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Remedy or Disease? Romantic Perspectives on Music

Around 1800, aesthetic debate suddenly places music at the very top in the hierarchy of the arts, even superseding poetry: This has become a commonplace not only in scholarly discourse. The protagonists of this re-arrangement of the artistic disciplines are Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Ludwig Tieck. In their programmatic texts, they state that music is to be free and absolute and stress its metaphysical quality and its close relation to the supernatural. Furthermore, music is supposed to be no longer dependent on the other arts, and music releases the listener or the musician from prosaic everyday life. As Wackenroder writes in *Die Wunder der Tonkunst*, music is „das Land des Glaubens [...] wo alle unsre Zweifel und unsre Leiden sich in ein tönendes Meer verlieren.“¹ It is „eine kleine fröhliche grüne Insel, mit Sonnenschein, mit Sang und Klang, – die auf dem dunkeln, unergründlichen Ocean schwimmt.“² And what is more, in Wackenroder’s words music is even described as „die heilende Göttin“³ All sickening thoughts which, according to Wackenroder, are the illness of mankind vanish with a piece of music, making our mind sane again. Literary romanticism here recurs to a long tradition that reaches back to the classical ages in Greece and Arabia: Music is used as a remedy for curing illnesses of various kinds. In classical antiquity, Apollo is the god of music, poetry and dancing as well as the god of healing. He was also named “Iatros” (physician) or Apollo Medicus.⁴ As Bruno Meinecke puts it most clearly: “Music and medicine therefore were intimately commingled in his [Apollo’s B.S.] divine nature as an integrated unity.”⁵ Orpheus as a bard and demigod was also said to be capable of curing diseases by means of his music. “Through the medium of poetry, music, and medicine, he too

¹ Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder: „Die Wunder der Tonkunst.“ In: Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder: Sämtliche Werke und Briefe. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe. Ed. Silvio Vietta and Richard Littlejohns. Heidelberg 1991. Vol. I., p. 206

² Ibid., p. 105.

³ Ibid., p. 205.

⁴ Bruno Meinecke: „Music and Medicine in Classical Antiquity“. In: Dorothy M. Schullian, Max Schoen (ed.): Music and Medicine. New York 1948, p. 47–96, p. 48.

⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

applied salutary remedies to soul and body.”⁶ Thus, music in history is part of treating physical illness on the one hand, but on the other hand is more and more considered to provide a remedy especially for mental deficiencies. Music is meant to improve nervous disorders and sometimes it is even prescribed as a regular medicine.⁷ As we will see in Hoffmann’s text *Die Genesung*, there is a connection between the ritual healing processes in the temples of Aesculapius and the setting of the forest in which the old man regains his health.

The connection between music and medicine in the classical ages goes along well with romantic medicine as it is represented by literary and philosophical writers like Schelling, Novalis among others: Around 1800, the image of medicine is strongly influenced by the Scottish physician John Brown and his sometimes critically assessed theory of medicine. Accordingly, romantic medicine is very much attracted to the idea that almost all kinds of illnesses can be traced back to sthenic or asthenic states of the body – too much or too less excitation of the nerves.⁸ Consequently, music is used to manipulate the nervous and mental condition of the patient. E.T.A. Hoffmann’s prose text *Die Genesung*, which he dictated shortly before his death in 1822, presents an example for the healing impact music has on the nervous condition. An elderly man called Onkel Siegfried is suffering from an *idée fixe*, that, as the narrator tells us, has grown to real madness: “Vor einigen Monaten wurde der arme alte Onkel Siegfried von einer schweren Nervenkrankheit befallen, aus der ihm eine fixe Idee zurückblieb, die, da sie feststeht, nachdem der Körper gesund ist, in wirklichen Wahnsinn ausgeartet.”⁹ He is convinced that nature, offended by ignorant human beings, has lost its green and hopeful colour and is a grey and black place instead. “Er bildete sich nämlich ein, die Natur, erzürnt über den Leichtsinne der Menschen, die ihre tiefere Erkenntnis verschmähten, die ihre wunderbaren, geheimnisvollen Arbeiten nur für ein reges Spiel zu kindischer Lust auf dem armseligen Tummelplatz ihrer Lüste hielten, habe ihnen zur Strafe das Grün genommen. In ewige schwarze Nacht sei nun der sanfte Schmuck des Frühlings, die sehnsüchtige Hoffnung der Liebe, das Vertrauen der wunden Brust [...] Dahin ist das Grün, dahin die Hoffnung, dahin alle Seligkeit der Erde [...]”¹⁰. To cure him, his niece Wilhelmine and her suitor, a young physician, take him into a forest.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷ Cf. Werner Friedrich Kümmel: *Musik und Medizin. Ihre Wechselbeziehungen in Theorie und Praxis von 800 bis 1800*. Freiburg, München 1977. (= *Freiburger Beiträge zur Wissenschafts- und Universitätsgeschichte*. Ed. Hugo Ott.) Vol. 2. 1977, p. 265 f.

