

High-Art Music and Low-Brow Types: Physiognomy and Nineteenth-Century Music Iconography

Alan Davison

The relationship between cultural practices and their particular visual manifestations in art raises innumerable complexities for the art historian; so when a clear connection can be ascertained between the cultural and visual, it reveals much of the artist's intentional, and no doubt unintentional, use of visual cues. In the case of visual art from the nineteenth century, a strong link can be found between artistic conventions in depicting character type and the widespread belief in physiognomy. Physiognomy was a pseudo-science of interpreting faces that imbued many levels of culture in the late eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century. Its most tangible manifestation was in literature, both fiction and nonfiction. Musicologists who have read nineteenth-century letters, reviews or memoirs have most probably encountered descriptions of people made under the influence of physiognomic precepts. These descriptions are notable today only because they tend to be strangely detailed, or even rather tiresome in nature; they can also lead directly to bold character judgments. A typical example, regarding Franz Liszt, dates from 28 November 1840 in the *Birmingham Journal*:

He is a very good-looking young man, pale, thin, and intellectual; with a fine forehead, good nose, and well cut mouth; not a little resembling the portraits of Bonaparte, when a captain of artillery. He is plainly, in his department, a man of great genius and originality.¹

Underlying much of this fastidious attention to physical appearance and brazen confidence in assessing personality was the widespread belief in physiognomy. It was the means by which many nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans 'saw' each other, or, to put this more specifically, it provided the discourse for 'body criticism.'² If an analogy can be made, physiognomy was the psychoanalysis of the nineteenth century; it contained a whole system

¹ In Adrian Williams, *Portrait of Liszt: By Himself and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 148.

² A term used by Barbara Stafford in *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991) 84.

of classification and language of analysis. Its means of propagation ranged from the erudite monograph to the popularist pamphlet, covering topics as diverse as the nature of the soul and tips for courtship.

To return to the description of Liszt quoted above, physiognomic bias is more readily discerned in written observations than in pictures because the moral and intellectual judgments were usually explicit. Passages such as 'a fine forehead' were not taken as mere aesthetic pleasantries by the readers of the day; they carried great weight as deeper judgements of artistic and intellectual ability, as well as moral and social status.

Parallel to such written descriptions was physiognomy's impact upon visual art; an impact both obvious and yet less surely interpreted due to the complexities of visual representation. To complicate matters more, in both literary and visual art of the period, physiognomy provided a set of signs that tended towards two conflicting ends. It encouraged a new level of individualism in the detail and accuracy of physical descriptions and representations, but also aided in the manipulation and stereotyping of gender, class and race.³

Whether visual or written, the significance of physiognomically-based representations can be completely overlooked today due to physiognomy's decline into a fringe pseudo-science throughout mainstream Western society; physiognomically laden iconography tends to present itself as little more than quaint or bizarre and, as a consequence, means little. An understanding of physiognomy enables a more sophisticated analysis of iconography by providing a key to interpreting one of the most crucial elements in the nineteenth-century artist's 'armory of signs,' to borrow a term from the art historian Ernst Gombrich. Therefore, before examining specific examples of music iconography, a general background to physiognomical and phrenological thought is essential.

The theory and practice of physiognomy and its relative, phrenology (the study of the shape of the skull as an indicator of personality or mental ability), permeated the culture of nineteenth-century Europe and America to an extent hard to appreciate now. At the root of both sciences was the assumption that inward qualities, such as morality and character, were reflected in the outward, physical aspects of the face and body. (The terms 'physiognomy' and 'phrenology' were often used interchangeably in the early nineteenth century, leading to some confusion between two quite distinct sciences.) These beliefs provided moral, spiritual, practical and scientific knowledge and instruction to societies keen for guidance derived from nature, whether God-given or not, and potentially free from metaphysics.⁴ Although dismissed for much of this century as mere popular pseudo-science unworthy of study, these doctrines were taken seriously by many influential people of the day, whether scientists or not. Amongst adherents of either physiognomy or phrenology were the biologist Alfred Wallace, and the writers Honoré Balzac and Charlotte Brontë, to name but a few.

³ For discussions of the latter in particular, see Stafford, *Body Criticism*; L. Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971); Mary Cowling, *The Artist as Anthropologist: The Representation of Type and Character in Victorian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁴ This significant element in phrenology's popularity in Victorian society is examined by David de Giustino in his *Conquest of the Mind: Phrenology and Victorian Social Thought* (London: Croom Helm, 1975).

