

## **Sonorous Neglect**

A disorder which has taken on many different names over the past century, sonorous neglect was first described by a student of the English neurologist, John Hughlings Jackson, known as R. D. Hicks, in 1909. He observed a patient who claimed to be specifically and exclusively unable to perceive the music of Chopin. The man, whom he called, simply, "J," betrayed no outward signs of madness; he was fully cognizant and well-functioning, was able to perform his work, support his family, and behave in an orderly, civil manner. More strangely still, there appeared to be nothing *physically* wrong with him either – no neuralgic dysfunction, no history of disequilibrium, not even any trace of hearing loss.

Hicks himself remained skeptical of the man's condition until he'd treated a different patient four years later, a woman suffering from epilepsy. The seizures, he found, were dependably triggered by the sound of wind chimes – something about the timbre and pitch of clanging brass pipes (it was never discovered what) sent her immediately into convulsions. So-called "musicogenic epilepsy," as it was later termed, was a condition that had been described, though rarely in much detail, by physicians and philosophers since ancient times. Just as flickering photostrobe effects may elicit seizures in certain epileptics, others are susceptible to auditory stimuli, usually vibrato or slewing, though occasionally music.

When Hicks observed this baffling case, he thought of his earlier patient, J, and promptly began a new series of tests. He soon discovered that J was not "deaf" to all the music of Chopin, but, curiously only to the mazurkas. The Polish dance-form itself, the vaguely rubato, off-kilter waltz with its displaced downbeat, when cradled by the fanciful drift of Chopin's melodies, provoked a corresponding astigmatism in the nervous system. This excitory interference effectively blocked the signal from the auditory cortex, vetoing the would-be perception of the offending sound.

Hicks' findings, which he described for the *Westminster Journal of Medicine* that February, was itself neglected. 1914 was the pivotal year for Freud's mounting celebrity, and psychoanalysis had begun to trump all other developments in psychology. Nearly all

disorders of the brain, including epilepsy and autism, were suddenly written off as disorders of the *mind* – that is, as breeds of hysteria. The condition of "sonorous neglect" observed by Hicks was quickly replaced by the term "selective timpanitus," and again by the overtly Freudian "hysterical deafness." The thinking was that just as certain subjects may become psychosomatically blind under great stress, others may unconsciously will themselves into amusia. The culprit, it was claimed, lay in the clenched hands of that behemoth of Freudian theory, the narcissistic mother.

The tide turned once more, however, after the death of J in 1958. An autopsy was performed by the doctor's son, Edmund Hicks, who was eager to vindicate his father's name. What the young neurosurgeon found upon peeling back the layers of cranial tissue was a small hematoma lodged in the left superior temporal gyrus – one of the central nodes of rhythmic audition. Unfortunately, the paper, which was published by the *Journal of Clinical Neuropsychology* in 1961, was never corroborated by any follow-up studies, and the conditioned has remained largely unheard of ever since.