⁸ Rita Wöbkemeier: *Erzählte Krankheit. Medizinische und literarische Phantasien um 1800*. Stuttgart 1990, p. 26 ff.

⁹ Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann: „Die Genesung.“ In: Hoffmann: *Sämtliche Werke*. Ed. Wulf Segebrecht und Hartmut Steinecke. Frankfurt am Main 1985. Vol. 3., p. 582.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 583.

Wilhelmine has already been the only person to give him some comfort at times by singing for him and telling him about green trees and bushes. “Fräulein Wilhelmine ist des Alten Herzblatt, und ihr allein gelang es, in schlaflosen Nächten dadurch einigen Trost in seine Seele zu bringen, daß sie, wenn er in halben Schlummer lag, leise – leise von grünen Bäumen und Büschen sprach, und auch wohl sang.”¹¹ While Siegfried is asleep, they lay him down on the grass. The doctor sits next to him and exercises a magnetic cure. As in so many other works by Hoffmann, the text presents magnetism, somnambulism and the curing methods of Mesmer and Puysegur, but here a musical therapy is added: Wilhelmine sings a song to the patient, that is taken from a play by Calderon: *La banda y la flor*. Its subject is the beauty of the colour green. “In der grünen Farbe glänzen, / Ist die erste Wahl der Welt, / Und was lieblich dar sich stellt! – / Grün ist ja die Tracht des Lenzen, / Und man sieht, um ihn zu kränzen, / Keimend aus der Erde Grüften, / Ohne Stimmen, doch in Düften / Atmend, in den grünen Wiegen / Buntgefärbte Blumen liegen, / Welche Sterne sind den Lüften.”¹² The effort is rewarded: Nature and music finally prove to be proper remedies to cure Siegfried’s madness and bring his mind back to sanity. The rural surroundings combined with music as a means of therapy also hint at ritual healing practices in Greek antiquity. The so-called Aesculapia were rural places far away from cities. As Meinecke points out, they were meant to restore the health of sick people by using “psychagogic therapy” which was to “induce in the patient an ecstatic experience in order to awaken the curative power of the soul, and thereby restore the harmonious relation between it and the body.”¹³ This is what happens in “Die Genesung” when the patient is taken to a forest and Wilhelmine sings a song to him. Apollo and Aesculapius were, in the ancient Greeks’ imagination, closely linked to natural healing powers and thus to nature itself. Meinecke sums up as follows: “The arts of Apollo and the muses, vested in Aesculapius, greatly enhanced those psychological factors which were naturally present in attractive and healthful surroundings, far removed from the distractions of urban centers, since shady groves and thermal springs, even theaters, stadia, and gymnasia offered every opportunity to influence the psychic nature of the patient.”¹⁴

But there are also several examples in romantic writing that present music as a two-faced art that can have negative as well as positive effects on the musician or the listener. In his *Brief des Kapellmeisters Kreisler an den Baron Wallborn*, Kreisler describes what he sees as the music-making

¹¹ Ibid., p. 583.

¹² Ibid., p. 583.

¹³ Meinecke: „Music and Medicine in Classical Antiquity“, p. 50.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

of the mob (“das Musiktreiben des Pöbels”).¹⁵ Not only glamorous arias that he describes as “heillos [...]”, also concerts and sonatas have afflicted his health. Kreisler refers to the bourgeois cultural life in the 19th century that is a popular target for romantic critics. They disdained the dilettante family music as well as the travelling virtuosi. According to Hoffmann, both parties profane the sacred art of music. In a simple tune, Kreisler finds a remedy for the violence that desecrated music exerts on him. It is not performed in a perfect way, but it shows true feeling and well meaning. This gives some healing comfort to him. Instead of complaining about the “heillosen” arias, Hoffmann here explicitly uses the verb “heilen”. “...daß [...] oft eine kleine unbedeutende Melodie [...] mich tröstete und heilte.”¹⁶ As Kreisler elaborates in his letter, music can cause both: destruction and cure. It depends on the way it is treated and performed by society and its musicians. It must also be stressed that it is not always technical perfection that counts, but the inner attitude of the performer.

