

The natural musicality of Italians : 18th-century medical and literary discourse on melancholy

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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata**

Band (Jahr): - **(2019)**

Heft 48: **Musik und Emotionen in der Literatur = Musique et émotions dans la littérature = Music and emotions in literature**

PDF erstellt am: **31.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006274>

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Valeria Lucentini

The Natural Musicality of Italians

18th-Century Medical and Literary Discourse on Melancholy

L'attribuzione del carattere malinconico agli italiani rilevata all'interno della letteratura di viaggio del XVIII e XIX secolo sembra contrastare, ad una prima lettura, con una tradizione letteraria che invece lo associava ai popoli dell'Europa del nord. Una lettura più approfondita di queste descrizioni nel contesto della medicina psichiatrica e della trattatista musicale del tempo ne rivela l'utilizzo come rinforzo dello stereotipo molto diffuso riguardante l'innata e naturale musicalità degli italiani. Descriverli malinconici servì a giustificare e provare la loro passione per la musica. Essi ne avevano bisogno per alleviare la malinconia e per questo motivo divennero più musicali delle altre nazioni.

The melancholic Italians?

Die Musik ist für viele Völker nur eine Erholung, die man nicht zu weit treiben darf, aus Furcht, die Erholung möchte endlich selbst ermüden: für die Italiener ist sie eine Leidenschaft, ein Bedürfniß; es mögen nun ihre Fibern empfindlicher sein, oder weil sie vielleicht ein Mittel wider Melancholie haben müssen. Man höret auf öffentlichen Plätzen einen Schuster, einen Schmid, einen Tischler und andere Leute von dieser Gattung eine Arie mit verschiedenen Stimmen, sehr accurat und mit einem Geschmacke singen, den sie von der Natur haben, und weil sie beständig Harmonisten hören, welche die Kunst gebildet hat [...]. Endlich muß man auch gestehen: daß der Geschmack an der Musik in Italien allgemeiner ist, als bei andern Völkern. Man könnte sagen, dieß wäre eine eigene Frucht dieses Clima, die in andern Gegenden fremd ist.¹

The natural and innate musicality of the Italians has been both a notion at the very center of scientific interest and a *topos* in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. Travelers, philosophers, physicians and men of letters took this assumption for granted and in their works, they tried to explain this particular disposition, often letting their fields of research overlap. Johann Georg Lederer's quotation above gathers in a few lines the main theories behind those explanations and is therefore central to this article. The author refers first to the medical tradition of the time, according to which individual

1 Johann Georg Lederer. "Von der Musik in Italien", section added to the German translation (*Reise nach Italien und Holland*, Nuernberg: Hausse, 1776, p. 465) of *Voyages d'Italie et de Hollande* by Gabriel François Coyer, Paris: Veuve Duchesne, 1775.

behavior was considered the result of a physical reaction and which focused attention on the nervous system, as well as on the impact music could have on the human body. But soon after, he considers natural causes as well, attesting to the long-standing presence of climate theories as explanations for collective behavior and differences between nations. Education and habit are also taken into account, as the Italians were supposedly more exposed to music than other people, given the ubiquity of musical practice in Italy. Lederer uses a comparative method, the most effective literary strategy adopted by travelers which could possibly contribute to creating and spreading an awareness of the “other” and of “otherness.” We gain a further idea of this if we consider a brief passage from the French scientist Lalande’s *Voyage d’un François en Italie* [...]:

Il semble que dans ce pays-là les cordes du tympan soient plus tendues, plus harmoniques, plus sonores que dans le reste de l’Europe; la nation même est toute chantante.²

What seems problematic at first sight is Lederer’s use of the term “melancholy”. The power of music against diseases – especially those related to the nervous system – has been the result of medical studies and experiments, as well as a subject of literary debate since ancient times. In this case, however, melancholy is described as a national characteristic explaining the musicality of the Italians: since they are melancholic, they needed music to alleviate it, and in so doing became more musical than other nations.

