Visible and Invisible Impairments in Images of Medieval Musicians

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Introduction

In modern Western society, blindness is considered a disability—that is, a physical ailment that prohibits the afflicted person from fully participating in “normal,” sighted society without special accommodations. Medieval societies, however, did not have such a word or concept. An issue such as blindness, for example, could be discussed from a medical perspective, especially with regard to treatment or cure; from a theological or philosophical perspective, as a sign of sin; or as a divine gift, such as prophecy or, especially relevant here, music. Moreover, if a person with such a condition was able to engage with their broader societal contexts in productive ways, especially if said condition acted as “a diminution of one sense that redirects the body toward another ability,” then that condition might not have been perceived as a disability at all.

Quite a number of the most renowned medieval musicians had what modern society might consider to be disabilities. Yet descriptions of many of these musicians, by themselves and by others, in print and in image, reveal that their individual ailments were typically presented not as something that they needed to overcome but as something that might have enhanced, or at the very least did not disrupt, their abilities as composers, teachers, and scribes.

Such musicians include Francesco “Il Cieco” da Firenze (c. 1325–Sept. 2, 1397; better known today as Francesco Landini) and Conrad Paumann (c. 1410–Jan. 24, 1473), who were both blind. Antonio “Zachara” da Teramo (c. 1350/60–after May 19, 1413) had several physical ailments, including the loss of several fingers and toes, stunted height, a possible club foot, and a self-described itchy skin condition. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–Sept. 17, 1179) explained her lifelong spells of illness as holy visions, which some have later interpreted to be chronic migraines. And the monk Notker (ca. 840–April 6, 912) was called “Balbulus,” or “the Stammerer,” due to his difficulties speaking.

Bibliography


Francesco “Il Cieco” da Firenze, alias Landini

Illustration from the Squarcialupi Codex (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, MS Mediceo Palatino 97).