In Hoffmann’s *Das Sanctus*, music and religion touching the problem of ‚Kunstreligion‘ (and possible blasphemy) are closely related to each other. A young singer, Bettina, loses her voice, because she left church in the middle of the “Sanctus”. The narrator tells us as follows: “Ihr wißt, daß ich mich im Tenor angestellt hatte, das Sanctus war eingetreten, ich fühlte die Schauer der tiefsten Andacht mich durchbeben, da rauschte es hinter mir störend, unwillkürlich drehte ich mich um, und erblickte zu meinem Erstaunen Bettina, die sich durch die Reihen der Spielenden und Singenden drängte um den Chor zu verlassen.”¹⁷ Her reason for this are some other appointments she has made for the same day. “ ‚Sie wollen fort?‘ redete ich sie an. ‚Es ist die höchste Zeit‘, erwiderte sie sehr freundlich, ‚daß ich mich jetzt nach der *** Kirche begeben, um noch, wie ich versprochen, dort in einer Kantate mitzusingen, auch muß ich noch Vormittag ein Paar Duetts probieren [...]‘“¹⁸ She prefers her glamorous role in society to showing some respect for the sacred piece. The narrator criticizes her and prophesies to her that she would not sing in a church for a long time. Shortly thereafter, Bettina loses her voice. “Während dieses Gesprächs erklangen die vollen Akkorde des Sanctus, und das Weihrauchopfer zog in blauen Wolken durch das hohe Gewölbe der Kirche. ‚Wissen Sie denn nicht‘, sprach ich, ‚daß es sündlich ist, daß es nicht straflos bleibt, wenn man während des Sanctus die Kirche verläßt? – Sie werden so bald nicht mehr in der Kirche singen!‘ – Es sollte Scherz sein, aber ich weiß nicht, wie es kam, daß mit einemmal meine Worte so feierlich klangen. Bettina erblaßte und

¹⁵ Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann: „Kreisleriana.“ In: Hoffmann: Sämtliche Werke. Ed. Wulf Segebrecht und Hartmut Steinecke. Frankfurt am Main 1993. Vol. 2.1, p. 369.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 369.

¹⁷ Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann: „Das Sanctus.“ In: Hoffmann: Sämtliche Werke. Ed. Wulf Segebrecht und Hartmut Steinecke. Frankfurt am Main 1985. Vol. 3., p. 147.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 147.

verließ schweigend die Kirche. Seit diesem Moment verlor sie die Stimme.¹⁹ At Bettina's bedside, a doctor and a travelling enthusiast share the opinion that her illness has mental reasons. Research from the view of medical history confirms that Hoffmann here correctly describes the symptoms and causes of a neurosis. Music again has some (negative) effect on psyche and nerves: Bettina is guilty of having treated music as a mere decoration in her bourgeois cultural life. For this reason, her disease must be regarded as a kind of punishment for desecrating art as such. In the end, she recovers by bibliotherapy – she overhears a narration that mirrors her own mistakes and helps her reflect on them. These two examples show that a wrong, degrading relation to music can cause illness – in the listener as well as in the musician him- or herself. When music then regains its proper position, its negative impact on body and nerves is exchanged for a positive and healing effect.

But in romantic writing about music, there are also many examples that present music only as dangerous and sickening – as a neurotoxic substance. Joseph Berglinger, the young composer whose life Wackenroder describes in *Das merkwürdige musikalische Leben des Tonkünstlers Joseph Berglinger* gives an instructive example. His strong love of music has made him a successful musician. In his early youth, music has proved to be a remedy against his general unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Now he has gained some experience with worldly bourgeois culture and his illusions about 'pure' art and its position in society are gone. But, one last time, he composes an oratorio that is meant for Easter Sunday. While he is working on the oratorio, he undergoes a number of extreme emotions. His morbid mental situation produces a masterpiece, as the narrator tells us. "Seine Seele war wie ein Kranker, der in einem wunderbaren Paroxysmus größere Stärke als ein Gesunder zeigt."²⁰ But on the day of the performance, Berglinger suffers from a strong nervous tension that afterwards transforms into a weakness of the nerves. He becomes chronically ill and, after a short time, he dies. "Aber nachdem er das Oratorium am heiligen Tage im Dom mit der heftigsten Anspannung und Erhitzung aufgeführt hatte, fühlte er sich ganz matt und erschläfft. Eine Nervenschwäche befiel, gleich einem bösen Thau, alle seine Fibern; – er kränkelte eine Zeitlang hin, und starb nicht lange darauf, in der Blüthe seiner Jahre."²¹ Once again, a strong presence of Brown's theory of irritability and holistic romantic medicine in general shines through the text. Berglinger falls from a sthenic condition, which music has caused in him, into an asthenic state of the nerves that is explicitly described as "Nervenschwäche." His over-irritated nervous con-

