



# Who's the more foolish? Edgar Allan Poe's 'The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether' as spanish lyrical theater

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## Introduction

*The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether* (1845) is a short story by the American author Edgar Allan Poe. It is a black comedy in which an unnamed narrator tells about his visit out of curiosity to a mental institution. He is temporarily tricked there by some patients in disguise. At the end he is unable to tell apart who is sane and who is not.

This story was adapted as a zarzuela, becoming thus one of the first theater adaptations of Poe's works (de Cascales, 2016, p. 129). *¿Quién es el loco?* (1867), by Llanos y Alcaraz and Rogel, was written for the Compañía de los Bufos Madrileños, a Spanish lyrical theater company (1866-1872) with an appetite for frivolity, satire and parody.

In the original story, Poe makes several references to music (in red in the left column). It would be interesting to find out how the topic of music is treated in the narrative of this particular lyrical theater play.

## Method

To verify the relevance of the music as topic in *¿Quién es el loco?*, a formal analysis and a hermeneutic reading is made to the libretto. Links are made between the divisions and alterations of the two texts. Then, the music is observed, contextualizing it with punctual references to the poetic and historiographical levels in order to find authoritative coherence.

## Results

In the original tale, the narrator sees music with a preconception of distinction until he begins to notice discomfort in the style and tuning of the performances at the asylum. In the zarzuela, Perronet does not approve 'normal' people practicing performative arts. Plus, he is horrified when listening to strange music.

Meanwhile, both in the story and the zarzuela, the rebelled mentally ill patients are happy, quiet and autonomous in their daily life when they are not disturbed by external visits. Bustle and violence only begin when the freed, dirty keepers want to regain control.

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century there had already been first references to music therapy in modern times, both in the USA (1789) and in Spain (1744), but Poe considers music in the story as a leisure activity at the hospital, while in the zarzuela it is implied that it is part of the treatment.

The music of this zarzuela follows the conventions of the genre. It is dynamic, simple but bright, with clear and catchy melodies. Not at all dissonant nor extreme as it was used back then to represent in opera an altered state of the mind. In two numbers there is parody. The woman singing a Bellini aria in the story is translated to this zarzuela effectively performing a romanza in the style of that composer. During dinner the patients sing a toast very similar in style to the one in *La Traviata*.

## Conclusion

In *¿Quién es el loco?*, music receives a verisimilitude treatment from a diegetic point of view. We do not find here a theatrical convention in which it is indifferent for the characters expressing themselves by speaking or singing.

Music is alien to the world of the 'respectable, sane' main character, and he judges it odd when music is out of context. But he is on the verge of a nervous breakdown during all the play when meeting different people with different behaviours. On the contrary, the residents of the asylum perform and listen to music. They live happy and unconcerned.

In spite of actoral bizarre behaviour -showy to the audience- there are not clear differences in attitude between patients and the visitor, nor moral negative judgements towards the mentally ill. What matters for life is not being foolish.

This is a work of metafiction, in which the Bufos want to refer to traditions in opera, zarzuela, and commedia dell'arte. At the end, a 'mad' actor says to the public that what is reasonable is to applaud their show.

## Bibliography

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[Access to manuscript ¿Quién es el loco? sheet music](#) courtesy of CEDOA (Centro de Documentación y Archivo de SGAE)

## The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether -excerpts by order of appearance- Written by Edgar Allan Poe

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A traveler wants to visit a mental hospital, and proposes so to his companion. This one knows its superintendent, Monsieur Maillard, so he will introduce him and leave.

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The visit begins -  
the superintendent ushered me into a small and exceedingly neat parlor, containing, among other indications of refined taste, (...) musical instruments. A cheerful fire blazed upon the hearth. At a piano, singing an aria from Bellini, sat a young and very beautiful woman, who, at my entrance, paused in her song, and received me with graceful courtesy. Her voice was low, and her whole manner subdued.

Maillard reassures the narrator that the sorrowful and pale woman is not a patient -  
my niece, and a most accomplished woman.

The narrator is interested in the 'system of soothing' about which he has heard. Maillard explains - We contradicted no fancies which entered the brains of the mad. On the contrary, we not only indulged but encouraged them; and many of our most permanent cures have been thus effected. But they had to return to the old usages. It was problematic. But After dinner, however, (...) I will be happy to take you over the house, and introduce to you a system which, in my opinion, and in that of every one who has witnessed its operation, is incomparably the most effectual as yet devised. (...) We put much faith in amusements of a simple kind, such as music, dancing, gymnastic exercises generally, cards, certain classes of books, and so forth.

Dinner is served and there is a numerous, extravagant company. Plus, there is live music - There were several active servants in attendance; and, upon a large table, at the farther end of the apartment, were seated seven or eight people with fiddles, fifes, trombones, and a drum. These fellows annoyed me very much, at intervals, during the repast, by an infinite variety of noises, which were intended for music, and which appeared to afford much entertainment to all present, with the exception of myself.