This is particularly surprising since melancholy usually had literary associations with people of northern lands. We may recall *The English Malady* by George Cheyne (1733), or take as an example Madame de Staël’s claim: “La mélancolie, ce sentiment fécond en ouvrages de génie, semble appartenir presque exclusivement aux climats du Nord.”³ In both cases, the reference to melancholy was a way to praise a nation and its evolved social, economic and artistic status. Cheyne described melancholy as a disease arising as the concomitant of a newly wealthy society; Madame de Staël adopted a similar strategy for her philosophical reflections on what was fundamental for a literary production “of genius.” Italians were creative and excellent improvisers, but they lacked depth of sensibility, which instead was a characteristic of people of the north, due to their climate and difficult life conditions. In her romance *Corinne ou l’Italie*, she compares England and Italy, emphasising their different national character. In her words, England was politically free and economically flourishing, but poor in imagination, artistic taste and

2 Jérôme Lalande. *Voyage d’un François en Italie, fait dans les années 1765 & 1766*. Venise/Paris: Desaint, VI, Chap. XVI, 1769. P. 345.

3 Germaine de Staël. “De la littérature dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales”. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Didot Frères, 1838 [1813]. Chap. X. P. 252.

love for beauty, arts, music and poetry, which were instead the domain of Italians. Eric Gidal includes Mme de Staël among those “social theorists of the romantic era,” who made melancholy a “symbol of moral integrity and a requisite for philosophical reflection,” a fundamental trait for a free society.

But, as I have mentioned, this served a different purpose for Italians. Recent research in the field of imagology and identity studies has highlighted the *longue-durée* of national images, something we would call today the creation of national stereotypes. As for other nationalities, several studies have been dedicated to the definition of Italian national identity, as well as to the emergence of an imagined Italy, focusing on specific characteristics or stereotypes around “Italian-ness.” According to these studies, the most recurrent were effeminacy, jealousy and, as Silvana Patriarca has already pointed out, idleness.⁴ In my research on eighteenth-century European travel literature, I increasingly came across the term *melancholy* as it relates to and informs Italian musicality; it became evident to me that melancholy was also central to an understanding of this subject.

I believe that we should interpret the reference to Italians’ innate musicality as one of those national stereotypes noted above. Reference to melancholy should be understood both within the literary tradition that contributed to the establishment of a national feeling of superiority and within the context of emerging studies in psychiatric medicine, taking into account the parallel development of these musical stereotypes. Descriptions of Italians as melancholic were used as proof of their innate musicality. To demonstrate this, I rely mostly on medical treatises and travelers’ accounts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Music, melancholy and the impact of climate theories

Le climat est pour une Nation la cause fondamentale de son génie [...]. Nous divisons tous les Peuples qui habitent la Terre en trois parties. Méridionaux [...], régions moyennes et tempérées [...], Septentrionaux.⁵

The North-South axis division of Europe into three areas was used to order knowledge of the world and to grasp better the differences between people by resorting to national explanations. According to such climate theories, temperature, humidity, wind and soil shaped a person’s body and behavior, with the result that national characters, directly deriving from those conditions,

⁴ Silvana Patriarca. *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁵ François-Ignace Espiard de la Borde. *L’Esprit des nations*. Genève: Henri-Albert Gosse, 1753 (new Edition of *Essais sur le génie et le caractère des nations, divisé en six livres*, 3 vols., Brussels, 1743).