Physiognomy is by far the older of the two disciplines, dating back to antiquity, with the earliest treatise, the *Physiognomonica*, traditionally attributed to Aristotle. In this work a close relationship is inferred between the body and the soul, with various facets of physical appearance and moral character being related to one another.⁵ The rationale for this was developed from associations between human and animal features and from aesthetic principles of proportions, particularly the golden mean.⁶

The most influential pre-Enlightenment figure in the history of physiognomy was Giambattista della Porta, whose *De humana physiognomonica* (1586) was to have a profound impact: by 1655 there were at least twenty editions throughout Europe, in several translations. Della Porta's work, although bound by the scientific principles of his day, was nonetheless a significant step in physiognomy's move away from metaphysical belief systems like astrology. His work would be cited by other leading physiognomists throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular, his famous visual comparisons between animals and humans, expanding upon the pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonica*, were to capture the imagination of artists and physiognomists for years to come.

The final phase of physiognomy, from the late eighteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, was instigated by the Swiss Protestant minister Johann Caspar Lavater. Lavater established his version of physiognomy with the publication of a small treatise entitled 'On Physiognomy' in 1772, but it was his massive and lavish *Physiognomische Fragmente* in four volumes, published by 1778, that laid the foundation for the Lavaterian age of physiognomy.

According to Lavater, the face was a presentation of moral and spiritual truth, and he believed that the science of physiognomy had a role to play in helping people learn truth as well as to love each other. Although his *Fragmente* evoked varied reactions amongst intellectuals, it was generally well received and became popular rapidly. Due to being reviewed widely in journals, the *Fragmente* became well known throughout Europe even before translations and more editions were made. Its growing popularity could be measured by the fact that by 1810 over fifty-seven versions had been published in several languages.

As translated in the pre-eminent English version, Lavater defined physiognomy as

the Science of discovering the relation between the exterior and the interior—between the visible surface and the invisible spirit which it covers—between the animated, perceptible matter, and the imperceptible principle which impresses this character of life upon it—between the apparent effect, and the concealed cause which produces it.⁷

He provides countless illustrations of various facial types, and then offers his analysis of them. Unfortunately, his writings are somewhat rambling and it can be hard to draw a clear conclusion at times as to precise meanings. Lavater's opinions often appear intuitive, although an underlying consistency does manifest itself through the course of his work. He discusses various

⁵ Graeme Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) 37.

⁶ See Tytler's chapter 'Lavater and the *Physiognomische Fragmente*,' in *Physiognomy in the European Novel*, for further discussion of the pre-Enlightenment history of physiognomy.

⁷ Johann Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy, Designed to Promote the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind*, trans. Henry Hunter, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1890) 20.

individual facial features most clearly in the section entitled '100 Physiognomic rules;' later writers tended to be still more concise and systematic.

Physiognomists gave particular parts of the face specific significance according to size and shape.⁸ For example, the chin had two facets: projection and roundness. The first characteristic represented will, the latter amateness (sexual drive). The forehead had the dimensions of height, width and angle in profile. A high forehead represented intellect, but broadness was also needed to be truly wise. Regarding the mouth, the degree of fullness was representative of the level of sensual passion. Sensual personalities, indicated by large lips, were considered with distrust; thin lips were indicative of a harsh, mean personality. Thus, a well-proportioned mouth was expected in an artist. The nose was considered to be extremely important by Lavater and subsequent physiognomists. Lavater considered the ideal nose to be equal in length to the forehead. To give some specific examples, an aquiline (or Roman) nose reflected firmness, while a straight (Greek) nose indicated refinement of emotions. A snub nose represented underdevelopment and stupidity.

If one fundamental and overriding aspect of the face could have been picked, it was the facial angle; that is, the basic angle formed by the face when viewed in profile. Simply put, the straighter the angle the more intellectually and morally developed (the ideal being a Classical Greek profile); the sharper the angle the less intelligent (such as an ape-like profile).⁹

Lavater's work was much more than just an empirical guide to unveiling a person's character: it provided an appealing mix of religious and scientific lore. A typical reaction that illustrates this point comes from George Sand, as recorded in a letter to Liszt from 1835. She writes to him of her response to finding an edition of Lavater's *Fragmente*:

You can imagine my joy, and I can assure you that I have never read anything more pleasant, instructive, and beneficial. Poetry, wisdom, profound observation, goodness, religious feeling, evangelical charity, morality, fine sensitivity, nobility, and simplicity of style—those were the qualities I found in Lavater.¹⁰

During the course of the nineteenth century many of the physiognomic works that followed from Lavater were of a more popularist nature, concerning practical matters such as courtship, social appearance, and the choice of domestic staff.¹¹ Nonetheless, the nineteenth century also saw an increased concern amongst some physiognomists for their discipline to become more 'scientific,' particularly via use of comparative anatomy and Darwinian theory.¹²

⁸ Most of the following paragraph draws on the useful overview by Jeanne Fahnestock in 'The Heroine of Irregular Features: Physiognomy and Conventions of Heroine Description,' *Victorian Studies* 24 (1982): 325–50.

