



## Review

## Musical and poetic creativity and epilepsy

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Accepted 28 December 2015

Available online 16 February 2016

## Keywords:

Epilepsy

Music

Poetry

## ABSTRACT

Associations between epilepsy and musical or poetic composition have received little attention. We reviewed the literature on links between poetic and musical skills and epilepsy, limiting this to the Western canon. While several composers were said to have had epilepsy, John Hughes concluded that none of the major classical composers thought to have had epilepsy actually had it. The only composer with epilepsy that we could find was the contemporary composer, Hikari Oe, who has autism and developed epilepsy at age 15 years. In his childhood years, his mother found that he had an ability to identify bird sound and keys of songs and began teaching him piano. Hikari is able to compose in his head when his seizures are not severe, but when his seizures worsen, his creativity is lost. Music critics have commented on the simplicity of his musical composition and its monotonous sound.

Our failure to find evidence of musical composers with epilepsy finds parallels with poetry where there are virtually no established poets with epilepsy. Those with seizures include Lord George Byron in the setting of terminal illness, Algernon Swinburne who had alcohol-related seizures, Charles Lloyd who had seizures and psychosis, Edward Lear who had childhood onset seizures, and Vachel Lindsay. The possibility that Emily Dickinson had epilepsy is also discussed.

It has not been possible to identify great talents with epilepsy who excel in poetic or musical composition. There are few published poets with epilepsy and no great composers. Why is this? Similarities between music and poetry include meter, tone, stress, rhythm, and form, and much poetry is sung with music. It is likely that great musical and poetic compositions demand a greater degree of concentration and memory than is possible in epilepsy, resulting in problems retaining a musical and mathematical structure over time. The lack of association between recognizable neuropsychiatric disorders and these skills is a gateway to understanding facets of the relationship between the brain and creativity.

**This article is part of a Special Issue entitled “Epilepsy, Art, and Creativity”.**

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## 1. Introduction

Much has been written in the last few years on the theme of creativity and genius; the literature has its origins in antiquity. The idea that there is a direct link between creativity in the arts and madness was one feature in Greek philosophy, and many distinguished names are associated with this theme ever since. Views have ranged from the divine inspiration of the genius' mind, to the view that somehow mental illness provides the *Ursprung* for creativity, possibly as a means of coping with the illness. The former view implicates exterior forces activating the mind, the latter looks to interiority—a Romantic perspective. Implicit in the latter is that manifestations of the illness may color the creative output; a psychoanalytic possibility is that creativity itself is a form of

neurosis [1]. In much of this literature, little attention is given either to the kind of mental illness referred to, at least in today's terms, and links to specific art forms have tended to concentrate on poets and painters. Associations between musicians and psychopathology have been discussed [2], but those between epilepsy and either poetic or musical composition have received little attention. In this paper, we first review the literature on links between poetic and musical skills and psychopathology, and then address the associations with epilepsy. We have confined our search to those who have contributed to the Western canon, essentially art traditionally accepted by Western scholars as influential in shaping Western culture—contributions that have stood the test of time [3].

## 2. Literature review

There are several studies that have examined psychopathology in creative people, but few that have either differentiated between the

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various art forms, and virtually none that have looked specifically at epilepsy. Several earlier studies, reviewed elsewhere, use different designations for psychiatric disorders from current terminologies. For example, Juda, in a study of 294 gifted personalities from a total of 19,000 people from German-speaking countries, noted psychopathy in 27% of artists, highest in poets (48%) and musicians (35%) [4].

Post reviewed the biographies of 291 “world famous men”, from six professional categories [5]. His groups were 48 visual artists, 50 scholars and thinkers, 45 scientists, 46 statesmen and national leaders, 52 composers, and 50 novelists and dramatists. Only men were studied, because of the lack of availability of adequate biographies of women. Diagnoses were made according to the DSM III-R. Considering composers, he noted 50% to have marked or severe psychiatric disorders compared with 56% in artists and 86.0% in writers. In composers, there was a high percentage with what he referred to as a personality disorder (62%), and 35% were rated as having an affective disorder. In an extended version of his work, Post looked at 35 poets. Bipolar disorder, cyclothymic personalities, and suicides were overrepresented in them. However, schizophrenia was noticeably absent in all his categories, and epilepsy was not specifically discussed except in the context of alcohol withdrawal seizures.

Arnold Ludwig carried out a 10-year study of the link between mental illness and creativity by gathering together biographies of 1004 “extraordinary men and women” [6]. One-quarter of the sample was female, and all were selected from biographies that had been reviewed in the New York Times Book Review from 1960 to 1990. Eighteen different professions were represented, including 38 composers. He analyzed the family backgrounds, looked for broken homes, noted family size and birth order, physical health, education, social behavior, encounters with the law, and several other factors he considered relevant to the nurturing of creativity. Among the 48 composers, Ludwig found that about a fifth had alcoholism, a third had depression, a tenth had psychosis, a quarter had adjustment disorders, and a fifth had mania. While 10% were categorized as being at some time psychotic, he was unable to give good statistics for schizophrenia. Only poets had a greater lifetime history of psychosis with a fifteenth affected. Epilepsy was distinctly absent from Ludwig’s results and discussions. Ludwig’s use of psychosis is difficult on account of a historical diagnostic confusion, especially in America, among the psychiatrists of an earlier era, who poorly differentiated between affective and schizophrenic psychoses. This effectively meant that there was an overdiagnosis of the latter at the expense of bipolar disorders. Ludwig used the term schizophrenia-like psychosis, embracing what we might now call schizoaffective disorders.