varied from one climate to the next. This theory finds its roots already in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, in particular in the work *Air, Water and Places*, where Hippocrates identified the influence of the climate on health and diseases, employing the term “melancholy” for the first time.⁶ At the end of the seventeenth century, this theory of climatic influence was fundamental to the studies of British doctor Thomas Willis, a pioneer in research of the nervous system who favored the cause and classification of diseases as vapor, spleen and melancholy. The theory evolved in the work of Abbé Du Bos, who saw “the difference of the character of nations [...] attributed to the different qualities of the air of their respective countries”⁷ and later had an influential impact on several works of the century, including Gibbon⁸ and Montesquieu⁹ – the latter emphasizing the reactions of the body’s fibres to temperature and linking them with habits and character; or Immanuel Kant, who in his *Von den verschiedenen Racen und Menschen* (1775) based the differences between races on the influence of climatic qualities; or still in 1781, the English physician William Falconer’s *Remarks on the Influence of Climate* (1781). These same climate theories and medical studies served to explain the peculiarity of Italian musical predisposition. The words of Samuel Sharp illustrate the belief people placed in this stereotype, employing the same concepts used some years later by Lederer: passion, climate, natural propensity and education:

[The] Englishman wonders at this behavior of the Italians; he comes with a notion that they are all enthusiastically fond of music; that there is something in the climate which gives them this propensity, and that their natural genius is nursed and improved by a musical education.¹⁰

Travelers believed that climate conferred on Italians their natural musical genius, and they were expecting to find such traits in Italian behavior itself. Their writings served thus to reinforce national stereotypes.

6 See Hellmut Flashar. *Melancholie und Melancholiker in den medizinischen Theorien der Antike*. Berlin: Gruyter & Co, 1966. Chap. 2. P. 21-49.

7 Cited from Thomas Nugent. *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*. Vol. II, London: Nourse, 1748. P. 244.

8 Edward Gibbon. *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776.

9 Charles Louis Montesquieu. *De l’Esprit des loix, ou du rapport que les loix doivent avoir avec la constitution de chaque gouvernement, les mœurs, le climat, la Religion, le commerce*, etc. Genève: Barillot & Fils, 1748; and “Essai sur les causes qui peuvent affecter les esprits et les caractères (1736-43)”. *Mélanges inédits de Montesquieu*. Bordeaux: Gounouilhau, 1892. P. 109-148.

10 Samuel Sharp. *Letters from Italy, describing the Customs and Manners of that Country, in the Years 1765, and 1766*. London: Henry and Cave, 1767. P. 77-78 (Letter XIX, Neapel: November 1765).

In the course of the century, medical treatises and climate theories combined with newer studies of phrenology¹¹, anatomy and different genres of literature about music. We find an example of “medicalization” of this Italian propensity in Nicholas Robinson’s work, *A new System of the Spleen, Vapours, and Hypochondriack Melancholy* (1739), where in a text dedicated to diseases, climatic causes are believed to be strongly at work and to provide the main explanation for the musicality of the Italians:

If we consult different climates, we shall perceive that this [musical] faculty is most improv’d in the Southern Parts of the World; where, through the Kindness of the climate, the People are naturally Musicians; and this is the reason why Italy and Naples are so much caress’d by all those that are remarkable for a fine Taste in Musick.¹²

While, on the one hand, concentrating on finding proofs of the different *genius of the nations*, on the other the object of investigation in these medical works was the impact music could have on the human body and its power against diseases, in particular melancholy, which was considered the most common one affecting the nervous system.

It is in this context that Italianness, melancholy and music connect to each other.

Music against melancholy

In fact, the power of music on the human body has been an object of interest since ancient times among pre-Socratic philosophers and Pythagoreans, who focused on the music of the spheres and the cosmic harmony, a theory which, in the neo-Platonic context, remained alive for centuries. Medieval thinking on music was, unsurprisingly, very concerned with Christian ideas, and as we can read in Boethius’s *De institutione musica*, music’s power was regarded with some suspicion. “Until well into the eighteenth century, works on music therapy generally ascribed the effects of music on the body to the way it aligned it with universal order.”¹³ Another fundamental long-lasting theory

11 See Simone Baral. “Un ‘armonica e magnifica fronte’. La persistenza della frenologia nei discorsi medici italiani intorno al genio musicale”. See also G. A. L. Fosatti. *Manuel pratique de phrénologie ou physiologie du cerveau d’après les doctrines de Gall, de Spurzheim, de Combe et des autres phrénologistes*. Paris: Germer Baillière, 1845.

