MUSIC AND SPIRIT IN EARLY MODERN THOUGHT

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The relationship between music and spirit in the early modern period is essentially to do with health and well-being. For as Henry Peacham observed in his *Compleat Gentleman* (1622): “The Physitians will tell you, that the exercise of Musicke is a great lengthener of the life, by stirring and reviving of the spirits, holding a secret sympathy with them…”¹ As I will show in this essay, the belief that music’s sympathetic action on the spirit could restore and maintain well-being was remarkably enduring, my examples of this belief spanning the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. It was also held throughout this period that music was particularly useful as a cure for melancholy, a disease to which scholars were especially prone.²

Both these ideas were embedded within a conceptual framework where health was regarded as a proper balance between the bodily humours as well as a harmony between the body and soul, either of which could be disturbed by a variety of external factors that resulted in disease. The physician’s role was to diagnose the imbalances that his patient suffered from (for example, melancholy was due to an excess of black bile or choler in the blood) and to prescribe appropriate changes in diet and exercise to counteract their ill effects.³ Although it might seem surprising, we have very little documentary evidence of physicians suggesting that their patients should listen to music.⁴ However there are indications that even without

² Music is briefly noted as a remedy on pp. 40–41 of Timothy Bright’s *Treatise of Melancholie* (London, 1586), the earliest English text on this affliction. Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford, 1621) also contains a section on “Music a Remedy,” in which he details its effects.
⁴ The examples most often cited date from the early eighteenth century and involved two patients suffering with fevers finding relief through music. These cases were discussed in “Observation sur un musicien guéri d’une fièvre avec délire par la musique,” *Histoire de l’Académie Royale des Sciences, année 1707* (Paris, 1730), 7–8 and “Observation sur une
the recommendation of a physician early modern individuals consciously used music as a remedy for melancholy, especially lovesickness.\(^5\)

My reason for exploring the links between music and spirit stems from an interest in early modern understandings of what we would now call music’s emotional effects and their relevance to health. Chiefly following Aristotle, the nature of sound and music were topics traditionally treated in the context of the soul, which unlike today was identified as an important subject of natural philosophical and also medical enquiry, as well as being central to moral philosophy and theology.\(^6\) This was because the soul was thought to play an essential role in all physical and mental actions including sense perception and motor activity, motions that were mediated by the spirit or what was often called the sensitive soul.\(^7\) It is also important to realize that during this period the emotions were generally called the passions or affections, and were thought of as actions of the soul that lie midway between acts of reason and acts of the senses. It was a subject which seemed to receive renewed attention from the early seventeenth century, the most influential work on this topic probably being Descartes’s *Les passions de l’âme*, first published in 1649 and translated into English a year later. An earlier English example of this genre is the Jesuit Thomas Wright’s *The Passions of the Minde* (1604), in which he explains that “those actions then which are common with us, and beastes, wee call Passions, and Affections, or perturbations of the mind.”\(^8\) If the passions are not moderated according to reason the soul is afflicted with some