⁹ The concept of facial angle was developed to the extreme, and with great influence, by the Dutch anatomist Pieter Camper in his *Dissertation sur les variétés naturelles qui caractérisent la physiognomie des hommes*, first published in 1791.

¹⁰ From Franz Liszt's *An Artist's Journey: Lettres d'un bachelier ès musique, 1835–1841* trans. and annot. by Charles Suttoni (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 210–11.

¹¹ See Cowling's chapter 'Physiognomy: The Literal View' in *The Artist as Anthropologist*.

¹² In what was almost a bizarre twist of fate, Darwin himself had a first-hand encounter with physiognomy that could have changed the course of scientific history: in 1831 the captain of the *Beagle*, an adherent of Lavater's science, was unimpressed by the shape of the young naturalist's nose, and had doubts about his suitability for the voyage.

Phrenology followed hard on the heels of Lavaterian physiognomy. Developed around the turn of the nineteenth century, phrenology, or craniology as it was first called, was founded by a prominent Viennese physician Franz Joseph Gall.¹³ Gall believed that since muscles grow with use, so must the brain. He reasoned that, given a flexible enough skull, a close examination of the head will reveal various bumps and dips indicative of the mental facility underneath. Detailed and complex charts of the head—the famous ‘phrenological head’—were developed, locating specific faculties with supposed accuracy. It is in this very notion of precise localisation that phrenology differed most from physiognomy, for phrenology was very much part of the nineteenth-century’s move towards the ‘division and fragmentation of the physical subject into increasingly specific organic and mechanical systems.’¹⁴

Samuel Wells, a leading American phrenologist, published in 1867 his *New Physiognomy, or, Signs of Character*, in it presenting an overview of physiognomic and phrenological thought up to that time. Wells was not an innovator; he relied upon previous authors, such as Lavater, Le Brun and Spurzheim. Because Wells often presents material unaltered from its original source, his book makes a useful guide to previous thinkers. His ‘chief principles’ of phrenology are a succinct introduction to the science, and so the first four are reproduced below:

1. The brain is the special organ of the mind. The essence and mode of operation of the mind itself are inscrutable; we can only study its manifestations.
2. The mind, though essentially a unit, is made up of about forty different faculties, each of which is manifested by means of a particular part of the brain, set apart exclusively for it and called its organ.
3. When other conditions are the same, the larger the brain the stronger it is; and the larger the portion of the brain occupied for the manifestation of a faculty, the stronger its manifestation.
4. Those portions of brain used for faculties related to each other are located together. Thus the brain is divided into regions or groups, as well as into organs. The location and boundaries of these organs and regions may be best learned from the Phrenological bust, and the accompanying diagram.¹⁵ [See Fig. 1.]

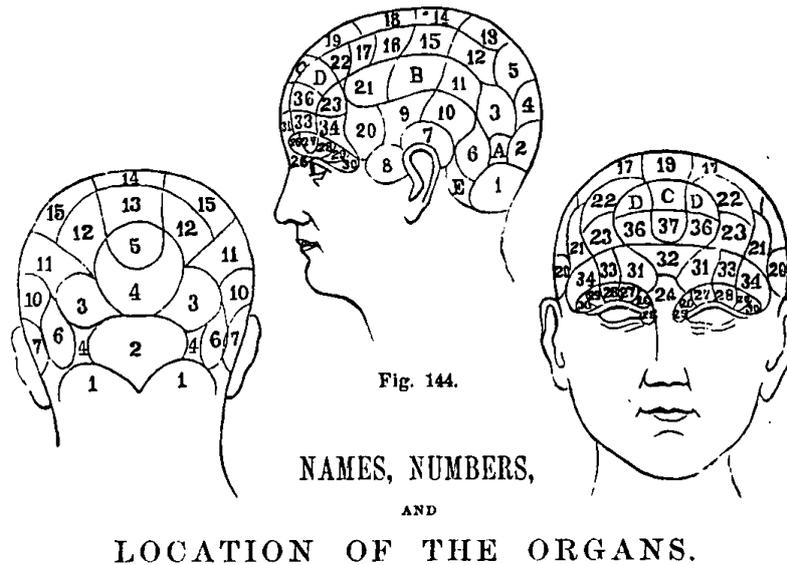
As can be seen, phrenological theory specified with great precision where the attribute of musical skill, ‘tune,’ was to be found. It was located at the temple, above and slightly behind the eye (number 34). Due to its placement, it would be most readily discerned when the subject was seen face on. Phrenology thus enabled those with musical talent to be identified from their head alone, potentially an important belief in the training of young musicians.¹⁶

¹³ It was actually Gall’s successor, Johann Gasper Spurzheim, who was instrumental in popularising phrenology.