12 Nicholas Robinson. *A new System of the Spleen, Vapours, and Hypochondriack Melancholy*. A. Bettesworth, W. Innys, and C. Rivington, London, 1729. Chap. IX. P. 142-143.

13 James Kennaway. “Introduction: The Long History of Neurology and Music”. *Music and the Nerves, 1700-1900*. Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2014. P 1-17.

was that of the four humors, which during the eighteenth century had seen a gradual shift from the idea of the balance of these humors and implanted air to a focus on human fibers and the nervous system: the human body was not an organism in communication with the universe anymore, but became instead an independent machine itself, made up of vessels, fibers and nerves reacting to physical stimuli. As George Rousseau pointed out, in the eighteenth century, a musical aesthetic of sensibility developed strictly related to medical theories on nerves, so that feeling became a question of having sensitive nerves.¹⁴ By the end of the century, the idea that music could stimulate the nervous system led to a belief both in the positive and negative effects of music on the body: if music could in many cases be a remedy against nervous diseases, in others it could be a dangerous stimulant leading to illness or even death. In any case, “despite the increased role ascribed to the nerves in listening, there was no consensus about how those nerves functioned.”¹⁵ The eighteenth century saw a variety of theories on the nature of the nerves co-existing, with models of animal spirits, nervous fluid, electrical, vibrating and oscillating nerves all competing and often being combined. Melancholy was at the center of this interest, but again, its importance and its link to music had also been a subject of investigation since Antiquity. In this context, the Venetian humanist philosopher Marsilio Ficino had a central role in the mediation of different past sources and in reviving them. Following Plato, he conceived of the activity of listening and performing music as a remedy for particular diseases associated with the four humors and passions of the mind, with special attention to melancholy. This last was considered a gift for musicians, as it already appears in Aristotle’s theory, described in his *Problemata*, where melancholy was seen to be a characteristic of the genius. “Therefore [...] music in Ficino’s music therapy is deliberately not used to heal the illness of melancholy, but only to stimulate the maintenance or development of a melancholic complexion.”¹⁶

It is within this context that melancholy, music, and national character are put together and can give us a means to understand this association with Italians. Melancholy was attributed to the northern lands to praise their superior social status; in the case of Italians it was used to support and justify the belief in their innate musicality, which was taken for granted.

14 See George Rousseau. *Nervous Acts: Essays on Literature, Culture and Sensibility*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

15 James Kennaway. *Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012. Chap. 2. P. 26.

16 Jacomien Prins. “A philosophical music therapy for melancholy in Marsilio Ficino’s *Timaeus* commentary”. *Melancholie – zwischen Attitüde und Diskurs: Konzeptionen in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*. Ed. Andrea Sieber and Antje Wittstock. Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2009. P. 119-143.

By analyzing the cases of the insane asylums in Aversa and Palermo, “famous throughout Europe for successfully using music, theater, and dance to treat mental illness”¹⁷, Carmel Raz has relied on reports of hospital staff and tourists to show that “whereas patient theatricals were generally regarded as dangerous by psychiatrists in northern Europe, an exception was frequently made for Italians, for whom such entertainments were regarded as essential.”¹⁸ Among the successful cases of what we may call “music therapy,” we find a prominent presence of people affected by melancholy. This is the case of the patients described by A. Brierre de Boismont in his “medical journey”¹⁹ or that of the noble young woman “suffering from a profound melancholy caused by a romantic disappointment,” as Maria Malibran recalled after her visit to the Aversa asylum.²⁰ And again in 1835, John Bell recalls a young woman who “entered the Asylum laboring under total derangement, the nature of her madness was a deep melancholy”²¹, [...] and who recovered by playing the piano. He had learned from the conductor of Aversa’s madhouse that “music had always proved singularly effective in soothing and calming the perturbed spirit of the maniac.”²²

