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HUMANITIES IN MEDICINE

The enigma of Mozart's death

El enigma de la muerte de Mozart

Introduction

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in January 27, 1756, at the third floor of Getreidegasse 9 in Salzburg, and died in December 5, 1791, in Vienna. He was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave. Mozart is the Austrian musician who represents the climax of the late 18th century Viennese classical style; the huge quality of his talent in opera, symphonies, church music, piano and violin concerti, vocal and chamber music has turned him the greatest genius composer of all time.¹ During more than 250 years of Mozart research, details of his short life have been studied, classified and incorporated into the worldwide literature, but the final moments of his life still remain unknown.² The Mozart's output produced in the last year is shown in Table 1.

The tragic ending

Solemnly opened in November 18, Mozart conducted the *Eine Freimaurer Kantate* (K.623), a true masterpiece, which was the last to be included in his Köchel catalog and completed 3 days before, and just 48 h later he became seriously ill with high fever. Mozart's first biographer, George Nikolaus von Nissen (1761–1826), who got his information from Constanze, wrote, "His mortal illness, during which he was bedridden, lasted 15 days. It began with swelling in his hands and feet, which he was soon unable to move". His rheumatic disorder was extremely painful and disabling. Sophie Weber, Mozart's sister-in-law, described a "night-jacket which he could put on frontways, since on account of his swollen condition he was unable to turn in bed". The disease was progressing, although the severity of signs and symptoms varies from patient to patient, depending, at least in part, on the level and rapidity of deterioration of kidney function. In Mozart's time, no therapeutic procedures were available and the prognostic outcome was irretrievably lost.^{3,4}

The cause of death

Thousands of pages have been written concerning Mozart's death and burial, probably more than any other circumstance of his biography. Of course, not all of them offered the same diagnosis. The "investigations" have focused mainly on the "theatrical" aspects to satisfy a given public with little inclination to know the real historical facts; when a young genius died it gave rise to any kind of suspicion. Several medical conditions have been postulated as the cause of his decease. The first was the *poisoning theory* with many variations. It opens a wide field of speculation: If Mozart was poisoned, two questions must be postulated: who was the assassin, and which was the motive? These interesting queries have been recently discussed: London, May 17, 1983. The conclusion of murder was reached at the music Festival in Brighton; the majority of the "jurors" (250 spectators) declared that the composer was killed. The identity of the culprit was Franz Hofdemel, the jealous husband of one of Mozart's disciples. "Judge" Michael Hutchinson, who chaired the proceedings, declared that in this particular case a "charge of homicide against a person or persons unknown" should be kept in mind. The second source for the poisoning theory is coming from Franz Xaver Niemetschek's biography (1798). "... Mozart began to speak of death, and maintained (he was writing the Requiem for himself ...) someone has surely poisoned me! I cannot free myself from this thought". However, Niemetschek's origin for this anecdote is unclear. The third reference points out to Antonio Salieri⁵; this idea, the most doubtful of all, appeared more than 30 years after Mozart's death. Leipzig, in May 25, 1825, *Allegemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, stated: "Our worthy Salieri just won't die as the popular expression goes. His body suffers all the infirmities of old age, and his mind is gone. In his distorted fantasies he actually claims to be partially responsible for Mozart's death – a bit of lunacy which surely no one but he, poor, delirious old man believes". Salieri never confessed to having poisoned Mozart. The Italian hardly refused this accusation: "...

Table 1 Mozart's last works^a, all produced in 1791.

Place	Date	Work
Prague	September 6	<i>La clemenza di Tito</i> (Titus) (K.621)
Vienna	Summer	Quartet (K.620,b)
Prague	Middle September	Aria: <i>Io ti lascio, o cara, addio</i> (K.621,a)
Vienna	September 30	<i>The Magic Flute</i> (K.620)
Vienna	October 7	<i>Clarinet concerto</i> (K.622)
Vienna	November 15	Kantate: <i>Lob der freundschaft</i> (K.623)Lied: <i>Lasst uns mit ...</i>
Vienna	July to November	<i>Requiem</i> (K.626)

^a Summary of all works produced in 1791: Operas (3), Arias (3), Lied (1), Kantate (1), Concert (1), Quartet (1), Mass (1): *Requiem*.

