



BRILL

NUNCIUS 39 (2024) 338–361



# Touching the Soul

*Nerves and Music in the Origin of Passions by B.J. Feijoo (1676–1764)*

*Elena Serrano* | ORCID: 0000-0003-1542-4378

Institut d'Història de la Ciència, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona,

Barcelona, Spain

*elena.serrano@uab.cat*

Received 26 January 2023 | Accepted 6 May 2024 |

Published online 18 June 2024

## Abstract

Exploring music's influence on the physiological model developed by the Benedictine natural philosopher Benito J. Feijoo (1676–1764), this article aims to contribute to ongoing conversations about the role of intersensory, affectional, and gender experiences in the production of knowledge. One of the most influential writers in the Hispanic world, Feijoo sought to explain how the impressions of the external world captured by the senses could come to provoke “passions” or “movements of the soul,” what today we call “emotions.” The article suggests that Feijoo's deep knowledge of the nature of sound, his observations and readings about music's influence on mood and health, and above all, the intense feelings that music aroused in him influenced his view on the physiology of emotions.

## Keywords

history of emotions – intersensoriality – gender

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/18253911-bja10105

© ELENA SERRANO, 2024 | ISSN: 0394-7394 (print) 1825-3911 (online) from Brill.com 07/02/2024 09:01:30AM  
via Open Access. This is an open access article distributed under the terms  
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## 1 Introduction

The delight of music, accompanied by virtue, makes on earth the novitiate of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

BENITO J. FEIJOO, 1753

In August 1737, the acclaimed Italian castrato Carlo Broschi (1705–1782), better known as Farinelli, considered by many of his contemporaries the best singer of all times, left the stages of London to settle at the Spanish court.<sup>2</sup> Instigated perhaps by resentful English and French publics or by political adversaries, rumours circulated that Queen Isabel de Farnesio had hired Farinelli to cure the king's melancholy, and that each night the virtuoso entered the king's chamber to sing for him the same four arias.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not this was true, one thing that is certain is that music's effect on the emotional state was well known to early moderns, having been recommended for the "affections of the soul" for centuries.<sup>4</sup> It supposedly cured melancholy, yet its healing power was taken to

- 
- 1 Benito J. Feijoo, "El deleite de la música acompañado de la virtud hace en la Tierra el noviciado del cielo," in *Cartas Eruditas y Curiosas*, vol. 4 (1753), <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjfc401.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024. All the works by Feijoo discussed in this article will be quoted from the digital version at <https://www.filosofia.org/fejoo.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024. I will note only the year of the piece's first publication, otherwise directing the reader to the digital version. Reference will be made to the multivolume *Teatro Crítico Universal* and *Cartas Eruditas y Curiosas* under the shortened forms *Teatro* and *Cartas*. The *Teatro* was a collection of eight volumes published between 1726 and 1740 with 117/118 essays in total. The contents of volume 9, which collected additions and commentaries to texts from the first eight volumes, were placed by later editors (beginning in 1765) in the original eight volumes. The *Cartas* was a collection of five volumes published between 1745 and 1760. The English translations of Feijoo's texts are mine.
  - 2 On Farinelli's fabulous technique and his contemporaries' praise, see Patrick Barbier, *Historia de los Castrati* (Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara Editor, 1990), 93–130.
  - 3 Daniel Martín Sáez, "La leyenda de Farinelli en España: historiografía, mitología y política," *Revista de Musicología* 61, no. 1 (2018): 41–77. Martín Sáez explains the creation and circulation of the story about Farinelli coming to cure the king as a political strategy originating in England and France, since it denigrated the political capacity of the Spanish monarchy. Cf., however, John Rice, *La música en el siglo XVIII* (Madrid: Akal, 2019), 84. According to Rice, the arias that Farinelli sang to the king included *Pallido il Sole* and *Per questo dolce amplesso*, from the Opera *Artaserses*, by Johann Adolph Hasse (Venice, 1730): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyfyhisttM8>, accessed 11 January 2023; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTfoFqnOSFA>, accessed 11 January 2023. On Farinelli singing for the king (albeit different songs!), see Carlo Broschi Farinelli, *La solitudine amica: Lettere al conte Sicinio Pepoli*, ed. Carlo Vitali (Palermo: Sellerio, 2000), 143–144.
  - 4 Peregrine Horden, ed., *Music as Medicine: The History of Music Therapy since Antiquity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

extend to other maladies such as mania and tarantism, and the most enthusiastic doctors even recommended music for all kinds of ailments.<sup>5</sup> Music was especially advised for curing unrequited love, or *amor hereos*, the “psychosomatic medieval malady *per excellence*.”<sup>6</sup> Along with walks through scented gardens brightened up by the sounds of streams and fountains, music was prescribed to heal aching hearts.

Literary, philosophical, and medical sources described music and love in paradoxical ways, as Linda Phyllis Austern has eloquently explained.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the erotic power of music was acknowledged in a wide range of contexts: medical writings, poetry, songs, emblems, and paintings; love rituals such as marriages; inscriptions and decorations in instruments; and even handbooks for learning to play instruments. And yet on the other hand, these sources also praised music’s spiritual power, and especially its perceived ability to prompt emotional communion with God.<sup>8</sup> In words of Andrew Dell’Antonio, “the fluid state of sacred and erotic ecstasy in early counter-reformation piety allowed for the incorporation of musical ecstasy in a continuum.”<sup>9</sup>

Certainly, the arrival of Farinelli, who remained in Spain during the last ten years of Felipe’s reign and the next fourteen of Fernando VI’s, animated musical life at the court. Farinelli directed all royal musical projects and hired the best singers and scenographers to stage the librettos of acclaimed authors such as Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782).<sup>10</sup> Most likely, he also stirred debates at

- 
- 5 Pilar León Sanz, “Medical Theories of Tarantism in Eighteenth-Century Spain,” in Horden, *Music as Medicine*, 273–292, on 275. Pilar León Sanz, “Music Therapy in Eighteenth Century Spain: Perspectives and Critiques,” in *Music and the Nerves 1700–1900*, ed. James Kennaway (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 98–117.
  - 6 Gaia Gubinni, “Introduction,” in *Body and Spirit in the Middle Ages. Literature, Philosophy, Medicine*, ed. Gaia Gubinni (Berlin, Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), 8.
  - 7 Linda Phyllis Austern, “Musical Treatments for Lovesickness: The Early Modern Heritage,” in Horden, *Music as Medicine*, 213–272.
  - 8 Austern, “Musical Treatments,” in Horden, *Music as Medicine*, 227: “In matters of lovesickness, music was thus understood to be the flame to light the fire or to ignite the hope of reciprocal passion, as well as the cooling draught of purgation and distraction.” On the influence of music on devotes practices see for instance: Claude Victor Palisca, “Moving the Affections through Music: Pre-Cartesian Psycho-Physiological Theories,” in *Number to Sound. The Musical Way to the Scientific Revolution*, ed. Paolo Gozza (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 289–308, 289.
  - 9 Andrew Dell’Antonio, “Construction of Desire in Early Baroque Instrumental Music,” in *Gender, Sexuality and Early Music*, ed. Todd M. Borgerding (New York: Garland Science Publishing, 2002), 201.
  - 10 Rice, *La música en el siglo XVIII*, 80. Malcolm Boyd and Juan José Carreras, eds., *Music in Spain During the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Thomas McGeary, “Farinelli in Madrid: Opera, Politics, and the War of Jenkin’s Ear,” *The*

court about music. Farinelli embodied the new “galant style,” also called Italian style, which contrasted with the older learned or French style that favour basso continuo, polyphony, and counterpoint.<sup>11</sup> Musicians and intellectual elites disputed eagerly about the virtues of each style. They also discussed about its true nature and purpose: if music should obey mathematical rules, speak to reason or feeling, or how each style affected the listeners’ mood and health.<sup>12</sup> A case in point was whether the ancient music played by the Greeks had greater power for healing than contemporaries’ music.