¹⁴ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994) 81.

¹⁵ Samuel R. Wells, *New Physiognomy, or, Signs of Character, as Manifested through Temperament and External Forms, and Especially in ‘The Human Face Divine’* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1867) 130.

¹⁶ The relationship between phrenology and music remains largely unexplored, but as an example of the link, an extended lecture from the *Société phrenologique* of Paris was published in the *Revue Musicale* of 7 Sep. 1834, 281–85. Such writings demonstrate the topicality of the science, and its links with music. For some further information, see the discussion of phrenology and music by Jamie Kassler under the entry ‘Spurzheim, Johann Gasper’ in her *The Science of Music in Britain, 1714–1830: A Catalogue of Writings, Lectures and Inventions*, vol. 2 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979) 962–67.



1. AMATIVENESS.	18. SELF-ESTEEM.	26. SIZE.
A. CONJUGAL LOVE.	14. FIRMNESS.	27. WEIGHT.
2. PARENTAL LOVE.	15. CONSCIENTIOUSNESS.	28. COLOR.
3. FRIENDSHIP.	16. HOPE.	29. ORDER.
4. INHABITIVENESS.	17. SPIRITUALITY.	30. CALCULATION.
5. CONTINUITY.	18. VENERATION.	31. LOCALITY.
E. VITATIVENESS.	19. BENEVOLENCE.	32. EVENTUALITY.
6. COMBATIVENESS.	20. CONSTRUCTIVENESS.	33. TIME.
7. DESTRUCTIVENESS.	21. IDEALITY.	34. TUNE.
8. ALIMENTIVENESS.	B. SUBLIMITY.	35. LANGUAGE.
9. ACQUISITIVENESS.	22. IMITATION.	36. CAUSALITY.
10. SECRETIVENESS.	23. MIRTH.	37. COMPARISON.
11. CAUTIOUSNESS.	24. INDIVIDUALITY.	C. HUMAN NATURE.
12. APPROBATIVENESS.	25. FORM.	D. SUAVITY.

Figure 1: Phrenological head with location of organs, from Samuel Wells, *New Physiognomy, or, Signs of Character* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1867) 131.

The profound influence and pervasiveness of physiognomy can be seen from its use in nineteenth-century literature. In his masterful study of the impact of Lavaterian physiognomy upon the nineteenth-century novel, Graeme Tytler demonstrates how the literary composite portrait of the era owed much to Lavater's theories. Tytler writes in his conclusion:

the [literary] composite portrait developed increasingly away from being a largely pictorial device into one essentially physiognomical...in their methods of characterisation novelists made specific use of physiognomical principles and correlations laid down in the *Fragmente*.¹⁷

Balzac, one of the many authors who utilised physiognomy extensively in their works, wrote of it: 'Physiognomy has created a true science. It has finally taken its place among the fields of human knowledge.'¹⁸ An example of Balzac's use of physiognomy is found in his novel *La Vieille Fille*, written in 1836. In the story the forty-year-old Mademoiselle Corman, desiring a husband and child, chooses the wrong mate because of her lack of physiognomic

¹⁷ Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel* 317.

¹⁸ Quoted in Christopher Rivers, "'L'homme hiéroglyphié': Balzac, Physiognomy, and the Legible Body," *The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Casper Lavater*, ed. Ellis Shookman (Columbia: Camden House, 1993) 148.

skills. The outwardly robust bourgeois man she selects in fact had a small nose and high voice—definite signs of male impotence.

Studies in the last thirty years or so have demonstrated the significance of phrenology in characterisation of individuals in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and others. Jeanne Fahnestock, in a study of heroine description in the Victorian novel, notes the significance of physiognomy to the genre—it helped provide a means of escaping from the restricting image of the physically perfect heroine:

The pressure to idealize female character was strong for the mid-Victorian novelist. ...It was particularly difficult for a novelist to break from the stereotype with any outright declaration of a heroine's imperfections. But the physiognomical description was a way of suggesting without proclaiming, of imputing intelligence, caprice, and even sexuality to heroines without indecorous explicitness.¹⁹

Such usage of physiognomic signs suggests the potential to break from stereotypes, but this was to be very much the exception to the rule, particularly where popular visual art was concerned.

