

Brass Instruments and Baldness – some results and observations from a 124 year old study

Gavin Holman, 5 June 2020

For those of you that wish to remain hirsute as time goes on - and I am largely addressing the male readership – then cease playing your brass instrument, it is only hastening the path towards your bare polished dome. A study published in *Scientific American* in 1896 concluded that brass instruments were more injurious to hair health than others.

An English statistician has recently been engaged in an original task, that of studying the influence of music on the hair. ... While stringed instruments prevent and check the falling out of the hair, brass instruments have the most injurious effects upon it. The piano and the violin, especially the piano, have an undoubted preserving influence. The violoncello, the harp, and the double bass participate in the hair-preserving qualities of the piano. But the hautboy, the clarinet, and the Mute have only a very feeble effect. Their action is not more than a fiftieth part as strong. On the contrary, the brass instruments have results that are deplorable.

Scientific American, Vol. 75, No. 9, August 29, 1896, p. 185

Summarizing the same study, the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* reported that “brass instruments have a fatal influence on the growth of the hair, notably the cornet, the French horn, and the trombone, which apparently will depilate a player’s scalp in less than five years. ... The baldness which prevails among members of regimental bands has been given the name of ‘trumpet baldness,’ calvitié des fanfares.”

Futility Closet, 17 Feb 2012



Proof that the violin is efficacious for hair retention

The news of this study rapidly spread around the English-speaking world, reports appeared in provincial newspapers from Canada to England to New Zealand, e.g.

MUSIC AND BALDNESS.

An English statistician has recently been devoting a good deal of his time to a study of the influence of music on the hair. He establishes first of all that the proportion of bald persons is 11 per cent. for the liberal professions in general, with the exception of physicians, who reach a bald record of 30 per cent. It is principally in the case of instrumental musicians that the influence of music makes itself felt in two opposing directions. While stringed instruments prevent and check the falling out of the hair, brass instruments have quite the opposite effect. The piano and the violin, notably the piano, appear to have an undoubted preserving effect, but the brass instruments bring on results which are deplorable. The trombone is the depilatory instrument par excellence. It will clear one's head of hair in five years—at least, that is the verdict of the English statistician.

Poverty Bay Herald, Vol. 23, Issue 7781, 18 November 1896

After the novelty of this died down, nothing more was heard until Sunday 12 June 1904, when Mrs Amelia Holbrook presented a paper at the Actor's Home, Staten Island, New York which echoed the results from the *Scientific American* study, with the addition that Wagner was the best of all composers for nervous diseases, because "his music is largely descriptive". At the close of her paper, several professional musicians stated that Mrs Holbrook's deductions coincided with their own observations.

Some seventeen years later, a series of articles appeared, copied across various newspapers and several years (as was the custom):

A Remarkable Theory – What Bandsmen Suffer

Timaru Herald, Vol. 97, Issue 14992, 11 March 1913

"If you are bald, learn the violin," is one of the morals to drawn from some startling statements made by M. Henri de Parville, quoted, in the "*Musical News*." M. de Parville's line of reasoning is that, as music exercises a manifest action on the nervous system, which itself also effects the nutrition of the bodily tissues, it seems reasonable to conclude that, in a general way, music has an influence upon the physiological individuality. Musicians, it appears, are bald in the proportion of 11 per cent, but among instrumentalists the influence of musical vibrations makes themselves fell in two opposite directions, according to the class of instrument.

*M. de Parville demonstrating
the proof of his theory*



Thus, while string instruments prevent and arrest the falling of the hair, the brass instruments exercise the most deadly influence upon the scalp. The piano and the violin, especially the former, have an undeniably preservative effect. All male pianists, says M. de Parville, have an Ysaye-like head of hair. The violoncello, the harp, and the double bass all partake of the beneficial effects of the piano; the oboe is inferior to the double bass, while the clarinet and the flute have but a very slender effect, and towards one's fiftieth year the hair begins to thin very perceptibly.

