

Medical Aid for Musical Maladies

by Bruce LW Sparks



Musicians like other mortals, are subject to the same indignities and frailties of the body as we lesser beings are, and they too turn to dust just as we do. Their illnesses and deaths are really no more exotic than anyone else's but because of the special positions which these people fill in our lives their afflictions and demises seem to have an extra significance and fascination for us. The tragedy is that many of the musicians died at a very early age denying us possible works of enormous dimensions and significance, and that if they had lived today the illnesses could possibly have been cured and their lives saved by simple and inexpensive modern measures.

In this series I shall look at a few composers in detail and touch briefly on some fascinating tales and secrets of others.

The records of musicians' illnesses and deaths are in fact often very inaccurate, as they are described in books and articles written by non-medically orientated journalists with strange concepts of the human body and its functions. For instance many books state that Schubert died of *typhus* from eating tainted fish, but one gets typhus from fleas, lice or ticks, tick-bite fever being an example. In fact he died from *typhoid* fever.

With the recent interest generated by the Oscar awards for Amadeus and the Durban Mozart festival I think it would be appropriate to begin with Mozart himself.

MOZART

The composer Antonio Salieri had become senile in the autumn of 1823, and in his madness is said to have accused himself of poisoning Mozart. The poisoning rumour was rife in Vienna at the time. Guiseppi Carpani, a friend of Salieri, exhorted a Dr Guldener Von Lobes to write a report on Mozart's death, which exonerated Salieri of all guilt.

What then did Mozart die of?

No autopsy was performed but based on Dr Guldener's report, and the letters of Mozart, his sister Nannerl, and his father Leopold, and to a lesser extent on reports written 30 years after his death by Constanze, his wife, and Sophie Haibel, their maid, we are able to build up quite an accurate medical file.

What was his first symptom? Possibly a sore bottom. He was born on 27 January 1756, the second survivor of seven children. The labour was difficult and there was fear for the survival of his 35 year old mother. Breast-feeding was not popular and he was fed honey and water and broth with some patent powders.

He spent the first 5 years in a comfortable, happy home but then he was paraded around the courts of Europe

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and Austria. The four tours in the next nine years were to occupy seven years of his life. During these tours he was exposed to the many endemic and epidemic diseases of those times. The journeys were usually undertaken in uncomfortable carriages, in all forms and extremes of weather. It was therefore not surprising that he suffered four illnesses towards the end of his sixth year.



Mozart as a young boy.

On 4th Oct 1762 he suffered from catarrh or flu while on a journey on the Danube from Linz (probably a 1985 streptococcal throat infection). Then 17 days later he became ill with fever, and painful raised spots on his shins, elbows and buttocks. These were obviously a yet to be described condition called Erythema Nodosum (only described 46 years later by Robert Willan [1808]) — also due to the same streptococcus.

A month later he was ill again with what was a probably upper respiratory tract infection (cough), and then a month later, soon after his return to Salzburg, he was put to bed with fever and rheumatism in his feet, so that he was unable to stand. This, I think, was rheumatic fever as the final complication of his 3 month streptococcal infection; if only they had had penicillin he would have been cured in two days for what today is R1,50!

At 8 he once again had probable strep infections, — quinsy and tonsillitis. Towards the end of that year he wrote his first symphony, much to the delight of his family.

In the spring of 1765, when he was 9, both he and his sister were stricken with a severe feverish illness whilst in The Hague. She was treated by bleeding but became so ill and weak that she was feared lost and annointed by a priest on 21 October. She had what was obviously typhoid fever. She lived, but a month later Wolfgang was also afflicted. Leopold wrote: "Over the next month it made him so wretched that he was not only unrecognizable, but had nothing left save for his tender skin and his little bones. I had to take much care of his mouth. Most of the time his tongue was like dry wood, and dirty, so that it had constantly to be moistened.

Three times his lips lost their skin, and became hard and black. By the middle of January, he was recovering and able to walk unaided." That was 2 months from the onset. During his tenth year Wolfgang again developed what seems like rheumatic fever.

Then, during a serious epidemic, Wolfgang contracted smallpox while in Olmutz. Nannerl later wrote that her formerly handsome brother became disfigured after the smallpox, and during his convalescence he was taught card tricks and given fencing lessons, much to his delight. This scarring was to affect him greatly during his life.

