

The Impact of Image: The Iconographic Celebrity of the Musician

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Abstract

In today's pop culture, a musician's image is as important as, if not more important than the music they create. This phenomenon is not as new as one might think, but rather dates from the Romantic Period, when society began to view musicians as creative geniuses, rather than craftsmen. These musicians were held in such high regard that they were recognized as musical celebrities. Musical celebrity can be defined as an individual or group who represents the ideal of a period, has the 'It' factor, and can be associated with the following criteria: a universal appeal regardless of gender and willingness to manipulate their image for self promotion. These criteria derived from depictions of musicians publicly promote this celebrity status. As early as the 19th century, the portrayal of celebrity can be seen in the media of portraiture, photography, caricatures, and album artwork. Due to changing aesthetics over time, analyses of these media must consider the transition from passive to active inspiration, the study of physiognomy, the musician as a political figure, the effects of a musician's race and gender, as well as audience reception. This paper uses iconography from various media to gain understanding of the developing form of musicians' popularity. It explores how the different facets of a musical celebrity have changed over time, and how those changes have led to a consideration of the notion of image versus talent. This research provides a new, multifaceted approach to linked notions of musicianship, musical innovation, and talent, as well as their affiliation with public perception via image.

Keywords: Celebrity, Image, Musicians

1. Introduction

Intelligence, refinement, passion, creativity are just a few qualities one can think of when picturing an idol. Individuals who are able to embody these are few and far between. Those who do are put on a pedestal by society, and labeled celebrities. For the purposes of my research, celebrity is defined as an individual or group who represents the ideal of a period, has the 'It' factor, and can be associated with the following criteria: a universal appeal regardless of gender and willingness to manipulate their image for self promotion. Celebrities create an image for themselves, and this image is often presented in the form of visual media. I will be discussing musical celebrities' permanent representations in a variety of media, how the qualities of a celebrity are used to create their image, and how the definition of celebrity, with its accompanying qualities, changes between the Classical period, Romantic Era, and 20th century. Starting in the Classical period and continuing on into modern times, characteristics in line with populist ideals are subtly woven into the iconography and help further promote the subject's celebrity.

2. Changing Aesthetics in Portraiture

In western art artisans such as musicians have traditionally been depicted as being either passively or actively inspired. Portraiture of the Classical period used passive inspiration, meaning that a portrait's subject would appear as a vehicle through which a muse was giving inspiration. The portrait of Homer by Mattia Preti (17th century) is a great example because, although he is not a musician, Homer's epic poems were often sung, and thus can be considered musical. In this portrait Homer, is poised and ready to play a violin, but he is waiting to receive inspiration from a higher being. Therefore, he is depicted with an upward gaze and open mouth. Towards the end of the Classical era, society began to view artisans as creative geniuses rather than mere craftsmen. The transition from passive to active portrayals of inspiration paralleled society's newfound acceptance of a musician's ability to achieve fame. Active inspiration was used to depict subjects that had creative control over their works. Artists noted this new "active" role of creation by portraying their subjects with a more focused gaze, while actively pursuing their craft. In a portrait by Eugene Delacroix (1832), Niccolò Paganini is shown performing on his violin with a downward gaze. As a premiere violin virtuoso during his lifetime, it makes sense that Paganini's image would demonstrate active inspiration. The shift from passive to active can be seen most in the imagery of Beethoven because his career bridged the gap between the Classical and Romantic Eras while this change was taking place.

Ludwig van Beethoven was the first musician to be viewed as a creative genius during his lifetime. In a portrait by Willibrord Joseph Mahler (1804-05), a youthful Beethoven looks out at the viewer with a focused gaze. He is surrounded by nature, which is a move toward romantic iconography. Beethoven is also pictured with a lyre, which is an anachronistic instrument, and is reminiscent of Apollo. By posing Beethoven with the instrument, the artist suggests that his subject has knowledge, and since Beethoven appears poised and ready to strike the lyre, active inspiration is hinted at, though never openly stated. In contrast, a portrait of an older Beethoven, composed in the Romantic style by Joseph Karl Stieler (1820), is making use of active inspiration. He is again surrounded by nature, although now his collar is undone, and his hair is unkempt. Beethoven is holding the tools of a composer but is actively writing with them. These elements portray Beethoven as a captivating, eccentric character that the viewer cannot help but be drawn to.