This article aims to explore the influence of this musical context on the writings of another “intellectual agitator,” the natural philosopher Benito J. Feijoo (1676–1764), and on his ideas of how emotions arose.<sup>13</sup> While Farinelli thrilled the courtiers with his sophisticated musical montages, Feijoo delighted some and upset others with his polemic writings, which reached astonishing printing numbers for the Spanish market.<sup>14</sup> To his adherents, Feijoo represented

---

*Musical Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (1998): 383–421, 385. On the scenography, see “Francesco Battaglioli: Escenografías para el Real Teatro del Buen Retiro,” *Revista de Arte—Logopress*, 16 May 2013, <https://www.revistadearte.com/2013/05/16/francesco-battaglioli-escenografi-as-para-el-real-teatro-del-buen-retiro/>, accessed 23 January 2023; and Margarita Torrione, “Nueve óleos de Francesco Battaglioli para el Coliseo del Buen Retiro,” in *La Corte de los Borbones: Crisis del modelo cortesano*, ed. José Martínez Millán, Concepción Camarero Bul-lón, and Marcelo Luzzi Traficante, vol. 3 (Madrid: Polifemo, 2013), 1733–1777. See also Carlo Broschi (Farinelli), *Fiestas reales* (Madrid: Turner, 1992), and Antonio Martín Moreno, *El padre Feijoo y las ideologías musicales del XVIII en España* (Orense: Instituto de Estudios Orensanos, 1976), 15–58, and 162–165.

- 11 Enrico Fubini, *Los enciclopedistas y la música* (Valencia: Universitat de València, 2002), first edition in 1971 and 1991 (Turin).
- 12 Rice, *La música en el siglo XVIII*, 25–40, especially 29. Other terms for the learned style are the “fugato style,” the “strict style,” and the “classical style.” Rice explains the evolution, differences, and similitudes of both styles taking as an example of François Couperin’s “Les graces naturelles,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e5idx4xumsc>, accessed 5 October 2022; Anna Bon’s “Sonata en fa mayor,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtioaXG6U3c>, accessed 5 October 2022; and Giovanni Battista Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzOmPUu-F\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzOmPUu-F_M), accessed 5 October 2022. On the perception of Farinelli by his contemporaries, Angus Herit, *The Castrati in Opera* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1956), 95–110. On Farinelli’s image in Spain, see Angel Medina, *Los atributos del capón. Imagen histórica de los cantores castrados en España* (Madrid: Ediciones del ICCMU, 2001), 149–161.
- 13 Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), advises avoiding the term “emotions” to speak about the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the term “emotion” does not capture the complexities of “passion,” “appetite,” “affection,” and “sentiments.” Here, I will use the word “emotion” to address in general all these terms.
- 14 Some of his essays were translated into Portuguese, Italian, French, and English. He was

the new philosophy without overstepping the Catholic faith. His style, at once humorous and erudite, was as effective in discrediting scholastic thought and defending the empirical method as it was in explaining Newton's force of gravity, the causes of earthquakes, or the intellectual equality of the sexes. He had his detractors, however, who wrote inflammatory texts against him—spurring waves of support in response that probably made him even more popular.<sup>15</sup> Feijoo made his entrance on the public stage in 1726, at the age of fifty. From his Benedictine convent in the northern city of Oviedo, and aligned with the reformist faction of the government, he wrote tirelessly to disabuse Spaniards of common errors, as he wrote in the prologue of the first volume of his *Teatro Crítico Universal* (1726–1740). Initially a compilation of sixteen amusing, witty essays that soon became a blockbuster, the *Teatro* was followed by eight additional volumes, supplemented later by five volumes of *Cartas Eruditas y Curiosas* (1742–1760), which also proved to be highly successful with the public.

Already in the first volume of the *Teatro*, in 1726, Feijoo engaged in one of these musical polemics, namely, which kind of music should be played in religious services. He argued against the custom of playing the new Italian galant style at church, because it could “move other affections” instead of inspiring love and devotion to the Almighty, which illustrate how strongly he recognized the enormous power of music to arouse “affections”, to “awake virtues or vices” as he put it.<sup>16</sup>

As part of this special issue, I am interested in relating his ideas about the origin of passions to his own and his circle's sensory musical experiences.<sup>17</sup>

---

also a bestseller in the overseas Hispanic territories. Agustín Coletes Blanco, “La huella de Feijoo en Inglaterra (1739–1818),” in *Feijoo, hoy (Semana Marañón 2000)*, ed. Inmaculada Urzainqui (Oviedo: Instituto Feijoo de Estudios del Siglo XVIII, 2003), 281–307; and Inmaculada Arias de Saavedra, “Feijoo en las bibliotecas privadas del siglo XVIII,” in *Con la razón y la experiencia: Feijoo 250 años después*, ed. Inmaculada Urzainqui Miqueleiz and Rodrigo Olay Valdés (Oviedo: Trea, 2016), 351–377.

15 On the position of Feijoo among intellectual elites, see Giovanni Stiffoni, “Introducción. Biografía y crítica,” in *Teatro Crítico Universal*, ed. Giovanni Stiffoni (Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1986), 9–71. To be sure, Feijoo had powerful allies in the court (including the kings Felipe V and Fernando VI), but also ferocious detractors among the reactionaries, as well as silent detractors among reformist elites (for instance, the circle of Gregorio Mayans). The works published in favour of and against Feijoo are also available digitally at <https://filosofia.org/fejoo.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024. On how Feijoo himself used the paratexts in his works to reinforce his authority, see Pedro Álvarez de Miranda, “Los paratextos de las obras de Feijoo,” in Urzainqui Miqueleiz and Olay Valdés, *Con la razón*, 331–350.

16 Feijoo, “Música de los templos,” in *Teatro*, vol. 1 (1726), 285–309. <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjft114.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024.

17 On Feijoo's opinion about the curative power of music, see Feijoo, “Maravillas de la música

Music played a crucial role in the scientific thinking of the time. In mathematics, cosmology, and natural magic, because of its numerical nature; in medicine because of its recognized power to heal.<sup>18</sup> From the seventeenth century on, philosophers began to pay more attention to music's physicality, that is, to the consequences of considering music as movements of air.<sup>19</sup> In the following, I will explore how Feijoo incorporated his familiarity with the physics of sound and his observations on the emotional power of music into his explanations of the workings of the nerves and the origins of passions, concretely the arousal of love. According to the historian of music Antonio Martín Moreno, Feijoo appealed "innumerable times" to music to explain his opinions.<sup>20</sup> I would like to add that he recurred to music especially to conceive and explain the relationship between soul and flesh in a way that resonated deeply with his readers. Music was not only for the privileged who lived near the court and attended the lavish shows organized by Farinelli or were wealthy enough to hire personal orchestras, but it occupied a central place in everyday events such as masses, military parades, religious processions, and popular theatres; it was in the streets, in taverns, dances, and social gatherings. It was used to uplift the spirit, to seduce, and to heal.