During the last fifteen years, several valuable studies have highlighted the significance in the nineteenth century of the link between the visual arts and physiognomy/phrenology; in music iconography, however, the field remains almost completely unexplored. Mary Cowling, for example, has shown that the reception of physiognomical and phrenological theories was particularly positive in Britain, within both scientific and artistic circles. Using the artist W. P. Frith's *Derby Day* from 1858 as a case in point, she underscores the necessity of understanding physiognomy when viewing visual art from the Victorian era:

The specificity with which every line and touch [of the face] is rendered is itself suggestive of the intensity of thought and feeling so evidently brought to bear on their conception: thoughts and feelings with which we are no longer familiar. Born, as they are, of a system of beliefs whose credibility is gone, all that remains is its outward semblance, a surface pattern of intense realisation which no longer discloses its original meaning. There is something paradoxical in the fact that what once ensured clarity and comprehension now serves only as a barrier to the understanding.²⁰

The influence of physiognomy upon artists could be much broader than merely supplying templates of facial types. In the case of the French artist Anne-Louis Girodet, it provided a framework to depict *caractère* rather than fleeting *passion*. Girodet's means of expressing the psychology of his subjects through their body changed from the 1780s to the 1790s. George Levitine has shown how the psychological meaning of Girodet's figures developed in sophistication from rather simple Le Brun-like pathognomic models of facial expressions and arm gestures, to more complex realisations of individual characters through effective use of physiognomic features and models.²¹

¹⁹ Fahnestock, 'The Heroine of Irregular Features' 326.

²⁰ Cowling, *The Artist as Anthropologist* 3.

²¹ See George Levitine, 'The Influence of Lavater and Girodet's *Expression des sentiments de l'âme*,' *Art Bulletin* 36 (1954): 33-44.

In Britain the influential *Art Journal* 'expressed itself...favourably towards physiognomy and phrenology...in its recommendations to the artists to adopt them as an aid to the accurate rendering of character.'²² The obvious implications of physiognomy and phrenology for artists received explicit realisation when, in 1855, the phrenologist George Combe published *Phrenology Applied to Painting and Sculpture*, which received enthusiastic reviews from art journals of the time.²³ The influence of these beliefs upon art and art aesthetics was considerable, and often led critics to judge paintings according to the quality of their physiognomic realisations.²⁴

Physiognomics provided a ready-made arsenal of signs and, by default, expectations regarding physical appearance. In depictions of fictitious people, various character types could be implied clearly by the use of appropriate signs. In depictions of real people, these signs could be manipulated in accordance with the artist's own bias, or in terms of wider expectations. As shall be seen, both cases occurred readily enough.

Some caricatures relating to music provide an apposite starting point for the application of physiognomic analysis to music iconography. Satirical illustrations, in their very exaggeration, tend to exhibit their physiognomic elements most clearly. L. Perry Curtis put the relationship between caricature and physiognomy bluntly, writing that 'Physiognomy is as inseparable from caricature as the stereotype is indispensable to any form of prejudice.'²⁵ More generally, caricatures are a crucial part of the nineteenth-century construction of visual types. This link has been noted in previous research, such as in Cowling's study of physiognomy in Victorian art, where she observes that

Caricature, even more than painting, plays a central role in the formulation of human types. By its nature intended for mass communication, its first function is social commentary, focusing on contemporary humanity with a degree of exaggeration impossible in painting.²⁶

Caricatures of musicians promise the possibility of unique insights into how performers and composers were formulated as physiognomic types; therefore the genre can be expected not only to have reflected social perceptions, but also to have played a role in the development of those perceptions.

A caricature by the French artist 'Cham,' A. C. H. de Nöe, from around the middle of the nineteenth century, provides a clear set of physiognomic signs (Fig. 2). Cham, and his fellow caricaturist Daumier, frequently used physiognomically derived stereotypes, particularly in his depiction of 'exotic' people.²⁷ A youth is shown practising at the piano; the caption merely

²² Cowling, *The Artist as Anthropologist* 104.

²³ Combe's book was much more than a mere practical guide; it contains, for example, chapters pertaining to aesthetics, criticism and self-analysis.