Beethoven's portraiture shows a clear transition of the styles of passive and active inspiration used to portray a musician of note. However, the distinction between the two styles is not always clear. For example, Joseph Danhauser's painting (1840) shows Franz Liszt sitting at a piano, surrounded by celebrated literary and musical figures of the time. The bust of Beethoven in the corner and painting of Lord Byron, the poet, on the wall represent the creative interests of the people gathered. There are two ways to interpret this painting. One is that Liszt is receiving inspiration from the bust of Beethoven, suggesting that Beethoven is acting as a Muse and is passively inspiring Liszt. However, the second and more likely interpretation is that Liszt is actively playing/composing at the piano and paying homage to Beethoven. Judging by the surrounding individuals' reactions to the performance, it is clear that Liszt is creating the music in the moment himself. If he were receiving inspiration, then Liszt would not be playing the piano. Rather, his hands would be hovering over it waiting for inspiration from Beethoven.

As time went on, and musicians gained even more respect from society, there emerged a new style of portraiture that utilized a popular "scientific" belief of the time called physiognomy. This style was used to push the musician forward from the status of creative genius to known celebrity.

Physiognomy is defined as the study of how facial features relate to mental capabilities and moral characteristics. The influence of physiognomy was found in portraiture because subjects wanted to be portrayed as having the ideal temperament, while highlighting the personal characteristics that led to their achieving public fame. This meant that features, such as forehead height, mouth fullness, profile angle, and noses, were often purposefully exaggerated. For example, two portraits of Liszt, painted by Henri Lehmann (1839) and Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1856), depict Liszt with a heightened and highlighted forehead. It was often said that when people met or saw Liszt in public they were confused because his forehead was not as large as they had known it to be in his depictions. This is an example of how artists used the known beliefs of physiognomy to manipulate their images based on the traits that their subject wanted to convey.

Image manipulation was not reserved for Liszt, rather other musicians were also frequently depicted this way, as can be seen in this portrait of Richard Wagner by Franz von Lenbach (1895). Wagner has completely given in to the societal norm of being depicted with exaggerated, physiognomic features, such as an enlarged forehead, to show the public his creative prowess. However, there are a few exceptions to this trend. For example, Giovanni Boldini's portrait of Giuseppe Verdi (1886) depicts him as a man of the people. Here Verdi's decision that his portrait not flaunt his musical abilities can be interpreted as either indifference or self-confidence. If it is indifference toward his own fame then this image demonstrates his lack of care about the trend of image manipulation. Verdi's forehead and temple

are completely hidden by a large, black top hat, and instead the viewer's gaze is drawn to his clothing and eyes. The resulting portrayal is more accurate, and may indicate that Verdi was more concerned with having a permanent representation of "Verdi the Man" rather than the famous musician. Alternatively, if this is a demonstration of self-confidence, then Verdi is stating that he knows of his fame and therefore does not feel the need to further flaunt it to the public with image manipulation.

2.1 Women's Image And Aesthetics

During the 19th-century a few notable women were able to break through the male dominated world of music. Society restricted women to the household, where they were supposed to be domestic and be accomplished at skills like music, painting, and sewing. These basic skills were to be used as light entertainment in the household and for private parties. However, they were not supposed to gain achievement in these areas, meaning they could not publish their work, perform publically, or make a career of it. Most women were kept to these restraints, but there were a few who were able to break through.