This article will thus investigate the possibilities opened by placing Feijoo's writings on music and affections side by side. I will show first how Feijoo advised his readers to cope with a heartbreak of love, how he conceived the nerves as musical strings stirred by the sense impulses, and how he solved the moral and religious issues raised by this model. Then I will examine Feijoo's thinking about music and gender, to end with a bold suggestion on the possible role of music in controlling sexuality. To be sure, Feijoo was not the first who was inspired by music or the physics of sound in thinking about the body. On the contrary, the research on acoustic, elasticity, and springs, and particularly, on "restitution" (that is, when internal tension came to the original state after being altered) provoked in some natural philosophers a way of understanding bodies as possessing internal harmonies and tensions, for instance in Thomas Hobbes and Robert Hooke. Jamie C. Kassler also acknowledged the probable influence of philosophers' own experience of sickness and their observations of

---

y cotejo de la Antigua con la moderna," in *Cartas*, vol. 1 (1742). <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjfc144.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024.

18 Joachim Küpper, "The Medical, the Philosophical and the Theological Discourses on the Senses," in *Body and Spirit in the Middle Ages Literature, Philosophy, Medicine*, ed. Gaia Gubbini (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 111–124.

19 Penelope Gouk, *Music, Science and Natural Magic in Seventeenth Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

20 Martín Moreno, *El padre Feijoo*, 67.

doctors' practices.<sup>21</sup> Musicologists and doctors also discussed different mechanisms to account for the perceived influence of music in the spirits. Sometimes, even instruments were compared to living bodies (consider the shape of violins, guitars, and harps, even of vertical pianos) whose vibrations actively interacted with the bodies of the audience.<sup>22</sup> Feijoo thus was able to communicate to a wide audience the undulating nature of male and female bodies by appealing to the common experience of being in love and enjoying music.

## 2 A Cure for an Unhappy Love

In 1736, Feijoo offered a useful bit of advice to his numerous followers: a cure for unhappy love.<sup>23</sup> In his essay "Remedies of Love," Feijoo sympathizes with unfortunate lovers, shows a good sense of humour, and demonstrates his awareness of the latest medical debates, in particular, the British anatomists' ideas about the neurological origins of passions (more later). To be sure, the entire essay "Remedies of Love" might have seemed rather odd coming from a monk who rarely abandoned the provincial city of Oviedo, where he was a professor of theology at the university. Yet he was far from an isolated monk, but rather a man with a busy intellectual and social life.<sup>24</sup> Living close to the lively Atlantic port of Gijon, he had access to the newest publications, corresponded with intellectual Spanish elites, and held gatherings in his cell and his friends' houses. His wide-ranging reading habits and experiences of everyday life might have helped him understand the sorrows of those in love: he took confessions from the nuns of the nearby Benedictine convent and her female friends consulted him on poetry and music (not to mention that he himself composed verses).<sup>25</sup>

21 Jamie C. Kassler, *Inner Music: Hobbes, Hooke and North on Internal Character* (London: Athlone, 1995).

22 Ingrid J. Sykes, "Le corps sonore: Music and the Auditory Body in France 1780–1830," in *Music and the Nerves*, 72–97.

23 Feijoo, "Remedios del amor," in *Teatro*, vol. 7 (1736), 379–429, edition published in Madrid in 1778 (Andrés Ortega, a costa de la Real Compañía de Impresores y Libreros). <http://www.filosofia.org/fejoo.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024.

24 Ivy Lilian McClelland, *Benito Jerónimo Feijóo* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969). See also several essays in Urzainqui, Miqueleiz and Olay Valdés, *Con la Razón*, and in particular, "Perfil Literario del Padre Feijoo" (on 331–350) by Pedro Álvarez de Miranda. See also Antonio Lafuente and Nuria Valverde, "Las políticas del sentido común: Feijoo contra los dislates del rigor," in Urzainqui, *Feijoo, hoy*, 131–157. On Feijoo extended network, see Mónica Bolufer Peruga, "Revisiting Benito Jerónimo Feijoo's Defence of Women (1726)," *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 43 (2016): 223–249. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26242552>.

25 Feijoo, "Razón del Gusto," in *Teatro*, vol. 6 (1734), 363. Feijoo narrated his visit to a nun.

His advice, however, was based on how he understood the workings of the sense organs. This is typical of his approach: to catch readers' attention with a thrilling topic (who hasn't suffered the travails of love?), and then drag them into philosophical issues. In the case of "Remedies for Love" and the essay that immediately preceded it, "Causes of Love," Feijoo tried to explain how the material particles that impacted the senses (the image, smell, etc. of the beloved) could produce mental images, lasting memories, and passions that in turn affected the flesh, making one tremble, blush or perhaps exciting one's sexual desires. Feijoo thus discussed what Mary Terrall called the "perennial question" and Jonathan Kramnick "the hard problem of consciousness": how material things produce ephemeral ones.<sup>26</sup> At the time Feijoo was writing, there was no unifying theory on the origins of the passions, although there was a renewed interest in the so-called sciences of the soul. The focus of this rekindled discussion shifted from the *properties* of the soul to the *interactions* between soul and body. In place of a metaphysical or theological bent of the discussion during the previous centuries, what now prevailed was a "natural-philosophical approach."<sup>27</sup> To cite Fernando Vidal, the soul was to be studied "by its appeal to observation, experience, experimentation, and introspection."<sup>28</sup>

In the new models, the nerves became the material connection between the mind/soul and the body.<sup>29</sup> Like many others of his time, Feijoo emphasized

- 
- <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjft611.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024. See also Mónica Bolufer, "Ilustración, catolicismo y género: Feijoo en el debate historiográfico," *Cuadernos de Estudios del Siglo XVIII*, no. 11 (June 2023): 59–78. <https://doi.org/10.17811/acesxviii.11.2023.3-163>.
- 26 Jonathan Kramnick, "Living with Lucretius," in *Vital Matters. Eighteenth-Century Views of Conception, Life, and Death*, ed. Helen Deutsch and Mary Terrall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 13–38, on 14–15; Mary Terrall, "Material Impressions: Conception, Sensibility, and Inheritance," in the same book, 109–130, on 109.
- 27 Fernando Vidal, *The Sciences of the Soul: The Early Modern Origins of Psychology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011). Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason: The Modern Foundations of Body and Soul* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), and Gary Hatfield, "Remaking the Science of the Mind: Psychology as a Natural Science," in *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-Century Domains*, ed. Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 184–231.
- 28 Vidal, *The Sciences of the Soul*, 11. See also George S. Rousseau, "Cultural History in a New Key: Towards a Semiotic of the Nerves," in *Interpretation and Cultural History*, ed. Joan H. Pittock and Andrew Wear (London: Macmillan, 1991), 25–81.
- 29 Nerves and humours were not mutually exclusive and even Feijoo used the Galenic framework many times. See several essays in George S. Rousseau, ed., *The Language of Psyche: Mind and Body in Enlightenment Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Mary Terrall, "Material Impressions: Conception, Sensibility and Inheritance," in *Vital Matters: Eighteenth-Century Views of Conception, Life, and Death*, ed. Helen Deutsch and Mary Terrall (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 109–129, on 111; Jonathan Kramnick, "Living with Lucretius," in Deutsch and Terrall, *Vital Matters*, 13–38, on 14–15.



what was considered the ultimate haptic nature of the five “external senses.” Particles external to the body colluded with the sense organs to give rise to sensory impressions: particles of light in the retina, odorous particles in the nose, gustatory in the tongue, air impulses in the ear, and physical in the skin. These impressions were then transported by nerves to the brain.<sup>30</sup> More controversial was what happened then.