²⁴ Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel* 107. The influence of phrenology upon American fine art, particularly its significance in shaping aesthetic ideals of beauty, are explored in a recent study by Charles Colbert. See *A Measure of Perfection* 364–65 where Colbert argues that American art passed through a 'phrenological stage,' a label he finds more appropriate than neoclassicism.

²⁵ Curtis, *Apes and Angels* 24.

²⁶ Cowling, *The Artist as Anthropologist* xviii.

²⁷ See the chapter 'Physiognomy, Racism and Stereotypes: The Development of a Caricature about Difference' in Elizabeth Childs 'Honoré Daumier and the Exotic Vision: Studies in French Culture and Caricature, 1830-1870', PhD, Columbia U, 1989.

identifies him as a neighbour imposing many hours of scales and exercises upon the artist.²⁸ But it is the physiognomic signs that are most potent, for his physical appearance is more than enough to indicate that he is never going to achieve any success from his labours. The low facial angle (formed by the low brow and weak chin) and large distance between the base of the nose and mouth are physiognomic signs that allude to poor mental and creative capacity.²⁹ This young man will never be skilled at music, which makes his presumably banal practice all the more painful to endure. The facial expression indicates his own frustration, but it is a frustration inevitable according to his physiognomy.

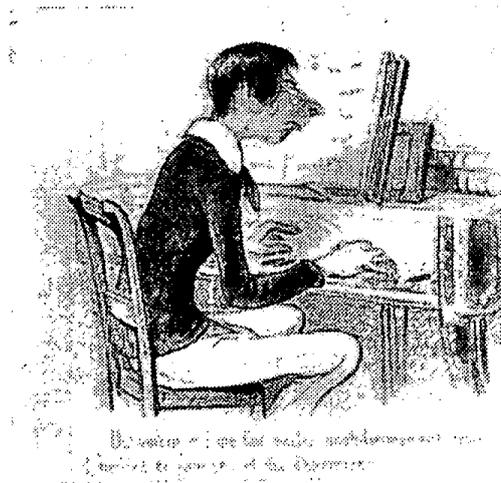


Figure 2: Caricature by A. C. H. de Nöe ('Cham'), c. 1850; rpt. in Karl Stork, *Musik und Musiker in Karikatur und Satire* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1911) 64.

Many satirical depictions of groups, particularly from England and France, comment upon issues of class, using the lower classes and aspiring bourgeois as their subject matter. Such groups are often shown relating their status or self image to the 'high' art of music. In such examples, a clear set of physiognomic signs tends to be used, to indicate unambiguously the intent of the artist. Either the musicians themselves or the audience could be the target of the caricaturist. In Alcide Lorentz's *Vue du public des galleries* of 1840 (Fig. 3), the lower classes are shown mouth agape at the spectacle they witness on the stage—they represent, literally, the low-brow of society. Their primitive physiognomies preclude them from any real appreciation of the event; they are overawed, yet lack understanding. The implication is that these people might just as well be at a circus or zoo, for the naïveté of their mouth-open responses demonstrate a lack of emotional sophistication. All of them exhibit at least one of the various signs of poor intelligence: weak chins, weak or snub noses, receding foreheads or generally poor facial angles. Their social status is unambiguous due to the clothing they wear, a clear example of the presumed link between physiognomic type and social standing. Depictions of this genre follow on from their English precursors, such as Thomas Rowlandson's *Tragedy*

²⁸ The caption reads 'Un voisin qui me fait avaler quotidiennement trois heures de gammes et six d'exercices.'

²⁹ Lavater, in his '100 physiognomic rules' notes that when the distance between the nose and mouth, and mouth and chin are equal, stupidity is implied.

Spectators of 1789, in showing the behaviour of a group in stark contrast to the event they are witnessing. This is achieved through juxtaposing widely different physiognomic and pathognomic signs. Later examples include Honoré Daumier's *The Orchestra during the Acting of a Tragedy* from 1852, which juxtaposes the dramatic gestures of the actors on stage with the dozing or yawning members of the orchestra.



Figure 3: *Vue du public des galleries*, caricature by Alcide Lorentz from 1840; rpt. in Yane Fromrich, *Musique et caricature en France au XIXe siècle* (Geneva: Minkoff, 1973) 60.