On the other hand, the effect of the brass is deplorable. The cornet and the horn despoil the most hirsute man of his locks with surprising speed and certainty. The trombone, however, is the most deleterious of all, for in five or six years the player has lost at least 60 per cent, of his hair. This disagreeable result is known as "Fanfare Baldness," because the evil particularly punishes regimental musicians.

A representative of the "*Daily News and Leader*" who called upon Mr Henry J. Iles, the editor of the "*British Bandsman*," and an international authority upon the effect and range of every kind of musical instrument, from a penny whistle to a grand organ, to get his view upon the subject, unfortunately found that he was out, having his hair cut, but an obliging subordinate who has made the theme his particular study was kind enough to furnish statistics which proved to the hilt M. de Parville's alarming theory. It seems that military bandsmen are the worst sufferers.

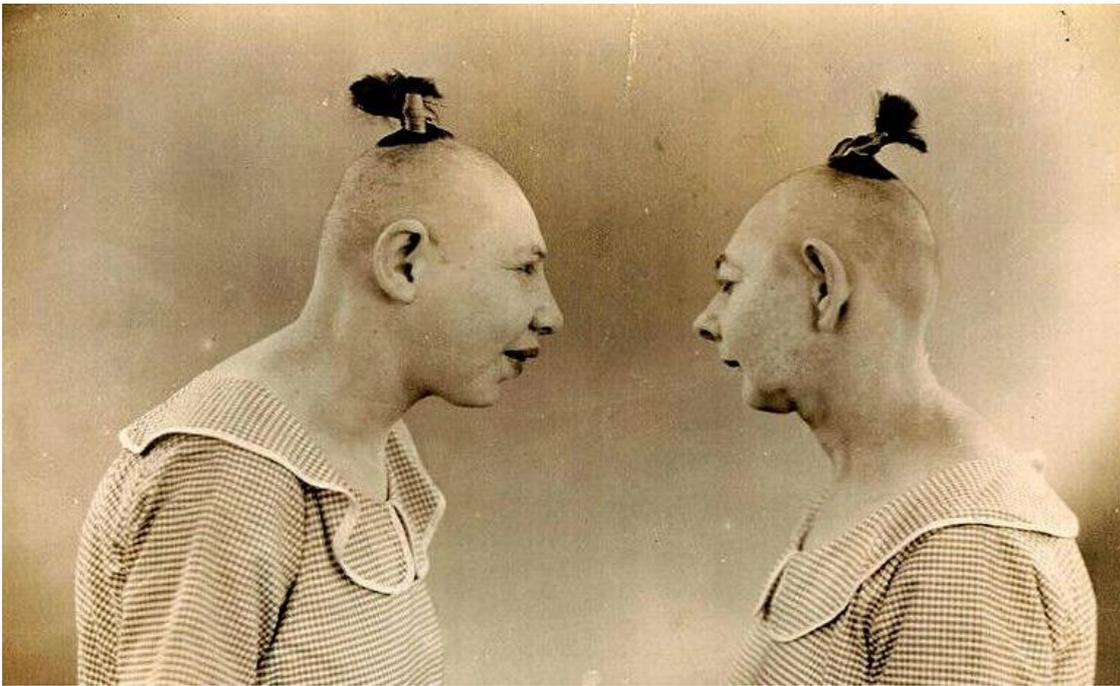
"They not only lose their hair, but their teeth," said this gentleman, with a sympathetic catch in his voice. "Whilst a bald bandsman is quite a common thing of the barrack square and the parade ground, he is by no means such a sufferer as the toothless tone producer, for the latter, after exercising his art for some years, is almost certain to lose his front teeth, unless great care is exercised and the operator takes an alum gum bath regularly.

Bald Trombonists

"A bald trombonist may still be an honour to his regiment, and continue to give it tone, but there is possibly no future outlook for the toothless trombonist, or, for the matter of that, for the artiste who produces strains from a cornet à piston. Front teeth are as necessary as valves in this connection.