The so-called “internal senses” were supposed to deal with these raw sensory impressions. Their exact number was disputed (five, four or three), but they performed different tasks: combining various sensory impressions (the common sense, also called the sensitive), recalling past sensations (memory), creating new associations (imaginative), and evaluating and making decisions (cognitive and estimative, sometimes also called judgment), such as fleeing if danger is nearby, as a sheep does at the sight of a wolf. For some, these internal senses were faculties of the *sensitive soul*, which, unlike the *rational soul*, was shared by both humans and animals and perished with the body. They thus mediated between external sensory impressions and bodily reactions. They explained the behaviour of animals and the insane, and all those behaviours in contradiction with reason. They also explained strange phenomena, in which, although the sense organs were healthy, no sensation came, such as not “hearing” a sound when asleep or, on the contrary, still seeing a bright light even after looking away, as well as the cases described in the medical literature in which patients had impediments to see, hear, etc., not because of a lesion in the organs, but in the nerves.<sup>31</sup> For Feijoo, three were the faculties of the sensible soul (the common sensorium, the imagination or fantasy, and the memory). In his scheme, the impressions captured by the senses were taken to be transmitted through the nerves to the sensorium commune, where all the nerves coming from the sensory organs converged. Then, these impressions were “interpreted” by the imagination.<sup>32</sup> The imagination was also thought to

30 For a discussion of touch as a single sense or many in the medieval times, see: Fernando Salmón, “A Medieval Territory for Touch,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 2 (2005): 45–65.

31 Peter E. Pormann, “Avicenna on Medical Practice, Epistemology, and the Physiology of the Inner Senses,” in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 91–108; Charis Charalampous, *Rethinking the Mind-Body Relationship in Early Modern Literature, Philosophy and Medicine: The Renaissance of the Body* (New York, London: Routledge, 2015), 5, and the discussion of Ockham, 15–21.

32 Feijoo, “Que no ven los ojos sino el alma; y se extiende esta máxima a las demás sensaciones,” in *Cartas*, vol. 4 (1753), 371: “Sólo siente el alma, y siente en aquella parte del cerebro donde está el origen de los nervios.” <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjfc426.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024.

be able to work with the memories of objects, thus the memory of the lover could provoke not only visible changes in the body (sparkles in one's eyes, a nascent smile), but also changes in the internal organs provoking the "feeling" of pleasure.<sup>33</sup>

Just how these feelings of pleasure ultimately arose was again a matter of discussion among contemporaries.<sup>34</sup> For some, it was the accumulations in certain places of "animal spirits"—supposedly subtle liquids that circulated through the hollow or semi-hollow nerves. The famous British anatomist Thomas Willis (1621–1675), for instance, explained in these terms what pleasure consisted of:

Pleasure consists of an agglomeration of spirits with their gentle, caressing movements, conveyed through the nerves to the medulla oblongata, where they generate similar ideas, and excite other spirits to agreeable dances.<sup>35</sup>

Notice how the florid prose of Willis (or to be more precise, of his translator from Latin) appealed to sensory experiences (gentle, caressing movements, agreeable dances) to evoke the feeling of pleasure. Willis used an "hydraulic model," in which sensations, appetites, affections, and passions were provoked because animal spirits agglomerated into a determinate organ or flowed away from another.<sup>36</sup>

For others, however, among them Feijoo, emotions were not to be explained through any material spirit, but as a movement of the nerves themselves. For Feijoo, nerves were not tubes through which animal spirits circulate, but elastic strings capable of vibrating in different ways to transmit different feelings.<sup>37</sup>

33 Feijoo, "Remedios del amor," 409–410: "creo, que en algunas pasiones, aun en la presencia del objeto, es la imaginación quien da todo el impulso a las fibras del cerebro, o sólo mueve el objeto las fibras del cerebro [410] por medio de la imaginación [...] De este influjo, que tiene la imaginación en el cerebro, viene la mayor parte del mal, que nos causan nuestras pasiones, y principalmente del que causa la pasión amorosa. Si el amor sólo se encendiese a la presencia del objeto, sería una dolencia de cortísima duración: una llama momentánea como de relámpago, pues sólo con cerrar los ojos, o volverlos a otra parte, se disiparía."

34 On a more detailed schema of Feijoo's thinking see Elena Serrano, "A Feminist Physiology: B.J. Feijoo (1676–1764) and His Advice for Those in Love," *Isis* 112, no. 4 (2021): 776–785.

35 Quoted in D.N. Wagner, "Body, Mind and Spirits: The Physiology of Sexuality in the Culture of Sensibility," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39 (2016): 335–358, on 340.

36 Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, 55–61.

37 On the different theories of nerves' composition, see: Álgvar Martínez Vidal, *Neurociencias*

Depending on the stimulus, nerves could “separate, corrugate, stretch, compress, loosen, or become more flexible or more rigid.”<sup>38</sup> These movements were then transmitted to the organs, which ultimately “felt” the passion.<sup>39</sup> Just as hunger is felt in the stomach, Feijoo told his readers, the heart is the organ where love is felt.<sup>40</sup> Panic and sadness, too, were sensed in the heart, Feijoo argued: the heart reacted to the amorous currents of the nerves, expressing all the different states in which lovers found themselves as it “disturbs, agitates, compresses, dilates, infuriates, saddens, rejoices, and encourages.”<sup>41</sup> The nervous currents could also provoke other effects in other parts of the body, such as trembling, blushing, sighing, sweating, and weeping. And if love happened to have “concupiscent part,” as Feijoo put it, it would also have effects in the sexual organs.<sup>42</sup>

This serves as the setup for Feijoo to discuss the cure to love: since emotions were not caused by an excess of humours, the traditional methods of bleeding, sweating, and purging were useless. Equally useless, he argued, was Ovid’s advice: to flee the city where the lover lived, dwell at length on the lover’s defects, occupy oneself with something else, or abundantly satisfy one’s sexual desire. Either this was impossible to do—who, he asked, could constantly dwell on the defects of one’s beloved?—or it contradicted Christian faith. Instead, Feijoo recommended thinking of something dreadful while evoking the image

---

*y revolución científica en España: la circulación neural* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1989).