While most caricatures relating to music satirise musicians and their audiences, not all caricaturists sought to comment poorly upon them. Musicians could be represented as an ideal type, such as in E. J. Pigal's *Compositeur* of 1833 (Fig. 4). Here Pigal has depicted a representative type, in a similar vein to several of his other illustrations from the same time (for example, his *Mathématicien* and *Plagiaire* from 1833.³⁰) The physiognomy is that of a strong-willed and intelligent person—a Roman nose and strong brow—but the facial angle does not overtly suggest high intellect when compared with his *Mathématicien*. The furrowed brow and intense stare into the distance denote the force of creativity. These features could equally

³⁰ The mathematician is endowed with an enormous forehead and has a dramatically posed hand to his chin; the plagiarist has large eyes (for copying) but a low forehead, and is given a furtive expression. These types, including the *Compositeur*, were part of a series that appeared in *Le Charivari*.

belong to any creative type, so Pigal endows the composer with enormous ears, alluding to the great ability of this sense. That a composer is visually constructed as a forceful, creative type is interesting in itself; only recently were they still thought of merely as skilled craftsmen. Portraits of Beethoven from the first two decades of the nineteenth century were crucial in establishing this new image, and Pigal's example can be seen as part of this emerging trend.³¹



Figure 4: *Compositeur*, caricature by E. J. Pigal from *Le Charivari*, 15 October 1833; rpt. in Fromrich, *Musique et caricature* 84.

In contrast to caricatures, 'realistic' portraits of musicians demonstrate the presence of physiognomic influence in more subtle and complex ways. As mentioned before, a new level of interest in a subject's physiognomy could well lead to portraits of great detail and accuracy. On the other hand, expectations of what a musician should look like might easily lead to an exaggeration or manipulation of features. Certainly, before the widespread availability of photographic portraits, people who had not met the subjects were oblivious to the fact that few representations of people were good likenesses, and thus the potential for artists to produce idealised images was great.

No clearer or more frequent case of physiognomic distortion involving a musician can be found than Liszt. He stands as perhaps the most telling example of the force of the

³¹ See Alessandra Comini's *The Changing Image of Beethoven: A Study in Mythmaking* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) for a discussion of the significance of Beethoven iconography in the development of the Romantic image of musicians.

physiognomic mind-set upon the formulation of images. Looking at pictures of Liszt now, it is easy to see these manipulations as mere niceties of pictorial representation (or 'prettification' in Emanuel Winternitz's words), but this is only skimming the surface. As a point of iconographic methodology, the reasons behind the unlikeness of a portrait may be enlightening in themselves, and to dismiss depictions that exhibit such qualities may be to confuse artistic incompetence with pervasive cultural forces.

Several depictions of Liszt show him with an exaggerated forehead, either in terms of height or facial angle. The majority of these depictions are at the 'lower' end of the artistic scale, but many would have received wide circulation. A depiction of Liszt from 1842 by Nicolas Maurin is a good example of likely physiognomic 'correction' (Fig. 5).³²



Figure 5: Franz Liszt, detail of lithograph of famous pianists by Nicolas Maurin from 1842; rpt. in Ernst Burger, *Franz Liszt: A Chronicle of his Life in Pictures and Documents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) 137. Reproduced with kind permission of Ernst Burger.

This lithograph shows Liszt, amongst seven other famous pianists from the era, in three-quarter view, thus showing the slightly aquiline nose. What stands out immediately when compared to more accurate depictions is the treatment of the forehead; it is altered in two fundamental ways. First, the angle at which it recedes from the vertical appears very nearly straight, resulting in a facial angle of classical quality. Second, the height of the forehead is increased, making it slightly greater than the length of the nose. The mouth is less wide than

³² Copies of this picture, in which all the pianists exhibit varying degrees of facial distortion, were offered to subscribers of *Gazette musicale* in 1843. As was typical at the time for such a group portrait, each likeness was almost certainly based upon previous individual depictions.

in real life, with well-proportioned lips. Likewise, the chin is prominent, but is less broad. There is also the probable influence of phrenological factors: the temples of most of the pianists, including Liszt, have been articulated with great care, thus highlighting their 'bump' of music. Why is his face altered this way? It is because he has been made to fit broadly the ideal model of an artistic temperament. In his *New Physiognomy*, Wells provides a description of general characteristics for each of the basic temperaments. He replaces the ancient classification of four temperaments—sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic—with a more 'scientific' classification based upon three grand systems of organs: the motive, vital and mental. His classes of temperaments are useful in an overview, for they contain nicely generalised physical features that reflect long-held beliefs about character types.