Wolfgang and Leopold returned to Salzburg after his second tour of Italy and shortly after composing his second symphony in A Major; in 2 weeks Nannerl wrote that her brother suffered a severe illness where he turned yellow. This may have been yellow fever which was epidemic in Italy at the time, but was probably viral hepatitis.

He had a few upper respiratory infections later but the illness of Aug 1784 (when he was 28) provides an important clue to the possible cause of Mozart's death. He was ill and unable to travel to his sister's wedding. On 23 August while attending Paisiello's opera, *Il re Teodora* in Venezia, he perspired so profusely, was ill and left early. He wrote to his father "four days running at the same hour, I had a fearful attack of colic, which ended each time in violent vomiting." His father mentions in a letter to Nannerl "so, not only my son but a number of other people caught a rheumatic inflammatory fever, which became septic when not taken in hand at once."

The most likely diagnosis is one of streptococcal throat infection which was complicated by Henoch-Schönlein syndrome. This is thought to be a toxic reaction to the bacteria resulting in purpura on the legs and arms, associated with haemorrhages in the bowel producing severe abdominal pains, haematuria and haemarthrosis with severe arthralgia. It can occasionally lead to renal failure and brain haemorrhage. He was to develop it at least twice more, once just before his father's death in 1787 and again in 1790 when



Mozart as a young man.

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he was confined to his house for long periods because of his "rheumatic" pains. The year 1791 was the fateful year in which he was to develop his terminal illness, to die on the 5th of December.

Mozart had an obsessional, immature personality which was moulded by his insulated upbringing. He was subject to severe melancholia sometimes related to his unattractive appearance. He was only about five feet tall, with an oversized nose that was frequently caricatured, a face disfigured by smallpox and external ears which were deformed.

He became preoccupied with death in his last year and "black thoughts which I banish with tremendous effort". Yet, with an astonishing burst of creative activity he composed the three last great symphonies on 26 June, 25 July, and 10 August. (During his last 11 years Mozart completed 295 compositions at an average of 27 per year — writing time of 8 hrs per day for the same period!)

He also developed personality changes, headaches, paranoid thoughts that he was being poisoned and commissioned to write his own requiem. Blackouts, anaemia and weight loss followed. His final illness of 15 days was one of fevers, dropsy, vomiting, paralysis of various forms, a rash with terminal coma.

Various theories have been put forward as to the causes of death and these vary from tuberculosis, typhoid fever, septicaemia, deliberate poisoning by Salieri, by mercury which he took when he thought he had syphilis (the treatment of the time), and by the freemasons because he had exposed their secrets in the Magic Flute. Others feel he may have died from uraemic coma, rheumatic fever, or even the venusections which were carried out.

The theory which I subscribe to, is the following:

I believe it was all caused by his frequent enemy, the minute streptococcal bacteria, which caused recurring Henoch-Schönlein syndromes, leading to chronic renal failure and hypertension. Finally he developed a stroke with terminal pneumonia. The venusections which were performed probably helped him further in shuffling off his mortal coil.

As you know, he was buried in a unmarked, common grave in Vienna. It was raining and there were no mourners. Constanze had a cold and, as had so often happened, she was not with him when he needed her most. She only visited the cemetery nearly seventeen years later, for the first time — apparently after being pressed to do so by her second husband, the Mozart biographer Nissen.

The only marker of Mozart's presence in the St Mark's cemetery is a collection of disused ornaments, the statue of a mourning angel, a stone tablet, and a broken pillar tastefully arranged at the assumed grave by a reverent graveyard keeper early this century. This mark of reverence by a loving hand is more affecting than the cold, pompous monument in the central cemetery.



Osteo-artrose

Vir sommige wat 'n sekere ouderdom bereik het, word verminderde beweeglikheid 'n ware bekommernis. Die pyn wat gepaard gaan met teerheid en vergroting van gewigte is 'n ernstige hindernis.

Gelukkig is daar Stopayne, die doeltreffende pynstiller wat spesiaal geformuleer is om verligting aan seer en stywe gewigte te bring.

Onthou Stopayne. Een naam wat pyn laat verdwyn.

Rx Vir pyn
Stopayne.

Een naam wat
pyn laat verdwyn