- 38 Feijoo, “Causas del amor,” in *Teatro*, vol. 7 (1736), 367–368: “Estas, o aquellas fibras ya se implican, ya se separan, ya se corrugan, ya se extienden, ya se comprimen, ya se laxan, ya se ponen más tirantes, ya más flojas, ya más flexibles, ya más rígidas.” <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjft715.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024.
- 39 In 1753, he explicitly doubted the existence of animal spirits: Feijoo, “Que no ven los Ojos sino el Alma,” 368: “And why are they to be admitted, if without them the whole animal economy can be explained, and in my feeling much better than with them?; “¿Y por qué se han de admitir, si sin ellos se puede explicar toda la economía animal, y en mi sentir mucho mejor que con ellos?”
- 40 Feijoo, “Remedios del amor,” 39–400, 400: “El amor no reside en la flema, en la melancolía, en la cólera, o algún otro humor extrañable, por catárticos, diuréticos, o sudoríficos.”
- 41 Feijoo, “Causas del amor,” 366: “El amor patético es el propio de nuestro asunto. Este es aquel afecto fervoroso, que hace sentir sus llamaradas en el corazón, que le inquieta, le agita, le comprime, le dilata, le enfurece, le humilla, le congoja, le alegra, le desmaya, le alienta, según los varios estados en que halla el amante, respecto del amado.”
- 42 *Ibid.*, 365: “El que ama, experimenta una determinada sensación en el corazón, que es propia de la pasión amorosa: el que se enfurece, otra sensación distinta, que es propia de la ira: el que se entristece, otra distinta, que es propia de la tristeza: el hambriento experimenta en el estómago la sensación propia del hambre, el sediento la de la sed: el lujurioso experimenta en otra parte del cuerpo la sensación propia de la lascivia.”

of the lover. In this way, one would be able to counteract the currents of tenderness running through one's nerves with currents of fear. He compassionately admitted that such a treatment would be difficult and specified what kind of images were most effective. He suggested that they be tailored to one's nightmares, and that they would be more effective if this memory were something terrifying that one had observed—or better yet, experienced—firsthand. He even suggested images based on his own experience. The greatest effect, he wrote, would come from recalling a sequence of several horrible images while thinking of one's lover. Such a treatment required patience since one had to “accustom one's imagination” to fly quickly from the image of the lover to the dreadful one.<sup>43</sup>

Or if patience was lacking, there was also the radical cure he called the “jump of Leucadia.” An island in the Peloponnese, Leucadia had a breathtaking cliff that ended in the sea, from which wretched lovers could throw themselves. Should one survive, he wrote, the cure would be certain, as the image of the lover would forever be attached to the horror of the fall.<sup>44</sup>

### 3 The Body as a Malleable Instrument

Feijoo's sense of humour aside, he is, in fact, taking the idea of nerves behaving as vibrating strings to its logical end, that is, that vibrations could be disrupted, enhanced, and stopped by other vibrations. Consider for example, what he explains in other pieces related with the physics of the sound. In “Campana y crucifijo” (Bell and crucifix), he noted that the supposedly miraculous movements of a crucifix hanging on the grille of the main chapel in the Cathedral of Lugo were not due to any supernatural power, but to the vibrations of the tolling bells, transmitted through the walls of the tower.<sup>45</sup> In his essay “Simpatía y Antipatía,” he thoroughly describes a well-known effect of sound: the fact that the vibrations from one string of a cithara can cause another string to vibrate, too.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, just as instruments sound differently if their strings

43 Feijoo, “Remedios del amor,” 429.

44 Ibid., 412.

45 Feijoo, “Campana y crucifijo de Lugo con cuya ocasión se tocan algunos puntos de delicada física,” in *Cartas*, vol. 2 (1745). <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjfc202.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024.

46 Feijoo, “Simpatía y Antipatía,” in *Teatro*, vol. 3 (1729). <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjft303.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024.

are thick or thin, long or short, dry or wet, people react differently to the same sensorial stimulus or, we might say, depending on the internal arrangement of their nerves, they *sound* differently. Said Feijoo:

The texture, position, consistency, flexibility, or rigidity, dryness, humidity, etc. [of the nervous fibers] are more or less apt for the terrible object to form that impression that causes fear, or for the melancholic to excite sadness, or for the offensive to excite anger.<sup>47</sup>

Although not explicitly, Feijoo is in fact treating bodies as musical instruments. As already mentioned in the introduction, he was not unique in this. By explaining the workings of the nerves analogous to musical strings, Feijoo was appealing to his own and his readers' musical experience. Moreover, one wonders to what extent the fashion of castrati, which was spectacularly important during these years, might not have contributed to the idea of thinking of bodies as prodigious musical instruments far beyond any metaphorical sense. As Patrick Barbier masterfully explains, castration together with exhausting training was thought to turn the bodies the virtuosi into "celestial" instruments. Their larynxes were as small as women's (due to a lack of ossification and an absence of the Adam's apple), but with the elasticity of a child's, maintaining a tone somewhere between that of a soprano and a contralto. As their larynx moreover retained the position it has in children, that is, well above of that of men and slightly above that of women, it was situated closer to their resonance cavities and gave their voices a new "brilliance." The procedure of castration also caused their chests to develop a bulge, thus increasing the resonance of the rib cage. As a product of training that lasted four or six hours a day in musical conservatories, castrati also had muscular, strong vocal cords, and some, like Farinelli, developed impressive lung capacity and could hold their breath while singing for more than a minute.<sup>48</sup>

This idea of bodies as instruments is reinforced years later, in 1753, when he discussed the classical topos of the "harmony of the body" in another interesting piece, "The delight of Music, accompanied by virtue, makes on earth the

47 Feijoo, "Causas del amor," 372: "Según que las fibras del cerebro son de tal textura, posición, consistencia, flexibilidad, o rigidez, sequedad, o humedad, &c. son más, o menos aptas, para que en ellas el objeto terrible forme aquella impresión, que causa el miedo, o el melancólico la que excita la tristeza, o el ofensivo la que excita la ira."

48 Barbier, *Historia de los Castrati*, 26–27. About the commentaries of the contemporaries on their voices, on 100–110.

novitiate of Heaven. To a lady devoted to and fond of music.<sup>49</sup> He takes up an expression of Aristotle in which he affirms that “our animus is harmony” or “has harmony” and elaborates at length on what the meaning of this sentence would be. The reason that music touches us so deeply, Feijoo argued, might lie in the similarity between music and human beings. This claim, he tells the reader, is about the consonance between the body and the rational soul. Pure matter and pure spirit are philosophically separated, and yet between them shines the “most sublime, the most admirable harmony.”<sup>50</sup> Feijoo explains: “what sounds in the body, resounds in the soul; what sounds in the soul, resounds in the body.”<sup>51</sup> He then gives an example of this harmonic relationship, which is worth quoting here in full because it summarizes how he envisioned the intimate connection between senses and feelings:

If the point of a needle touches any part of the body, at the delicate contact of that imperceptible *little nervous cord* [my emphasis] that struck the needle, the whole soul is moved and resents it. The soul feels any affliction, any sorrow, any grief that torments it; at once, as echoes of that pain, various sensitive movements result in the body; for which the animal spirits received; tremors, contortions, mutations of the countenance, decay of colour, turbulent agitation in the blood, weakening of the forces, some disorder in the functions, either vital, or animal. The same happens in the passions of the soul. There is none to whom some consonance in the body does not result. Anger moves the blood to the surface: fear gathers it inward; the love of concupiscence makes it burn in impure flames.<sup>52</sup>

49 Feijoo, “Que no ven los ojos sino el Alma,” 369: “Entre un espíritu puro, cual es el alma, y la materia, hay una distancia filosófica tan grande, que se hace ininteligible, que esta resultancia provenga de alguna conexión natural de uno con otro.”

