

Epistemology, philosophy of the mind and bioethics

Did Mozart suffer from Gilles de la Tourette syndrome? ☆



Leonardo Palacios-Sánchez^{a,*}, Juan Sebastián Botero-Meneses^b,
Laura Daniela Vergara-Méndez^c, Natalia Pachón^d, Arianna Martínez^d,
Santiago Ramírez^d

^a Departamento de Neurología, Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá, Colombia

^b Grupo de Investigación en Neurociencia (NEUROS), Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá, Colombia

^c Departamento de Pediatría, Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá, Colombia

^d Semillero de Investigación en Neurociencia, Bogotá, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

The personal and private lives of great men and women in history, like writers, painters and musicians, have been the subject of great interest for many years. A clear example of this is the vast scrutiny is cast over the famous composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. What may have started as curiosity, rapidly evolved into extensive research, as the answers about the musician's legendary talent may lie in the details of his life (his childhood, his relationships, his quirks and his mannerisms). It is usually up to historians, anthropologists or philosophers to delve into the pages of old books, trying to grasp answers and clues. However, for some time, physicians have sought their own part in solving the puzzle. The long told hypothesis regarding Mozart's diagnosis of Gilles de la Tourette syndrome will be examined. Could all of the peculiarities and oddities of the genius be caused by a neurological disorder? Or was this musical genius just an eccentric brilliant man?

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¿Mozart padeció síndrome de Gilles de la Tourette?

RESUMEN

Por años, la vida privada de los grandes hombres y mujeres de la historia, escritores, pintores y músicos, ha sido objeto de gran interés. Un claro ejemplo de esto es el gran escrutinio que se ha hecho sobre el aclamado compositor Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Lo que posiblemente comenzó como simple curiosidad rápidamente se convirtió en una investigación

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* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: leonardo.palacios@urosario.edu.co (L. Palacios-Sánchez).

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exhaustiva, pues en los detalles de su vida (su infancia, relaciones, mañas y manerismos) podría estar la evidencia de su legendario talento. Usualmente, son los historiadores, antropólogos y filósofos los que se sumergen en las páginas de viejos y ajados libros tratando de encontrar respuestas y pistas; sin embargo, desde algún tiempo, los médicos han reclamado su propio papel en la resolución de estos interrogantes. Este artículo explora la hipótesis sobre el posible diagnóstico de síndrome de Gilles de la Tourette para Mozart. ¿Todas las peculiaridades y rarezas del genio podrían estar causadas por un trastorno neurológico o se trataba solamente de un hombre brillante y excéntrico?

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Introduction

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) is considered by many to be the best composer of all time.¹ He left behind over 600 pieces of work, including more than 50 symphonies, 27 vocal concertos, 26 works for string quartets, 25 piano concertos, 21 operas, 17 piano sonatas, 15 masses and 12 violin concertos. Several of his works are considered some of humankind's best musical creations.² However, despite his genius and fame, Mozart's life was short and he suffered great financial difficulties and multiple diseases, including scarlet fever, smallpox and typhus. It is said that he used a language (spoken and written) associated with behaviours that have led several authors to consider the possibility that the Austrian genius may have suffered from Gilles de la Tourette syndrome, described by the French neurologist after whom it was named in 1885. The main characteristics of this condition are: simple and complex vocal and motor tics, which arise between 2 and 15 years of age and persist for over 12 months. Onset should not occur after 18 years of age. Coprolalia, coprographia and copropraxia may be present in 30% of cases. Symptoms decrease with the passage of time and are significantly reduced in adult life.^{3,4}

This article draws a parallel between the life of the musical genius and the main findings that indicate this possibility.

Biographical data

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born on 27 January 1756 in Salzburg. He was the son of Leopold Mozart (1719–1787), a composer at the Salzburg court, and Anna Maria Pertl (1720–1778). His parents married in 1747 and had six children, only two of whom reached adulthood: Maria-Anna, known as “Nannerl” (1751–1829), and Wolfgang Amadeus (Amadeus means “loved by God”)⁵ (Fig. 1). Wolfgang married Constanze Weber (1763–1842) in 1782 and the couple had two sons, Karl (1784–1858), who was a trader, and Wolfgang (1791–1844), a composer and pianist.¹

Variations of the genius's name

It is well known that Mozart introduced himself with different variations of his name depending on the region, era or a particular whim at the time. His middle name, Amadeus, as



Fig. 1 – “Loved by God”, illustration by María Camila Vélez.

we know it today, seems to be a “joke” or, rather, another of his uncontrollable and amusing impulses. The most common are “Wolfgang Amadeo”, as he called himself in Italy in 1770, and from 1777 onwards, “Wolfgang Amadé”, which was possibly his favourite, as this was the name he used to sign his certificate of marriage to Constanze.⁵

However, other more exotic variants included “Wolfgang Gottlieb” and “Trazom” (Mozart backwards). He only used “Wolfgangus Amadeus Mozartus” as a joke or gag, as seen in letters where, as well as his name, both the date and other words end in -us, which is ironic, given that it ended up being the name that stuck after the 19th century to the present day.⁵

If we examine this situation in detail, it can be inferred that perhaps this custom of using multiple names was not only an eccentric trait, but also evidence of uninhibited complex tics and impulses that could be explained by Tourette's.⁵

Mozart's early life was marked by his artistic genius. Figures as important as Goethe, Grimm, Haydn, Wagner, Kierkegaard and Barth spoke in glowing terms of his extraordinary talent.¹

As soon as his father discovered his musical skills, he decided he would do everything he could to turn him into a great musician and to devote the rest of his existence to educating his children.¹ Fortunately for humanity, Leopold was an excellent teacher. Although he was always strict when imparting lessons to his children, instilling a sense of ethics and effort, he managed to make music lessons fun. This enabled

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