Fanny Mendelssohn is a classic case of a woman composer who was constrained by society. Her family was supportive of her musical education and eventual interest in composition. However, her brother Felix was adamantly opposed to the idea of her publishing her own work. When she did get her first three pieces published, they were under Felix's name, not hers. This lack of support is reflected in her portrayals because her features are not exaggerated, she is not seen with any musical tools. What is more, in two images, a portrait by Mortiz Daniel Oppenheim (1842) and a pencil sketch by her husband Wilhelm Hensel (1847), Mendelssohn's hair hides her temple, the supposed origin and central hub of musical creation. As a result she appears as a typical 19th-century lady lacking any hint of her musical capabilities.

Amy Beach was an American composer/performer who came from a strict religious household, and like Fanny Mendelssohn, was at first not allowed to pursue music. Early in her childhood it quickly became apparent that she had a gift for music, but, congruent with her religious beliefs, her mother did not let her study it until she was five or six. When Beach married, it was to a man twenty-five years her senior, who allowed her to compose and publish, but in keeping with social conventions of the day, prevented her from performing publically. Within a year of each other both her mother and her husband passed away, leaving Beach free to do as she pleased. She returned to public performance and continued to compose smaller works. Beach's image, unlike Fanny Mendelssohn's, had contrast. On the one hand there were photographs of her like the one in the George Grantham Bain Collection (circa 1890s) where Beach is shown as a standard turn of the century lady. However, a photograph from the Elizabeth Porter Gould Photographic Collection (circa 1809s) is less typical, and resonates with the type of romantic portraiture we saw earlier. In that image Beach has a focused gaze, reminiscent of Beethoven, a highlighted forehead, and a straight profile.

Where Amy Beach patiently waited to have a career in music, the British composer Ethel Smyth defied social convention, and began her career in music going against her father's wishes. Smyth not only broke conventions in her career, but also in her daily activities as a suffragette and in her appearance. In a photograph produced by Bassano Ltd. (1927) she is dressed in masculine clothing and posed at a piano with manuscript paper in a manner evocative of passive inspiration. The fact that Smyth is among the first, if not the first, female composer presented in a way similar to that of male musicians speaks to her success. Like her female counterparts, Smyth was also depicted in a sketch rather than an oil based painting, one example being a black chalk on paper sketch by John Singer Sargent (1901).

Unlike their male counterparts, these three women had to break conventions to even be considered artists. Their images reflect a progression of equality. At first, Fanny Mendelssohn was completely blocked out of the world of music and her representations demonstrate this. Amy Beach took a step forward and after gaining freedom from her family displayed a mixture of plain and extraordinary images. Ethel Smyth unapologetically stepped into the role of composer as if she were a man of her day. Her images show this conviction and defiance toward the social norms. These women, the latter two especially, are examples of how in order to take control of their futures they had to take control of their images. In order to take the next step to be successful, these women had to model their representations in the same vein as the male composers at the time.

3. Image Control: Private vs. Public Input

Caricatures exaggerate their subject's physical appearance usually to make some sort of statement or satire. These images could be directed at the subject's personality, political inclinations, or public perception, and were usually reserved for individuals who were already established in the public limelight, like the composer Richard Wagner. The caricature by Andre Gill from "L'Eclipse" (1869) is a statement about Wagner's music. Wagner is illustrated hammering a music note into an ear as blood spews out, suggesting that his music was physically painful for the listener to hear. The second image is a politically charged caricature by Karl Klic from "Humoristische Blaetter" (1873) that depicts the composer in a musical setting, but with exaggerated Jewish features. Known to be an anti-Semite, this is a reflection of how Wagner's politics became a part of his music, specifically his operas.

The other musician who was a popular subject of caricature was Giuseppe Verdi. In these two caricatures, both by Mechiorre Delfico, the themes of music and politics are present. The first, *Verdi Confronting the Naples Censor When Preparing Ballo* (1859, Villa Verdi), acknowledges the trouble Verdi often encountered with censors due to their constricting rules and his lack of compliance. Verdi would strive to test the boundaries of the censors, and would often find loopholes to make sure content he wanted was in his operas. The second, *Verdi Crushed by Commissions* (1860), depicts Verdi being overwhelmed by commissions, which speaks to the success of his operas and other works.