50 Feijoo, “El deleite de la música,” 9: “En nuestro ser, en este todo, compuesto de cuerpo, y alma racional, resplandece la más perfecta, la más sublime, la más admirable armonía de cuantas produjo la naturaleza o discurrió el arte.”

51 Ibid.: “Cuanto suena en el cuerpo, resuena en el alma; cuanto suena en el alma, resuena en el cuerpo.”

52 Ibid., 9: “Toque en cualquiera parte del cuerpo la punta de una aguja, al delicado contacto de aquella imperceptible cuerdecita nerviosa, que hirió la aguja, se conmueve, se resiente toda el alma. Sienta el alma cualquiera aflicción, cualquiera congoja, cualquiera pesar que la atormente; al punto, como ecos de aquel dolor, resultan en el cuerpo varios sensibles movimientos; por el que recibieron los espíritus animales; estremecimientos, contorsiones, inmutación del semblante, decadencia de color, agitación turbulenta en la sangre, debilitación de las fuerzas, algún desorden en las funciones, o vitales, o animales. Lo mismo sucede en las pasiones del alma. Ninguna hay, a quien no resulte alguna consonancia en el cuerpo. La ira mueve la sangre hacia la superficie: el temor la recoge hacia dentro; el amor de concupiscencia la hace arder en llamas impuras.”

The reader familiar with Feijoo's works will have noted that the animal spirits he rejected in 1736 reappear here in 1760. But I would like to put aside this fleeting return to instead highlight the forceful image with which Feijoo presents us: the touching of a needle as the trigger of an interior turmoil. The same internal turbulence occurs when a pleasant stimulus occurs: "Any movement, or soft, and placid contact of the body recasts joy, or pleasure in the soul."<sup>53</sup>

The corollary is that to experience pleasure in music, we mortals need our bodies. This posed some questions, for instance, about what would happen in the beyond. As Feijoo pointed out, the Christian heaven may resonate with seraphic music, but we must wait to enjoy it till the Final Judgment and the resurrection of our bodies. Until then, angels would play only for God, the Virgin Mary, and some saints who were lucky enough to arrive at heaven with their flesh and souls joined together. This intimate consonance between senses and feelings, however, also raised other, more pressing problems. If our individual arrangement of nerves and organs determined our reactions, feelings, and tastes, where then was free will? Where is then our responsibility? The model risked raising serious religious, ethical, and even aesthetic problems. It could be taken as preventing the establishment of a canon of beauty, along with the idea that aesthetic standards could be set forth. It had the potential to threaten one of the basic principles of the Enlightenment: the possibility of learning and improving.

### 3.1 *Grades of Pleasure*

Aware of these dangers, theology professor Feijoo addressed these issues in several essays, but most notably in those entitled "Ethiopian Color," "Reason of Taste," and "Despotism, or Tyrannical Domination of the Imagination."<sup>54</sup> In these texts, he discusses the workings of the imagination, noting one characteristic in particular: "apprehension," or the capacity of the imagination to work with the representation of sensuous objects. Apprehension, he argued, can be trained. He asks readers to consider, for instance, how taste develops. Things prove pleasant to our taste depending on two characteristics: "temperament," used here in the sense of the internal disposition of nervous fibers and organs, and apprehension. Temperament could not be changed, he noted, but

53 Ibid., 10: "Cualquier movimiento, o contacto suave, y plácido del cuerpo refunde alegría, o placer en el alma."

54 Feijoo, "Color Etiópico," in *Teatro*, vol. 7 (1736), <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjft703.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024; Feijoo, "Razón del gusto;" Feijoo, "Despotismo, o dominio tiránico de la Imaginación," in *Cartas*, vol. 4 (1753). <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjfc408.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024.

one could change—through the activity of reasoning—the apprehension of things. He writes: “The vices of the apprehension are cured with reasons.”<sup>55</sup> He then elaborates further when considering if pleasure can be measured—if there are things that cause more pleasure than others. Hailing from a region known for bagpipes, Feijoo discussed a case that most likely drew on his own experience and Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics about actuality and potentiality. Who would have more pleasure in listening, he asks, the one that likes more a concert of bagpipes, or the one that likes more a concert of violins? Here we can distinguish the elitist Feijoo, who asserts a hierarchy of the educated above the uneducated in sensorial terms: “In equality of perception on the part of the faculty, the more excellent the object is, the more excellent is the act.”<sup>56</sup> So if the objects to be perceived (heard in this case) are better (and as he saw it, violins’ music is more excellent than that of bagpipes), then the pleasure of listening to the former would be greater. Consequently, he concluded, people who like exquisite objects (arguably, the more educated) experienced more enjoyment than those who like less refined objects.

#### 4 Music, Gender, and Sexuality

Although Feijoo might have an elitist idea about sensual pleasures, he did not classify ways of sensing according to sex. He applied the Lockean notion that ideas originate in the senses, to emotions and moral sentiments. This capacity to “feel” was used to define hierarchies, for instance, between humans and animals, educated classes and the common people, or nonexperts and experts—and between the sexes. In words of Anne C. Vila: “bodily senses were a tool for constructing the theory of sexual dimorphism.”<sup>57</sup> Feijoo nevertheless defended the idea that there was no such thing as male and female nature; rather, he argued, this distinction was constructed a posteriori to justify social prejudices. In the “Defense of Woman,” which appeared in 1726 at the very beginning of his long career, he argued that there is not any physiological base for any intellectual difference between men and women. In other pieces, he also

55 Feijoo, “Razón del gusto,” 362: “los vicios de la aprehensión son curables con razones.”

56 Ibid., 358: “que el sujeto, que gusta más del objeto más delectable, goza mayor deleite, que el que gusta más de lo que es menos.”

57 Anne C. Vila, “Introduction: Powers, Pleasures, and Perils of the Senses in the Enlightenment Era,” in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. Anne C. Vila (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–20, 16.



defended the equality of the sexes in other ways, for instance in relation to their ability to appreciate music or their capacity for love. He did not argue, like his friend the doctor Martín Martínez, that children, women, and old people cried more profusely because their nervous fibers were more tender than those of men. Sensing was not marked by sex, he claimed, but by one's biography (memories, education), inner anatomical constitution (fibers and organs), and, as we have just seen, by the way one trained one's imagination (apprehension).

Nevertheless, we also find occasions in which Feijoo took recourse to old clichés. In already mentioned "Despotism, or Tyrannical Domination of the Imagination," he dealt with a question posed by a reader as to whether laxative and vomitive medicines could act at a distance, as a woman claimed happened to her. Feijoo argued that in the case of the vomitives, the effect could be easily explained as the workings of the imagination, as a faculty that can work with "representations"—in this case, the representation of disgust associated to the medicine. He added that, as the subject was a woman, this was the most plausible reason, because women's "imagination are more vivid and their brains softer."<sup>58</sup> On the one hand, as Mónica Bolufer has pointed out, this case exemplifies the difficulties contemporaries often experienced in their statements about the sexes, as widespread prejudices showed themselves even in those who were intellectually convinced of the equality of the sexes.<sup>59</sup> It also exemplifies the problems that the researchers encounter when approaching Feijoo (as I noted in passing above about his ideas on animal spirits). His extensive production of texts over so much time, along with his style, which often jumps from one topic to another, makes it challenging to follow his opinions, which must be understood from a broad perspective across many statements, and considering all the circumstances in which they were written, published, and read.