Baldness among brass instrumentalists may be 'classified' as follows:

Trombonists	81 per cent
Euphonium players	63 per cent
Horn-winders	60 per cent
Cornet (solo)	57 per cent
Cornet (ordinary)	51 per cent
Bassoon (big)	49 per cent
Bassoon (little)	48 per cent



Two trombonists who had being playing for 30 years

All these instruments are also extremely deleterious to the progress of the moustache, but (generally speaking) encouraging to the beard. A flute, regularly played, has a wonderfully fertilising effect upon side whiskers, and that is no doubt the reason that in the 'Eighties' this instrument was held in such high favour by certain distinguished Q.C.'s at the Parliamentary and Chancery Bar. Among these learned gentlemen, too, diurnal exercise on the big drum was found to be as stimulating to voice production as flautistry was (and is) to the encouragement of whiskers.

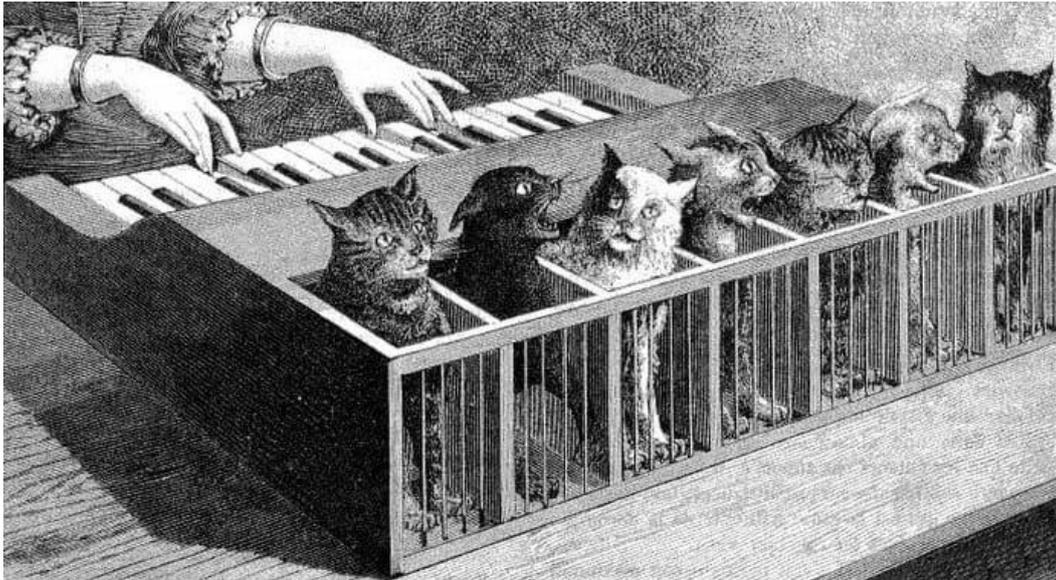
The Pianola Treatment

A distinguished tonsorial artist who embellishes the neighbourhood old Bond street by his presence and his perfumes declined to discuss such plebian things as trombones in relation to the hair. Had it been harps, or dulcimers, or even pianolas or Pathephones, he might have ventured, after the purchase of a bottle of revivifier, to unbend to the extent of volunteering the information that his great uncle had attended to the leonine locks of Ludwig von Beethoven at Prague, whilst he himself had several times experienced the mental elevation of trimming the hair of M. Paderewski, to say nothing of several of the lesser lights.