Idleness could be regarded as both a major cause and symptom of melancholy²³: a comparison appears clear, for example, already in Bonaventura’s work.²⁴ Business, work and music were often prescribed as a useful remedy, as in Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621):

Musica est mentis maesta, a roaring-meg against melancholy, to rear and revive the languishing soul; affecting not only the ears, but the very arteries, the vital and animal spirits, it erects the mind, and makes it nimble.²⁵

17 Carmel Raz. “Music, Theater, and the Moral Treatment: the Casa dei Matti in Aversa and Palermo”. *Musique italienne et sciences médicales au XIX^e siècle*. Ed. Céline Frigau Manning. Laboratoire italien politique et société, 20/2017.

18 Raz. “Music, Theater” (as note 17).

19 Alexandre Brierre de Boismont, “Des établissements d’aliénés en Italie”. *Journal complémentaire des sciences médicales*, 13, 1832. P. 179-180. Cited in Jean Bouillaud, *New Researches on Acute Articular Rheumatism in General*. Trans. James Kitchen. Philadelphia: Haswell, 1837. P. 67.

20 See Pier-Angelo Fiorentino. *Comédies et comédiens*. Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1866. P. 42.

21 John Bell. *Observations on Italy*. London: Cadell, 1825. P. 243.

22 Bell. *Observations* (as note 21). P. 242.

23 Diana Buie. *Melancholy and the Idle Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century*. Diss. University of Northumbria at Newcastle, 2010. URL: http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/1542/1/buie.diane_phd.pdf

24 See Rainer Jehr. *Melancholie und Acedia*. Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1984.

25 Robert Burton. *The Anatomy of Melancholy, What it is: With all the Kinds, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Several Cures of it. In Three Maine*

And so it was in the Aversa asylum, where to avoid idleness as a possible cause of melancholy,

comedies are performed twice a week, and of concerts an equal number. Balls are permitted whenever a desire for dancing is manifested [...], idleness being prohibited. [...] The performers are the patients, as are also the musicians of the concerts.²⁶

Melancholy could benefit from exposure to selected pieces of music. In fact, as mentioned before, music could aggravate or cure some illnesses: medical treatises of the time suggested the use of different kinds of music according to the disease to be cured. Francis Bacon had already made this observation, noting that some particular tunes disposed the spirit to various passions having a certain affinity with the affections.²⁷

In his influential *Essay on the Effects of Singing, Musick, and Dancing on the Human Bodies*, Richard Browne suggested that because of its relationship with the human spirits, music should be employed to regulate the passions and therefore as a remedy against “nervous disorders, such as the Hypochondriack, Hysterick, and Melancholick Affections [because] singing will be much conducive to the cure. By the succession of the brisk and lively ideas of the tune [...]. In the melancholick affection the soul and spirits are still more dejected, and therefore for the same reason it requires the briskest Allegro imaginable.”²⁸ Again, listing melancholy among the diseases to be cured through music, Nicholas Robinson is echoing Browne’s words:

Of the power of Musick in soothing the Passions, and allaying the tempests of the soul, under the Spleen, Vapours, and Hypochondriack Melancholy. [...] There is a connexion between certain Motions of the Mind, we call passions, and certain motions of the Fibres of the Brain, that support these passions; and that both are capable of being varied, exalted, or depress’d, accordingly as the Force of musical Sounds differently influence their Motions.²⁹

In his *Reflections*, Brocklesby is more specifically linking the musical character with certain disorders, still recalling climatic theories:

Partitions with their Several Sections, Members, and Subsections. Philosophically, Historically, Opened and Cut up. Vol. 1. London, 1827 [1621]. P. 449.

26 Marguerite Gardiner. *The Idler in Italy*. London: Henry Colburn, 1839. P. 435.

27 Francis Bacon. *Sylva Sylvarum or a Natural History in Ten Centuries*. London: Rawley, 1627.

28 Richard Browne. *Essay on the Effects of Singing, Musick, and Dancing on the Human Bodies*. London: J. Cooke, 1729. P. 29 and 48.