However, there is a letter to a female reader that arguably illuminates how Feijoo disentangled senses and emotions from gender, at least in the case of music. In 1753, a dearest female friend asked him if music, one of her most cherished pastimes, might turn her away from God.<sup>60</sup> Scholars have extensively explored the intricate relationship between music, sexuality, and gender.<sup>61</sup> Just to exemplify the problematic relationships of women with music,

58 Feijoo, "Despotismo, o dominio tiránico de la Imaginación," 100: "Por ser más viva la imaginación de las mujeres, y más blando su cerebro, por consiguiente más susceptible de engañosas impresiones."

59 Bolufer Peruga, "Revisiting Feijoo," 223–249.

60 Feijoo, "El deleite de la música," 1.

61 See for instance Susan McClary, "Why Gender Still (as Always) Matters in Music Stud-

consider Santa Cecilia depictions, the patroness of music since the 15th century. As explained by Sigrid Harris, some portraits emphasize the saint's mystical nature, while also showing definite undertones of eroticism. Moreover, concerning the musical education of girls, some families were enthusiastic to provide resources, whilst others actively prevented their daughters from pursuing such skills because of the allegedly sensuality of a young woman playing music.<sup>62</sup>

Notwithstanding, Feijoo's answer to his friend was straightforward: enjoying music was not only not harmful for her, but advisable, as music helps virtue. Like his friend, Feijoo was also fond of music. In several texts, for instance, he explains the joy he felt at hearing the Spanish guitar, even suggesting that he might know how to play it.<sup>63</sup> As a child, he recounts, he admired the little guitars of the Portuguese pilgrims that passed by to Santiago de Compostela; later on, he took pleasure reading a handbook on how to play the instrument.<sup>64</sup> It seems that Feijoo even commissioned the construction of a six-stringed guitar (the usual number of strings in early modern times was five, see Fig. 1), giving it an appearance that one of his detractors considered strange.<sup>65</sup> What we can be certain of, however, is how Feijoo admired its sound:

---

ies," in *Dichotomies, Gender and Music*, ed. Beate Neumeier (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009), 49–59; Todd M. Borgerding, ed., *Gender, Sexuality, and Early Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Bruce W. Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture. Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Samantha Chang and Tim Shephard, "Music, Gender and the Erotic in Italian Visual Culture of the 16th Century: Introduction," *Early Music* 51, no. 1 (Feb. 2023): 21–24.

62 Sigrid Harris, "Transcending the Body: Music, Chastity and Ecstasy in Reni's St Cecilia Playing the Violin," *Early Music* 51, no. 1 (2023): 91–108. For a survey of these issues, see James Kennaway, "Music and the Body in the History of Medicine," in *The Oxford Hand Book of Music and the Body*, ed. Sander L. Gilman and Youn Kim (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 333–343; and Judith Peraino and Suzanne G. Cusick, "Music and Sexuality," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 3 (2013): 825–872.

63 Martín Moreno, *El Padre Feijoo*, 61–63.

64 Feijoo, "El deleite de la música," 23; "Acuérdome de haber leído, siendo muchacho, en el libro que compuso para el uso de la Guitarra el bello compositor Gaspar Sanz, que éste había visto a un Guitarrista manejar una cuerda sola de modo, que parecían sonar en ella, no uno sólo, sino varios instrumentos." The handbook was Gaspar Sanz, *Instrucción de música sobre la guitarra española y método de sus primeros rudimentos hasta tañerla con destreza* (Zaragoza: Herederos de Diego Dormer, 1674), new edition in 1697.

65 Martín Moreno, *El padre Feijoo*, 62–63.



**FIGURE 1** Guitar from the workshop of the Catalan Josephus Massager, Barcelona 1758. Note how it has five double cords. Cat. No. 5265. Musikinstrumenten-Museum, Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung, SPK Berlin  
PHOTO: HARALD FRITZ, 2009

I also once saw a man of talents shed tears of delight and tenderness upon hearing a plucked guitar play, which never happened when he heard the symphony of several instruments.<sup>66</sup>

In other texts, Feijoo showed that he knew how other string instruments worked, and that his knowledge of music allowed him to read and analyse scores. It is even possible that he himself tried to compose musical pieces.<sup>67</sup> He lamented not being born rich, which would have allowed him to enjoy good musical performances.<sup>68</sup>

But above all, he acknowledged the power of music to touch the body's sensible fibers. Feijoo developed his argument about how music serves virtue in three points. His first argument concerned the excellence of music compared to all other arts, exemplified in the harmony of the celestial spheres. His second point argued that music was the art most in accordance with our rational nature (see the above discussion about the harmony of body and soul). In his third point, he defended the idea that music had also moral utility. Music, he writes, not only makes us "forget the other passions" as it sounds, but:

[it] gradually brings the heart to a sweet, tempered state allowing one to correct the acrimony of anger, the ardor of concupiscence, the bitterness of hatred, the austerity of melancholy, the effervescence of ambition, the thirst of covetousness, and the exaltation of pride.<sup>69</sup>

Here Feijoo seems to express his own sublime musical experience.

66 Feijoo, "Maravillas de la música y cotejo de la antigua con la moderna," in *Cartas*, vol. 1 (1742), 342: "Vi también alguna vez a una persona de muy buenos talentos verter lágrimas de deleite, y ternura, oyendo tañer una Guitarra punteada; lo que nunca le sucedió, oyendo la sinfonía de varios instrumentos." <https://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjfc144.htm>, accessed 20 April 2024. Text from the edition published in Madrid in 1777 (en la Imprenta Real de la Gazeta, a costa de la Real Compañía de Impresores y Libreros).

67 Feijoo, "Música de los templos," 292 and 301; Feijoo, "En respuesta a una objeción musical," in *Cartas*, vol. 1 (1742), 193–195. See Martín Moreno, *El padre Feijoo*, 63–67.

68 Feijoo, "El deleite de la música," 30: "Solo dos cosas en toda mi vida he envidiado a los grandes señores: poder oír a buenos músicos y tener medios para socorrer a los necesitados."

69 *Ibid.*, 14: "Y en efecto le presta, no sólo haciendo olvidar mientras dura los objetos de las demás pasiones, mas trayendo poco a poco el corazón a una dulce temperie con que se corrige la acrimonia de la ira, el ardor de la concupiscencia, la acerbidad del odio, la austeridad de la melancolía, la efervescencia de la ambición, la sed de la codicia, y la exaltación de la soberbia."

I would like to finish adding a stroke to current debates on the epistemic role of music in relation to gender and sexual identities, through the character who opened the essay. Despite all their differences, Farinelli shared an ambiguous status with Feijoo—or more generally, the castrati shared a status with Catholic clergymen. The obvious similarity in both cases was the prohibition of marriage, which signaled the peculiar place of these men in society and their sexual status. In the case of the castrati, this was not because of any impossibility that they might achieve an erection since this was not necessarily prevented by castration. Castrati could also ejaculate, though without sperm—hence the prohibition of marriage. In the words of the theologians, those who had been castrated suffered from *impotentia generandi* but not *impotentia coeundi*.<sup>70</sup> And while clergymen were considered fathers of their extended Catholic family, they were often jocularly compared to the female sex—an attribution exemplified by their long robes, which concealed their sexual attributes.