Experiments on women using an early juke box proved unsuccessful

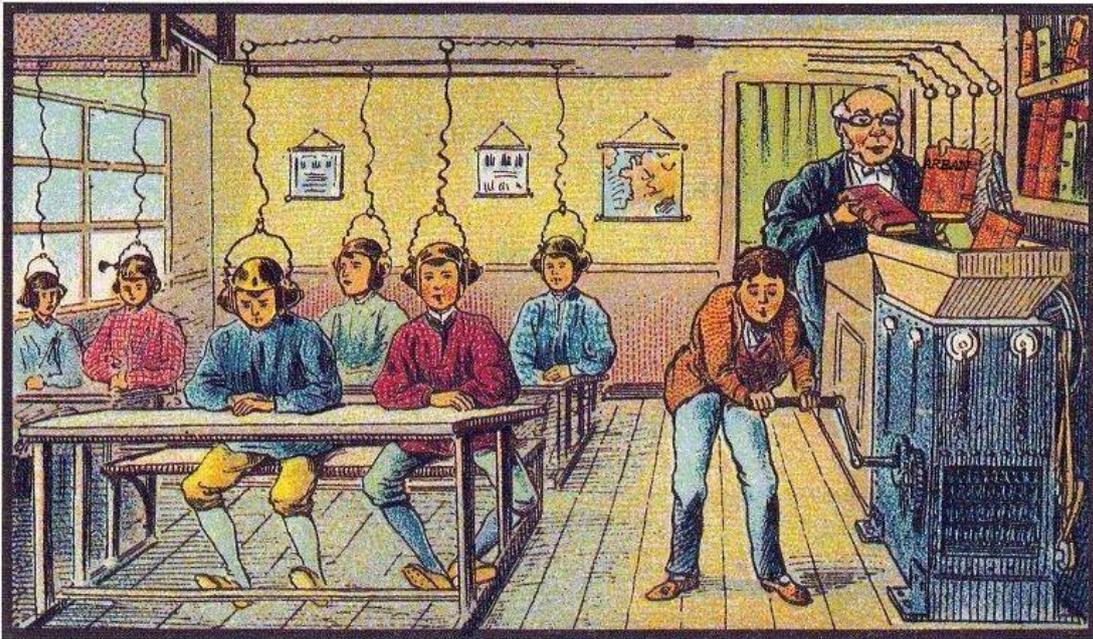
"It is true," he said, "that high-class music from a Broadwood or a Bechstein stimulates the tonsorial growth, and I am considering the advisability of adding to my establishment what is known in the profession as the pianola. Treatment for such of my clients whose scalp has refused to respond to the liquid or 'wash' system, it can be worked by the same electric motor which supplies the rotation to the brushes. The fact that properly-selected music, judiciously applied, is of tonic value to the hair has long been recognised by certain experimentalists, and I am at present considering an invention which was brought to me recently by a clever scientist. It is called the "Patent Musical Shampoo," and it is easily fitted to the ordinary shampoo basin.



One of the early experiments which determined that piano playing did not induce hair loss (only seven cats were harmed during this study)

The Musical Shampoo

The customer leans over the basin in the usual way, and chooses a musical shampoo instead of a dry shampoo, as the case may be. The operator then turns a little lever and the customer's head is immediately folded in the most entertaining strains, which can be turned on (like the hot or cold water in the ordinary shampoo) from pianissimo to fortissimo. The musical shampoo is supplied in various keys to suit the colour of the hair. Thus, for black hair the key C is the most suited, for brown G sharp, for grey E flat major, and for yellow A flat minor, and so on. It is all very promising but at present it is somewhat 'in the air' as the inventor and I cannot quite agree as to the terms.



Attempting to determine the effect on the hair of test subjects by feeding Arban's trumpet studies directly into their brains at high speed

Following extensive searches (well a few), it appears that the subject of differential effects of musical instruments on male pattern baldness frequency has not reappeared as a scientific or medical research topic. Thus, I must conclude one of two possibilities:

- a) The original 1896 results were obviously complete and accepted as scientific fact, thus rendering any future studies unnecessary. Though this does raise the question of why musicians have not been warned about this over the years – has this information been suppressed for the good of the orchestral ensemble and the continuing health of the brass band movement?
- b) The original 1896 results (and any subsequent reiterations) were rubbish or statistically irrelevant. I suspect this may be the true case, sadly, as I am sure many balding brass musicians would love to be able to point to their musical career as the reason for their lack of hair!

A follow up experiment in 1944 to determine if other "instruments" other than musical ones, had an effect on hair – here a typewriter is being tested.





An explanation of why the flat cap is so popular among the brass musicians of the North – you rarely see a violinist wearing one



The “bowler” was less common and less successful in hiding the bald pate