Francesco was born in Florence, the son of a well-known painter. He became blind in his early childhood due to smallpox, and as a result turned to music while quite young. Not only did he become well known as an exceptional organ player, improviser, and composer, he also built and tuned organs, sang, and invented other new instruments. He was also renowned for his expertise in other humanities, in particular poetry, and wrote a lengthy poem in praise of the logic of William of Ockham. Two images of Francesco remain. One is his tombstone, surviving in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence; the other is one of the numerous detailed illuminations from the Squarcialupi Codex (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Palatino 87). In both images, Francesco is depicted with the most obvious symbol of his musical career: his portative organ. In the Squarcialupi illumination, he is also wearing a laurel wreath, signifying his prestige as a poet (Cuthbert, 518). Francesco is also clearly depicted as blind in both images. His is the only illumination in the Squarcialupi codex in which the face is turned to one side, leaving only one (closed) eye visible. On his tombstone, Francesco is shown face-on, but his eyes have been hollowed out, creating the impression of a cavernous, unfocused gaze.
Unlike Francesco, later musician Conrad Paumann was born blind. We know little about his early years, but by the time he was a teenager he was already being sponsored as a talented musician; by his mid-thirties, Paumann was considered to be the best organist in all of Germany. He visited many nobles and dignitaries throughout Western Europe, reports of which describe his abilities as worthy of marvel. His epitaph in the Frauenkirche in Munich shows him surrounded by a lute, harp, recorder, and fiddle, but like Francesco, he too is playing the portative organ, and his eyes are closed. As Julie Singer points out, Francesco is thus captured as his contemporaries understood him: a person who was blind, and whose blindness allowed him to excel in matters both intellectual and musical; the same could also be said of the virtuoso organist Conrad Paumann.
Antonio da Teramo was often designated “Zachara” (Zacchara, Zacar, Zacara, Çach-erias) in late medieval documents. The nickname, as Michael Scott Cuthbert points out, derives from the biblical Zacchaeus, who was too short to see Jesus and thus needed to climb a sycamore tree. Antonio was also short, perhaps due to illness or a congenital issue; in a fifteenth-century necrology, he is described as being short-statured, with only ten total fingers and toes. He too is depicted in an illumination in the Squarcialupi Codex, and while it is impossible to determine from it whether he was short, he is clearly missing some of his fingers, and his left arm is in a sling. Moreover, it appears that his left foot is turned in toward his body, and that leg might be shorter than the other. Lastly, his face is unusually shaded, which Cuthbert suggests might be indicative of a condition such as lupus, which could also explain his loss of fingers and toes. Yet despite his missing fingers, Antonio was a papal secretary, and extant examples of his handwriting show no discernible flaws. He was also a singer and composer for the Roman and Pisan popes and was held in highest regard by his contemporaries, being one of the most widely copied composers of his day. His illumination depicts him holding an open book, which, though blank, likely refers to his abilities as either a scribe or theorist/composer. While it cannot necessarily be said that, like Francesco or perhaps Paumann, his physical ailments caused him to excel in other complementary ways, they certainly did not impede him from his successes, nor does it seem that he was shunned in any way for them.
With Hildegard of Bingen, the questions of disability, impairment, and representation are more blurred. In her various writings, Hildegard shares that even from her youth, she suffered periods of illness and interpreted them as divine punishment; at other times, she experienced moments of physical, mental, and emotional change or ecstasy as visions sent from God, which she was later encouraged to document in writing. Her current reputation as a migraine sufferer is due to early twentieth-century attempts to diagnose her retrospectively, but as Katherine Foxhall points out, modern scientific ideas of migraine have changed considerably in the last century. More importantly, though, a “purely” medical evaluation of Hildegard’s descriptions does not take into account her own interpretations of her lived experiences, which were much less medical than they were theological. Still, if one were to propose Hildegard’s visions qua visions, without any retrospective medical diagnosis, one might suggest that they, like Francesco’s blindness, were a characteristic that diminished Hildegard’s physical health while simultaneously strengthening her intellectual, musical, and theological prowess. As Hildegard’s contemporary reputation was built in large part on the acceptance of the authenticity of her visions, they were certainly no detriment but instead one of her greatest assets. As such, they are depicted as gifts of the Holy Spirit, as in her portrait in the Rupertsberg Manuscript, where Hildegard’s head is surrounded by tongues of flame reaching down from the heavens.
The last example is the least like the others, for while it is a portrait of a person with a known disability (in the modern sense), that disability is not shown. There were several monks named Notker in and around the abbey of St. Gall, and in order to differentiate them, each had some sort of nickname. Notker the musician was called “Balbulus,” or “the Stammerer,” and in his own writings he described himself as “stammering and toothless.” He worked as a scribe in the abbey but is best known to modern music scholars as a composer of sequences or hymns, setting new texts to longer existing melodies which quickly found themselves part of the local chant repertory. Due to his facility with language, he and his works were widely admired, and he won the favor, and the commission, of numerous noblemen, including the Emperor Charles the Bald. It was Notker’s written texts, not his verbal prowess, that earned such esteem; his stammering was in no way prohibitive of his successes either within the monastic structure or secular interactions. But unlike the other images discussed thus far, Notker’s portrait does not show any indication of his speech impediment. Far from this being an indication that his stammer was a source of shame or something that could be idealized via erasure upon his death (as many did upon Stephen Hawking’s death by portraying him as physically whole, walking away from his wheelchair), a much more likely interpretation is that a stammer is an invisible disability, difficult to portray through a visual medium. Notker is shown slumped at his writing desk, holding what might be a scroll in his right hand; he is thus strongly associated with the written word, his personal forte, in a manner similar to Francesco or Paumann being shown playing their portative organs, Hildegard dictating her visions, or Antonio holding an open book.
Conclusion

These images show us, quite clearly, that the various ailments that these musicians had were considered to be fundamental to their identities; they were neither erased nor corrected, but were deliberately included, whether in “lifelike” or stylized fashion. Moreover, some of these images suggest that these musicians reached the pinnacle of their expertise precisely because of their disability. Francesco and Conrad Paumann focused their attentions on music and the liberal arts due to their lack of sight; Hildegard’s visions were considered authentic revelations from God by the Pope, thus cementing her reputation as a scholar, theologian, and musician; and Notker’s stammer might have focused his attention on the written, rather than the spoken word. Antonio might likely have already been highly trained as a scribe before he lost some of his fingers, but he maintained positions of prestige in papal circles for years despite his other physical ailments. Such images thus reinforce that, to the contemporaries of these medieval musicians, none of them had disabilities by modern standards, but rather their physical characteristics might instead have redirected them toward something in which they could excel.
Endnotes

3 Ibid.
5 Michael Scott Cuthbert, “Difference, Disability, and Composition in the Late Middle Ages: Of Antonio ‘Zachara’ da Teramo and Francesco ‘Il Cieco’ da Firenze,” The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies, eds. Blake Howe et al. (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 523. This retrospective diagnosis is not widely known or accepted, and is mentioned here as one scholar’s suggestion only in order to bring attention to the painter’s rendition of Antonio’s complexion.