These caricatures demonstrate the *public's perception of* Wagner and Verdi, while the musicians' portraits were what the *musicians wanted the public to perceive*. Wagner's portrait displays a serious tone. His caricatures, however, paint a picture of a dramatic figure, both in terms of his music and personal beliefs. These images still exaggerate his features, but instead of aiding his celebrity they attack it and him. As we have seen, Verdi's portrait is reserved and modest about his musical abilities, but his caricatures amplify these abilities by picturing him literally overwhelmed with commissions. The privately composed images are representations of the individual as a musical celebrity who created music with little connection to the music itself. In contrast, the publicly composed caricatured images reference the music composed by the celebrity rather than the celebrity himself. This shift in perspective lasts until 20th century jazz album covers featured soloists like Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. These artists began to be featured on the covers and therefore brought the focus back to the individual musician.

Despite the appearance of photographic imagery on jazz albums of the late 40s early 50s, it's not until Elvis Presley releases his first album in 1956 that photographic covers become the norm, and the individual the focus. Elvis' first album cover is a photograph from a live show, taken by William V. "Red" Robertson, demonstrating the rawness of early rock n' roll. The energy of the first image is lost in his next few covers because the record company decided to tone down Elvis' controversial image and market him according to the 1950s ideals. This new image change can be seen in the *Loving You* album cover from 1957. This cover is simply a glamor headshot featuring Elvis with a stylish 50s hairdo. Other musicians and groups copy this type of cover due to its marketability to the masses.

That image made its way into the world of male and female groups of the 50s and 60s, who were regularly photographed in a cookie-cutter type of image called "the personality cover." The Beatles perfected this type of cover because their early album artwork always pictured the band with similar haircuts and suits. They were always looking at the viewer, and were organized neatly into similar poses. It wasn't until their later years that they began to break this trend. The *Rubber Soul* album (1965) is the first hint at their expanding musical views and image. The Beatles are now pictured with long hair, but of varying lengths and only John Lennon is looking out at the viewer. The image itself uses a fisheye-lens to create a warped quality. This drastic shift in photographic style demonstrates that The Beatles were starting to embody the aesthetics of the late 60s psychedelic movement. They were a leading group in promoting the vibe of this decade similar to how the 19th-century composers used the popular trend of physiognomy to promote their celebrity. The Beatles drastic change in style came about because the group itself wanted to change their image. They worked with visual artists to create their new look, but the it was driven by the group itself and not necessarily by a marketing team or record label.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, musical celebrities have historically used populist ideals and aesthetics of their day to establish and promote their fame. To achieve this, they have manipulated their physical image in multiple types of visual media, creating a public persona that adheres to the characteristic traits of their respective genre. Thereby gaining acceptance, support, and promotion from the public audience. Regardless of the changing aesthetic ideals, the musicians of each of these periods demonstrate a desire to capture specific characteristics in their image to display their celebrity and relevance to the public. However, over the past 30 years, as technology has progressed, musical celebrities have had

less control over their image because a marketing team is advising them on their image similar to the musicians of the 1950s. Another layer, like the caricatures of the past, is the public itself now has the power to way in on these musicians' imagery. For modern day musical celebrities, social media, the Internet, and programs like Photoshop have amplified this public influence, and have put more pressure on celebrities to conform to societal ideals in order to gain acceptance. This leads to a new set of challenges facing musical celebrities today, who are increasingly confronted by the need to create a public image, and manipulate their visual representations in order to appeal to the masses and achieve lasting fame. The latter has become increasingly more difficult to gain because modern musicians have far more demands of the public to fulfill than the musicians of the past. This raises the question of whether image has surpassed the need for actual musical talent in order to become a celebrity in today's cultural atmosphere.

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