but you must observe that while I was a learning the tune, and happened to feel the strain of the first two barrs, the man began to move accordingly, and got up as quick as lightning ... but as I had not yet learn'd the whole tune, I left off playing, not thinking it would have any effect on the man. But the instant I left off playing, the man fell down ... [I] made all the haste I could to learn the rest of the tune ... the instant he heard me, he rose up as he did before, and danced as hard as any man could do ...

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<sup>6</sup> op.cit, 595

<sup>7</sup> Mead, op.cit, 68

<sup>8</sup> xxii (1753), 433-4

<sup>9</sup> *Concert Room and Orchestra Anecdotes, of Music and Musicians, Ancient and Modern* (London, 1825), i, 25

<sup>10</sup> in a letter to *The Gentleman's Magazine*, xli (1771), 443-4

<sup>11</sup> xliii (1743), 422-4

<sup>12</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, xxiv (1754), 69-70 (70)

<sup>13</sup> op.cit, 595

<sup>14</sup> op.cit, 433

Most writers, however, agree that each person requires his own specific tune. The anonymous letter to *The Gentleman's Magazine* in 1743 recounts three instances of musical cures, all culled from earlier newspaper accounts, and claims (p.423) that 'When the Patient is arrived at the last Symptoms of being insensible or motionless, a Musician tries different Tunes, till he hits on one whose Modulation and Notes suit the Person affected', and further (p.424) that 'each Patient has his particular specific Tune'.

The single point of unanimity among all the writings examined here - even Collier's lampoon - is that the cure is accompanied by dancing of the most vigorous kind. (One mid-18th-century medical textbook got it the wrong way round, and credulously asserted that tarantulas would dance to violin music.) Among the more serious commentators the exertion of dancing is held largely responsible for the cure; "the benefit of it is, that the continued motions of the limbs produce large sweats, which, by carrying off the inflammatory particles, abate the fever raised in the animal spirits".<sup>15</sup> This idea was one of the cornerstones of 18th-century medical practice; a number of patent medicines such as James's Powder (advertised regularly in the London newspapers throughout the century) acted by making the unfortunate patient sweat violently.<sup>16</sup> The alternative explanation for the cure is that 'the quick motion impressed by the impulse of musical sounds on the air, and from thence communicated through the ear to the blood and animal spirits, gradually dissolves the coagulation which the poison had produced in them'.<sup>17</sup> Mead mentions a similar hypothesis, based on 'the determinate force and particular modulation of the trembling percussions of the air, made by the musical chords upon the elastic fibres in the brain' which he defends by reference to the sympathetic vibration of similarly tuned strings.<sup>18</sup>

The bite of *Lycosa tarentula* is no doubt painful and produces a degree of shock, but it is not inherently fatal. The legend of the musical cure was perpetuated for centuries not by Italian peasants but by scholars - even the most scientific ones such as Richard Mead, who ought to have known better - thoughtlessly and unquestioningly retailing what they read elsewhere. Have we entirely shaken off that habit?

Not unlike this, is a fact recorded by the divine *Homer*. *Ulysses* had a large rent made in his thigh by a wild boar, - a terrible animal, Mr. *Humblings*: - well, and what happen'd? - why, he only sent for the town-waits, and after the first bar or two had been play'd, the blood stopp'd; and as the fiddles proceeded, the wound contracted, and by the time they had finished *Alley Croaker*, *Moggy Lauder* and *A lovely Lass to a Fryar came*, (which are all antient *Greek* tunes, sir,) the wound was quite healed, and the cicatrix as smooth as the back of my hand.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mead, op.cit, 73

<sup>16</sup> a practice strongly attacked by the anonymous author of *An Essay on the Power of Nature and Art, in Curing Diseases: to which are annexed Impartial Reflections on James's Powder* (London, 1753)

<sup>17</sup> This view is attacked by 'Q. of Wigan', op.cit, 443-4

<sup>18</sup> op.cit, 73

<sup>19</sup> 'Collier', op.cit, 14-15