We have been unable to find any studies that have examined an association between epilepsy and either music or poetic compositional ability. However, the almost total absence of schizophrenia in the data from both Post and Ludwig might be significant with regard to our search for those with these talents and epilepsy, in view of studies of the comorbidities of epilepsy, since schizophrenia-like psychoses have the strongest association [7].

### 3. Epilepsy and musical composition

Hughes [8] in his paper “Did all those famous people really have epilepsy?” notes the few composers who have been suggested to have epilepsy (such as Handel, Beethoven, Schumann, Berlioz, and Tchaikovsky), only to dismiss the evidence. Haydn [9] and Mussorgsky [10] were thought to have epilepsy, but this was later refuted. Haydn in later life had a stroke and was given a diagnosis of subcortical vascular encephalopathy. Mussorgsky was an alcoholic and experienced alcohol withdrawal seizures. Although it has recently been asserted by Caruncho and Fernandez [11] that Chopin had epilepsy, the data are more suggestive of hallucinations or even trance-like states; the evidence for seizures or epilepsy is simply absent.

The only composer we have discovered who is known without question to have epilepsy is Hikari Oe, son of the Nobel Prize laureate for literature, Kenzaburo Oe. As described in the book *The Music of Light: The extraordinary story of Hikari and Kenzaburo Oe* [12], Hikari Oe was born with an encephalocele, which was operated on at birth, and signs of autism emerged early. His mother recognized his ability to identify bird sounds and the key of songs, and to recall titles of all music he heard, much like a savant. She began to teach him piano at 9 years of age, but his performing ability was hampered by poor coordination. At 13 years, he wrote fragments of music composed in his head without a piano. Though he has some features in common with savants, Hikari is not a musical savant, most of who have an extraordinary musical memory [13] or performing ability [14]. Instead, Hikari has notated what he composed in his head, demonstrating musical creativity separate from his performing skills. His father has said that “music is not an alternative to language for Hikari but the language of Western classical music... is the only mode of expression he has truly and thoroughly mastered” [12].

Hikari Oe developed epilepsy at age 15. When he was 30, his seizures worsened and his mother thought that “his creative work might be impossible after that [12]”. His work has been reviewed by *The New Yorker*, *Chamber Music Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and *The London Times*. All comment on the simplicity of the composition and its tendency to sound emotionless and lack variety. His father maintains that “Hikari’s epilepsy has only dampened his creativity and cannot have enhanced it in any way” [12].

### 4. Epilepsy and poetic composition

Our failure to find evidence of musical composers with epilepsy finds parallels with poetry. Within the Western canon, there are virtually no established poets with either schizophrenia or epilepsy. Christopher Smart (1722–1771) and Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) almost certainly had what we would now diagnose as schizophrenia, as probably did John Clare (1793–1864), but their talent waned as their psychotic disorder advanced. With regard to epilepsy, Lord George Byron (1788–1824) had seizures in the setting of his terminal illness, and Algernon Swinburne (1837–1909) had alcohol-related seizures. Trimble [15] has described the epilepsy and postictal psychoses of Charles Lloyd (1775–1839), scion of the banking family, and who Samuel Taylor Coleridge described as a poetic genius. Yet his star readily declined as his episodes of seizures and psychoses interrupted his creative potential.

Edward Lear (1812–1888) had seizures which were well documented by Lear himself. Lear had his first seizures around the age of 5 or 6 years, and recorded up to 10 to 15 attacks a month. His sister Harriet also had epilepsy. He referred to his attacks as “the Demon”, only to be complemented later in life with “the morbid”, the acute depressive episodes to which he was so prone. He wrote: “It is a most merciful blessing that I have kept up as I have, and have not gone utterly to the mad bad sad”. His seizures were preceded by some kind of aura, such that he had time to seek privacy before the attack. In his diary for the February 14, 1880 he wrote: “It is wonderful that these fits have never been discovered, except partly apprehending them beforehand, I go to my room”. He referred to experiencing “cataleptic pauses of an hour”, and some of his seizures were “violent”, leaving him confused for even longer. He tried “self-control” to stop them, but soon came to the conclusion that self-control had little to do with the matter.

Lear was an accomplished artist, both as a natural history illustrator and a landscape painter. He illustrated the poems of Lord Tennyson, composed songs, and, in spite of having none of his own, loved children. Most of his poems for which he is known were composed quite late in his life. Although the early limericks probably date to the 1840s, the major ‘nonsense’ songs such as *The Owl and the Pussy Cat* were composed in the 1860s and 70s.

His most recent biographer, Peter Levi, is rather dismissive of the verse of his youth (“suburban...scarcely distinguishable”), and he

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