I am mortally ill, I assure you in good faith that there is no truth so that absurd rumor. It's malice nothing but malice". In summary, the *murder theory* is coming from three points: from Prague (*Musikalisches Wochenblatt*); from the Mozart's biographer; or by assassination (*Allegeine Musikalische Zeitung*, 1825). Another suspicious man was Franz Xaver Süssmayr, the lover of Mozart's wife, Constance, who often spent holidays with her. Possible cause of Mozart's death is *mercurial poisoning*. He could have taken a sub-lethal dose in the summer time, and a lethal dose in the middle of November. In this way, that could explain that Mozart would perform in public the 18 of this month; he conducted a *Kantate* and died few days later. "My mind is upset. My ideas are confused, and I can't take my eyes off the image of that unknown person". "I constantly see him in front of me, asking me, and requiring me my work ..." "I'll finish what I started once; it's my own Requiem".

However, the *poisoning* theory is clearly untenable, because there is no evidence of the physical manifestations that, of course, appear in such clinical disorders. In summer 1791 (6 months before his death) he felt ill, and he was impressed with the horrible idea that someone had poisoned him. One day, Mozart came to Constanze; he complained of a great pain in the lumbar region and a deterioration of his general state of health. He believed that someone of his enemies gave him a deleterious mixture that would have caused his death. Hypothetically, the composer was poisoned with *aqua toffana* made up of arsenic, lead oxide and antimony.⁵

While some medical historians believed in the poisoning theory, others – particularly Aloys Greither (1913–1986) a German dermatologist – and myself maintained that Mozart died of renal disease followed by uremia. Karl Ernst von Baer (1792–1876) concluded that Mozart suffered from an attack of rheumatic fever – as he did several times in his childhood – and died from the effects of this disease and the erroneous therapeutic treatment prescribed for him. The pathography of Mozart is showed in Table 2. Nevertheless, others causes of death have been provided. At this time, Mozart's death certificate has not been found. The Registry Office refers to what was known as typhus, also called petechial fever, characterized by fever, stupor, maculopapular exanthema, which clinical course usually lasts 2 weeks. These symptoms are not related to those developed by Mozart before his death. He remained lucid until the last moments before the final outcome; unfortunately, no autopsy was carried out. Many people have raised the question about how Mozart's last illness developed. Six months before he died, he was not ill. In the middle of August, *The Magic Flute*

was over and Mozart started another opera: *La Clemenza di Tito*. September 6 – 20 days later – the opera was finished. In Prague, when Mozart conducted the *première*, he felt sick; however, *Titus* was fortunately released. In September 30, the first performance of the *The Magic Flute* at the *Theater auf der Wieden* was a clamorous success, full of general public who was moved by the first appearance. In October 15, Mozart probably felt sick. The masonic *Kantate* K.623 was conducted by Mozart in November 18, but 4 days later he developed high fever from unknown origin. According with the "rheumatic diagnosis", in 1986, Prof. Anton Neumayr (1887–1954) affirmed that the genius died of *acute rheumatic attack*, that he suffered from childhood aggravated by the erroneous medical treatment given. On this controversial point, when was Mozart exactly felt sick? A Prague newspaper reported: "The composition – *La Clemenza di Titus* – is by the famous Mozart, and does him honor, though he did not have much time for it and was also the victim of an illness, during which he had to complete the last part of the score".

Among the other diagnostic possibilities, *heart failure* can be discarded since he sang fragments of the *Requiem* at the final moment of his life. This circumstance would not be possible in a patient with heart disease and shortness of breath. Generalized swelling (anasarca), which was reported in many biographies, was spread throughout his body. It is well known that heart insufficiency together with generalized edemas usually occurs in the last stages of the

Table 2 Pathography of Mozart.

Age	Year	Illness
6	1762	Scarlet fever
6	1762	Nodosum erythema
7	1763	RHEUMATIC FEVER
9	1765	Pernicious fever
10	1766	POLYARTHRICULAR RHEUMATISM
11	1767	Typhoid fever
13	1769	Smallpox
14	1770	Recurrent colds
15	1771	Pneumonia
18	1774	Benign fever disease
22	1778	Functional dyspepsia
28	1784	RHEUMATIC FEVER
29	1785	Epidemic typhus
35	1791	CHRONIC RENAL FAILURE

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