29 Cf. Robinson, *A new System* (as note 12). Chap. IV. P. 343.

Persons of a fallow bilious complexion, and of an adult temperament, are most propense to this disorder [melancholia], and especially *caeteris paribus* the inhabitants of warm climates, whose radical moisture is much dissipated by insensible perspiration, that abounds most in hot countries. [...] 'Tis remarkable that different tunes affect different persons, but generally the briskest airs do most service to this melancholy people; and such is power of musick at the time, that they often fall a dancing upon hearing it, [...] and in this extatick way they continue 'till their former health of body and mind is restored.³⁰

Using the same general idea of Italians' production of "brisk music," and therefore situating himself in the tradition of medical treatises and studies of "music therapy," Goldsmith derived the melancholic character of Italians, writing that:

It is worthy of remark in general, that the music of every country is solemn in proportion as the inhabitants are merry; or, in other words, the merriest, sprightliest nations are remarked for having the slowest music; and those whose character it is to be melancholy, are pleased with the most brisk and airy movements. Thus, in France, Poland, Ireland, and Switzerland, the national music is slow, melancholy, and solemn; in Italy, England, Spain, and Germany, it is faster, proportionally as the people are grave.³¹

In curing melancholy through music, the Italians seemed to be more successful than other European countries, due to the assumption of their natural musicality and therefore the positive impact music could have upon them. It was precisely their melancholic temperament which served as proof of their musical predisposition, which was never put in doubt, as for example in J. de Blainville's travel description:

In Music, sculpture, painting and ancient coins, Welschen [Italians] are extremely loved, so these things are valued for their great delightfulness, and the pleasant entertainment of their melancholy temperament.³²

As was the case with many men of letters of the time, the French historian Pierre-Jean Grosley believed that every nation brings into its songs and music the national character which differentiates its genius and habits.³³ His refer-

30 Richard Brocklesby. *Reflections on Antient and Modern Musick: With the Application to the Cure of Diseases*. London: M. Cooper, 1749. P. 50 and 60.

31 Oliver Goldsmith. "On the Different Schools of Music". *The British Magazine* (1760): p. 175 [Essay n. III].

32 Monsieur de Blainville. *Travels through Holland, Germany, Switzerland, but especially Italy*. 3 Vols. Ed. Daniel Soyer. Trans. John Lockman (Vol. 1), William Guthrie (Vol. 2), George Turnbull (Vol. 3). London: John Noon, 1757.

33 Pierre Jean Grosley. *Nouveaux mémoires ou observations sur l'Italie et sur les Italiens*. Vol. 3. London: Nourse, 1764. P. 304.

ence to music as Italians' daily need and remedy, takes us back to Lederer's words at the beginning of this article, which itself attested to the dissemination of this belief. Italian melancholy is the main element of Italian character and yet again was described as a cause and proof of their natural musicality:

Italians' passion for harmony is due to their temperament and the melancholy which dominates it. Music is for them a usual need and a necessary remedy: it moves them.³⁴

Conclusion

The attribution of a melancholic character to Italians in the travel literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seems at first to contrast with the image of Italy as it had been established in the literary tradition. A deeper reading of these references within the context of psychiatric medicine and music treatises of that time reveals its use as a reinforcement of the widespread stereotype of Italians' innate and natural musicality. Describing them as melancholic served to justify and prove their need and passion for music, which they needed to alleviate their melancholy, and in so doing became more musical than other nations.

34 "La passion des Italiens pour l'harmonie tient à leur tempérament et à la mélancolie qui le domine. La musique est pour eux un besoin habituel et un remède nécessaire: elle les remue." Pierre Jean Grosley. *Essai d'histoire comparée de la musique italienne et de la musique française*. London: Nourse, 1764. P. 95.