Briefly, the motive temperament is typified by large and long bones, tending towards angularity. Wells suggests that the 'figure is commonly tall and striking if not elegant.'³³ Physical features are strongly marked and the expression is striking. The vital temperament is best defined as rotundity, with the face inclining to roundness, 'the nostrils...wide; the neck rather short; the shoulders broad...the arms and legs plump but tapering, and terminating in hands and feet relatively small.'³⁴ Finally, and most importantly for understanding the formulation of the ideal musician, the mental temperament is 'characterised by a slight frame; a head relatively large, an oval or a pyriform face; a high pale forehead; delicate and finely chiselled features...The whole figure is delicate and graceful, rather than striking or elegant.'³⁵ Wells provides an illustration of this type, a certain Professor 'Tholuck' (Fig. 6), and then goes on to explain how persons of this temperament have great sensitivities, refined feelings and so forth. Clearly, 'this is the literary, the artistic, and especially the poetic temperament.'³⁶

With such highly coded features as the basis, an ideal composite image of a poet, artist or musician could be formed. It was expected that they conform to the basic qualities of the mental temperament (or equivalent), and thus they were sensitive, emotional and gifted with excellent taste (although, as a performer, the musician could be expected to have a partly motive temperament). This, according to Wells, was typified by an oval or pyriform face. The forehead should be lofty (and so the facial angle accordingly high) and preferably broad. Ideally, the mouth should indicate sensitivity, without being sensuous, and the nose should be refined.

Pictures such as the example of Liszt shown in Figure 5 are not 'inaccurate' randomly, but rather conform to expectations of what such a person should look like, and show how physiognomic beliefs became self-fulfilling. It is hardly surprising that when people met Liszt for the first time they immediately noticed where he differed from the images they had seen. For example, the countess Eva Hanska records:

³³ Wells, *New Physiognomy* 101.

³⁴ Wells, *New Physiognomy* 103.

³⁵ Wells, *New Physiognomy* 106.

³⁶ Wells, *New Physiognomy* 107. In case it be thought that the mental type was ideal, Wells warns that there are too many people with this temperament, caused by 'sedentary habits, lack of bodily exercise, a premature or disproportionate development of the brain, the immoderate use of tea and coffee, late hours, and other hurtful indulgences' (107–8).

Liszt is of medium height, thin, pale, and drawn. He has the bilious complexion belonging to people of great talent and personality. His features are regular. His forehead is less high than they show it in his portraits. He is furrowed with lines.³⁷

Her apparent disappointment in the shape of Liszt's forehead reflects the degree of expectation developed through the wide dissemination of images that showed him with either a higher forehead, or an altered facial angle, or both. It was in this characteristic that Liszt most obviously fell short (literally). Liszt's well-known writings on artistic and intellectual matters would have fuelled an image of an intellectual type—of which a lofty forehead would certainly be expected.



Figure 6: An example of the mental temperament, from Wells, *New Physiognomy* 107.

Nonetheless, in some cases, the expectation of what he should look like appears to have left an even more enduring impression than did his actual appearance. A young and overawed Charles Hallé wrote in 1836: 'His aspect is truly remarkable. He is tall and very thin, his face very small and pale, his forehead remarkably high and beautiful.'³⁸

A final example demonstrates, with powerful irony, the strength of physiognomic assumptions. In Wells's *New Physiognomy* itself there is an illustration of seven famous musicians including Liszt (Fig. 7). Wells comments upon these faces, and of Liszt he writes:

[He] has a strongly marked mental-motive temperament. *Observe the length of the face. His would pass for a three-story brain, including a high order of instinct, reason, and devotion.*

³⁷ Letter dated 13 Apr. 1843, translated in Alan Walker's *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years, 1811–1847* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983) 377.

³⁸ Cited in Williams, *Portrait of Liszt* 84.

There was clearness, openness, and freedom, with sympathy overflowing, and an evidently highly cultivated brain. He could have developed into a first-class scholar, and have become either a statesman or a divine. But he chose the department of music, and became distinguished.³⁹ (emphasis added)

Here, Wells is interpreting a depiction already distorted along the lines prompted by the discipline he is espousing. Such was the force of the physiognomic beliefs of his era that Liszt's image has become an ideal that bears little resemblance to his true likeness.

It is significant in itself that Liszt had come to represent physiognomically, or be represented as, an intellectual/creative persona. This fact reflects interestingly upon his reception, for it countered the common image of him as a showman and presented him instead as an intellectual. This type of image was doubtless informed by Liszt's influential writings on music and art from the mid-1830s and, more generally, by the changing role of the artist in society. Iconography such as this demonstrates the potential value to the historian of physiognomically distorted images, and suggests that rather than being dismissed as nothing more than kitsch idealisations, they should be valued as reflecting deeper social and cultural issues.



Figure 7: Seven musicians, from Wells, *New Physiognomy* 528.

³⁹ Wells, *New Physiognomy* 531.