For fun, cases of the 'system of soothing' are told. And they speak about the bizarre plates they are supposedly eating. But the strange behaviour of their companions is minimized by Monsieur Maillard- all very old women, are more or less eccentric! (...) the rest of these ladies and gentlemen are (...) my very good friends and assistants.

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There are frightening yells, to which Maillard explains that they are used to them. The lunatics, every now and then, get up a howl in concert; one starting another, as is sometimes the case with a bevy of dogs at night. Maillard tells a story about a revolt of the lunatics. Since a madman is not necessarily a fool the head rebel managed to keep control of the asylum.

The loose patients bounce into the hall and there is a fight. The members of the orchestra, who, for the last fifteen minutes, had been seemingly too much intoxicated to do duty, now sprang all at once to their feet and to their instruments, and, scrambling upon their table, broke out with one accord into "Yankee Doodle," which they performed, if not exactly in tune, at least with an energy superhuman, during the whole of the uproar.

The narrator is beaten, he rolls under a sofa and reflects realising that Maillard was telling his own story. He had been the superintendent, but grew crazy, became a patient and then rebelled.

One of the tarred and feathered keepers had managed to escape through the sewers and free the others.

The 'soothing system' with important modifications, has been resumed at the chateau. But the narrator became obsessed with the system of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether.

## ¿Quién es el loco? -divided into scenes- Libretto by Adolfo Llanos y Alcaraz; Music by José Rogel

Off-stage moral lesson (set to music)  
Life is a farce,  
judgement, an illusion.  
Of crazy and sane,  
the name is fabrication;  
equally crazy are  
all the population.

Enter Pericon and Perronet. Perronet wants Dr. Monicoff to treat his daughter Coriné. She thinks she's a ballerina of 'primissimo cartello'. Her only symptom is doing pirouettes around.

The doctor diagnoses -  
The symptom is typhoid, but not dangerous: although the exophagus is enighed upon the hyperitonitis of the cerebellum virus, with the spasmodic system the deleterious vapors will dissolve, and at the moment I will cure her. They are invited to dinner. Perronet will stay.

Rosbif and Pirueta, two asylum caregivers, recite meaningless proverbs and leave.

Dr. Monicoff explains his method to Perronet.

Enter Cuchufleta, a soprano who sings an aria in the style of Bellini in dog italian about lovesickness, a man submerged in a stream and a talking donkey. Coriné dances during the final instrumental section.  
Then, Cuchufleta greets Perronet, praises herself and leaves.

Monicoff explains, to Perronet's astonishment, that Madama Cuchufleta is part of the staff there -  
my cousin! A great teacher  
that, in a year of lessons,  
has cured two thousand people!

With Coriné, Monicoff will apply the 'gentleness' treatment. They will support the patient to remain in her error.  
Does your daughter want to dance?  
Dancing will heal her.

He rarely uses the method of Doctors Pluma and Brea.  
It is an infallible system!  
It is causing furor!  
They already are as glorious  
as Columbus and Beethoven!  
Perronet is amazed -  
If this is not a man of talent, I'm playing the viol.

The staff of the asylum sing about the appearance of Perronet and Coriné, who are about to dine.  
The waiters sing noise onomatopoeias during service, sounding the plates and glasses to the beat.

Jelatina joins them. She talks nonsense, but Monicoff reassure Perronet that she is the niece of an archbishop, so she's the most sane person ever, only a bit eccentric. Monicoff blesses the food in dog latin and announces the bizarre plates.

All the diners except Perronet sing an absurd Verdi-esque 'brindisi'.

Perronet hears noises and Monicoff admits that in the past some patients rebelled and locked the doctors.

They have escaped and, greased in tar and feathered, begin to go after the running, phoney staff, provoking chaos. There is a tremolo in the orchestra to intensify extra-diegetically the action.

Perronet, terrified, hides under the table  
I'm having a stifle! I'm losing my mind! Which of you is sane? Which of you is crazy?

Pericon is back. He and some people from the village had freed the 'sane' staff. But in the middle of turmoil both Pericon and Perronet are beaten.  
Ouch! Not me! I'm not guilty! I'm not one of them! Who is crazy?

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Dr. Monicoff breaks the fourth wall -  
I do not know if the reason  
is census or benefit;  
but occasionally  
I found out that judgment  
is but an illusion.  
(...)  
who can say:  
"I'm completely sane?"  
How to distinguish  
in the midst of so many people,  
between two people, who is  
more judicious or more demented?  
(To a spectator.)  
Do you want to know?  
It's a complicated matter.  
But since I am not foolish,  
I find out easily:  
he who applauds me is sane;  
he who whistles me is crazy.