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

²⁰ Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder „Das merkwürdige musikalische Leben des Tonkünstlers Joseph Berglinger.“ In: Wackenroder: Sämtliche Werke und Briefe. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe. Ed. By Silvio Vietta and Richard Littlejohns. Heidelberg 1991. Vol. I., p. 144.

²¹ Ibid., p. 143–144.

dition has caused the loss of his mental balance. In Wackenroder's short text belonging to the Berglinger complex, the composer himself expresses some doubts about music and its impact on his life. „Meine lüsternen Kunstfreuden sind tief im Keime vergiftet; ich gehe mit siecher Seele umher, und von Zeit zu Zeit ergießt sich das Gift durch meine Adern.“²² Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, likewise, turns out to be a disease for the singer who does not keep a proper mental distance to the music. In *Don Juan*, E.T.A. Hoffmann displays a fantastic plot: A traveling music lover attends a performance of *Don Giovanni* at the opera. The singer who represents Donna Anna suddenly appears in his loge between the scenes. The first person-narrator himself senses some kind of somnambulist state in which their dialogue takes place. They have a conversation about musical romanticism and its supernatural intensity of feeling. In contrast to this, the bourgeois audience afterwards criticizes Donna Anna's emotional singing as dangerous for irritable nerves. In a final conversation the narrator takes part of, the reader is informed about the Italian singer's death: she has died of nervous fits (“Nervenzufälle”). Nonetheless, the narrator indicates before that she is transported to “Dschinnistan”, the “Geisterreich”: Hoffmann's terms for a supernatural romantic kingdom.

As literary romanticism impressively shows, music can not only affect the nerves but also the mind. Hoffmann's Kapellmeister Kreisler has become a prefiguration of the romantic artist as such. When he appears in *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr* and as the protagonist of the *Kreisleriana*, madness is constantly attributed to him and serves as a kind of leitmotif. In the preface to *Kreisleriana*, the narrator remarks: “Viele behaupteten, Spuren des Wahnsinns an ihm bemerkt zu haben”.²³ He traces it back to an over-irritable mind – „ein überreizbare[s] Gemüt“.²⁴ This kind of madness is closely connected to Kreisler's passion for music. Baron Wallborn, exchanging letters with Kreisler in the second part of *Kreisleriana*, writes: “Man hat nämlich Dieselben [Wallborn/Kreisler] lange schon im Verdachte der Tollheit gehabt, einer Kunstliebe wegen, die etwas allzumerklich über den Leisten hinausgeht, welche die sogenannte verständige Welt für dergleichen Messungen aufbewahrt.”²⁵

It is well known that the 18th century brought many changes to the scientific discourse on mental illness. Physicians like Johann Christian Reil, Pinel, or William Battie are central for the European debate on madness at that time.²⁶ But John Brown, in his theory of irritability, also refers to psychic diseases. He includes them into his system: illnesses like melancholy and hypochondria are due to under-irritation, mania belongs to

²² Ibid., p. 224.

²³ Hoffmann: „Kreisleriana“, p. 33.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

²⁵ Ibid., 362.

²⁶ Patricia Tap: E.T.A. Hoffmann und die Faszination romantischer Medizin. Düsseldorf 1996, P. 22 ff.

sthenia/over-irritation.²⁷ Kreisler's restless and passionate behavior as a musical enthusiast could be categorized as a sthenic disease: mania. William Batties famous *A Treatise on Madness* 1758 regards madness not just as a disorder of the mind, but also as a disorder of emotion that is related to the nerves. He counts exaggerated feelings among the possible reasons for madness.²⁸ From this point of view, it is just natural that Kreisler's passion for music affects his nerves and his mind. But the question here is: does it really affect his brain? Is Kreisler mentally disturbed or is it just his "Kunstliebe" that causes his seemingly eccentric behavior? To allude to Foucault's elaborations on madness, Kreisler's mental illness is ascribed to him by a society whose understanding of art is superficial and incomplete. Again and again, *Kreisleriana* and *Kater Murr* act out a kind of irony that unmasks Kreisler's madness as socially constructed. Along with the scientific debate on mental disease, 'madness' finds its way into German romantic literature in a new way. As Susan Sontag puts it in *Illness as Metaphor*: Psychic disease around 1800 was used in literary texts as a means to present society as an authoritarian and repressive place to be.