The masculinity of clergymen and castrati did not arguably correspond to the norms held by most laypeople and were in a way intertwined.<sup>71</sup> Employed at first by the Vatican to sing in its choirs, since the presence of women was forbidden, the castrati possessed male bodies that shared some characteristics with the female sex, such as the near absence of bodily hair, a particular distribution of fat, and sometimes the development of breasts. At the same time, hormonal imbalances made some of them very tall and long-limbed, giving them gangly figures that did not correspond to those of women. Their ambiguous gender was even enhanced because of the different roles (male and female) that they played in the opera.<sup>72</sup> To their entirely devoted fans, however, their “sublime and sensual” voices brought them closer to angels.<sup>73</sup> In the case of Farinelli,

70 Barbier, *Historia de los Castrati*, 23.

71 Katherin Crawford, *Eunuchs and Castrati: Disability and Normativity in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021).

72 Goethe explained his fascination with the castrati (he even advocated for superseding the actress: “thus, a double pleasure is given, in that these persons are not women, but only represent women. The young men have studied the properties of the female sex in its being and behaviour; they know them thoroughly and reproduce them like an artist; they represent, not themselves, but a nature absolute foreign to them.”) Quoted in Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1975), 26. See also Martha Feldman, *The Castrato. Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015); Daniel Martín Sáenz, “El jurista Giulio Capone, el cantante Ottavio Gaudioso y la defensa filosófica de la castración con fines musicales,” *Resonancias* 26, no. 51 (July–December 2022): 11–34, <https://doi.org/10.7764/res.2022.51.2>.

73 Barbier, *Historia de los Castrati*, 26–27 and 116–117; see also in Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 36–37, the words of Enrico Panzacchi (1840–1904) when he heard on of the few castrati in the Vatican chapel: “a voice that gives the immediate idea of sentiment transmuted into

music played a fundamental role in placing him in a sex that did not correspond to any earthly one, but a celestial one—a sex that was neither male nor female but seraphic, we might say. This arguably alternative masculinity was a consequence of a physical procedure that was meant to enable castrati to excel in music. Or put in another way, this sex was imprinted on their bones and cartilage, and especially, their strong vocal cords and flexible larynges, and perceived by others as contrary to gender norms.

By contrast, clergymen were classified as masculine. In fact, as scholars have pointed out, controlling (or pretending to control) their sexuality would have formed part of performing a “religious masculinity.” Their masculinity was predicated not on convivial forms of sociability between men (feasting, for instance, which might have been such a social context of this kind, was prohibited among clergymen), not on practicing sex with women, but on the public recognition of self-control—on the understanding that they were at war with flesh and lubricious temptations.<sup>74</sup> Music might have played a central role in successfully constructing, performing, and maintaining this specific ideal of ascetic masculinity. If nerves were understood as “vibrating strings,” music could counteract the desire that might run through, and, in Feijoo’s words, “gradually bring the heart to a sweet, tempered state.”

This article has tried to immerse its readers in a difficult task for historians: how the sensory and emotional world of the actors may have influenced their scientific ideas and identities. Music in the eighteenth century offers a good example of the intricacies of the senses and their relations with emotions and sexuality. It is not only apprehended by the sense of hearing, but it

---

sound, and of ascension of a soul on the wings of that sentiment.” See also Derek Alsop, “‘Strains of New Beauty’: Handel and the Pleasures of Italian Opera, 1711–28,” in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth-Century*, ed. Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 133–163.

74 The literature here mainly relates to the medieval period, as already pointed out by Joanna de Groot and Sue Morgan in their introduction “Beyond the ‘Religious Turn’: Perspectives in Gender History,” in *Sex, Gender and the Sacred: Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History*, ed. Joanna de Groot and Sue Morgan (Newark: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 5, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/9781118833926.ch12>, accessed 20 April 2024. See, for instance the essay by Pat Cullum, “‘Give Me Chastity’: Masculinity and Attitudes to Chastity and Celibacy in the Middle Ages,” in the same book, 225–240, and Jennifer Thibodeaux, ed., *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks, and Masculinity in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010).

See also <https://notchesblog.com/2016/02/09/the-manly-priest-an-interview-with-jennifer-thibodeaux/>, accessed 11 January 2023; and Elizabeth Eva Leach, “Music and Masculinity in the Middle Ages,” in *Masculinity and Western Musical Practice*, ed. Kirsten Gibson (London: Routledge, 2009), 21–39.

also speaks to the actual haptic nature of sound. Spectators of religious and military parades, for instance, might feel touched by the air vibrations caused by the tolling of bells, the sounding of trumpets and drums, and the firing of artillery salvos. Performers conversely caressed the keys of the organ or moved the bow to vibrate the strings of a violin in different ways to execute the instructions of the composer (*pianissimo*, *forte*, *vivace*). Sight was also central to the music spectacle. Not only in the lavish opera, theatre, and dancing; but also, on the way some musicians intended to evoke landscapes, springs, seasons: to translate music into “mental pictures.”<sup>75</sup> Moreover, in addition to the “external senses,” when dealing with early eighteenth-century physiology, one had to consider the believed intimate union of soul and flesh for some authors such as Feijoo, or how the imagination, working with the memory, and the common sense was capable of triggering emotions and behaviours at the input of the external world. Furthermore, music, more than painting or other arts, moved the “affections,” provoking such variegated states such as sadness, joy, erotic pleasure, and communion with God, or peace of mind.

Feijoo might have found, in the pleasures that music gave him and his readers, inspiration for making sense of an undulating model of the nerves and the physiology of emotions. We might even say that music—whether apprehended externally or played internally by the senses, nerves, and imagination—allowed him and others to conform to their sexual identities. The late Roy Porter eloquently posed a crucial question: “Our sense of self presupposes an understanding of our bodies. But how do we know them? To a large degree our sense of our bodies, and what happens in and to them, is not first-hand but mediated through maps and expectations derived from the culture at large.”<sup>76</sup> The undulatory map of the body proposed by Feijoo offered one possible guide to help enlightened men and women navigate their passions and sexualities.

### Acknowledgments

Elena Serrano is a Ramón y Cajal research fellow at the Institut d’Història de la Ciència (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, iHC-UAB). This article was

75 David Howes, “Hearing Scents, Tasting Sights: Towards a Cross-Cultural Multimodal Theory of Aesthetics”, in *Art and the Senses*, ed. Francesca Bacci and David Mellon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 161–181 (general reflection). See several essays in Simon Smith, Jackie Watson and Amy Kenny, eds., *The Senses in Early Modern England, 1558–1660* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

76 Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, 44–45.

cofounded by the Ramón y Cajal contract RYC2021-031850-I / AEI / 10.13039/501100011033, the European Union *Next Generation EU/PRTR*, and the project *CIRGEN: Horizon 2020/ERC-2017-Advanced Grant-787015*. I am grateful to my coeditors in this special issue, Hansun Hsiung and Elena Paulino, and to the rest of the contributors for their insightful commentaries in the seminar that we held at the University of València. My thanks also to Mónica Bolufer, Kapil Raj, Montserrat Cabré, and Aurelia Pessarrodona for their wise suggestions, as well as to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful remarks and bibliographic recommendations.