As we see in German literature around 1800, music is considered to be both, a cure and a cause for disturbed mental and physical states. In some cases, problematic behavior and even death are its consequences. It is common for all the examples I have mentioned that music in its pure and intense form opens up a way that leads away from society. If its effect is healthful, it is coupled with peaceful nature ("Die Genesung"), or it makes the listener *forget* about social life and its burdens. If it is sickening, it transfers the musician from earthly life to a supernatural kingdom of art by death, or at least separates him to some degree because he is considered mad.

The romantic opposition between art and life, bourgeois and artist, is a long-lasting topos. Especially about 1900, it holds a prominent position in the literature of so-called decadence and aestheticism. At the end of my paper, I would like to ask the question whether the idea of music as a remedy, a "heilende Göttin," maybe gets lost along the way. One example that may stand in for many others around 1900 is Gabriele Klötterjahn, heroine in Thomas Mann's novella *Tristan*. She is a typical example of a *femme fragile*, a popular type of woman in German literature around 1900. When Thomas Mann describes her appearance, he makes use of common traits that characterize a *femme fragile*. "Ihre schönen, blassen Hände, ohne Schmuck bis auf den schlichten Ehering, ruhten in den Schoßfalten eines schweren und dunklen Tuchrockes, und sie trug eine silbergraue, anschließende Taille mit festem Stehkragen, die mit hochaufliegenden Sammetarabesken über und über besetzt war. Aber diese gewichtigen und warmen Stoffe ließen die unsägliche Zartheit, Süßigkeit und Mattigkeit des Köpfchens nur noch rührender, unirdischer und lieblicher

²⁷ Ibid., p. 28 ff.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 22 f.

erscheinen. Ihr lichtbraunes Haar, tief im Nacken zu einem Knoten zusammengefaßt, war glatt zurückgestrichen, und nur in der Nähe der rechten Schläfe fiel eine krause, lose Locke in die Stirn, unfern der Stelle, *wo über der markant gezeichneten Braue ein kleines, seltsames Äderchen sich blaßblau und kränklich in der Klarheit und Makellosigkeit dieser wie durchsichtigen Stirn verzweigte. Dies blaue Äderchen über dem Auge beherrschte auf eine beunruhigende Art das ganze feine Oval des Gesichts.* [*italics BS*]²⁹ Gabriele Klöterjahn comes to be treated at the Sanatorium “Einfried”. She is suffering from a disease of the lungs. As the blue “Äderchen” in her face, her disease – tuberculosis, it seems – is a typical phenomenon of an aestheticist young woman. Her acquaintance with the aestheticist writer Spinell, also living at “Einfried,” turns out to have a fatal effect on her unstable health. He persuades her to return to playing the piano as she did in her youth. In the end, it is music which is responsible for her rapidly progressing illness and her death. She dies shortly after she has spent an evening with Spinell, playing Wagner on the piano. “Die Rätin Spatz stand draußen. Sie hielt ihr Schnupftuch vor den Mund, und große, längliche Tränen rollten paarweise in dieses Tuch hinein. ‚Herr Klöterjahn‘, brachte sie hervor..., es ist so entsetzlich traurig ... sie hat so viel Blut aufgebracht, so fürchterlich viel ... Sie saß ganz ruhig im Bette und summte ein Stückchen Musik vor sich hin, und da kam es, lieber Gott, so übermäßig viel ...”³⁰ Obviously, before she dies, Gabriele is singing Wagner’s music that acts like a poisonous substance. While music in romanticism is still oscillating between being the goddess of health and a neurotoxic substance, in German literature around 1900 it is inseparably linked to decadence. Notwithstanding, in many texts even a weak and useless artist is superior to a vigorous merchant: Music proves to be inimical towards health and life. Health and innocence: Wackenroder closely relates them to music in *Die Wunder der Tonkunst*. But Mann’s Tonio Kröger, in his conversation with Lisaweta, summarizes as follows: “Das Reich der Kunst nimmt zu, und das der Gesundheit und Unschuld nimmt ab auf Erden.”³¹

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³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

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