

Mozart's Death: Myth and Reality

On December 5, 1791, two months before his 36th birthday, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died in Vienna. An extensive debate continues two centuries after the death of the great composer. How did this prolific figure of the 18th century die at the young age of 35? Was he poisoned by Antonio Salieri, a rival court composer, or the mysterious organization known as the Freemasons? Perhaps Mozart, who was known to have suffered from bouts of rheumatic fever throughout his life, fell victim to a disease? Although numerous scholars have provided their analysis on this historic event, the issue remains unresolved. Nevertheless, an educated hypothesis can be derived by analyzing the many theories and myths that exist concerning the composer. In the end, the romantic legends that have characterized the retelling of Mozart's life have to be discredited and the more plausible assumption of a death by disease accepted.

The sudden death of Mozart immediately gave birth to rumors of murder. A Berlin newspaper reported on December 31, 1791, "Because his body swelled up after death, some people believe that he was poisoned... In his life he was constantly the object of cabals, which he at times may well have provoked by his *sans souci* [carefree] manner" (qtd. in Hirshmann 1382). In fact, months prior to his death Mozart stated to his wife Constanze, "I know I must die, [...] someone has given me *acqua toffana* and has calculated the precise time of my death [...]" (qtd. in Stafford 32). *Acqua toffana* was a liquid containing arsenic which many used as a poison. Although Constanze dismissed Mozart's thought of being poisoned as a ridiculous idea, rumors spread that Antonio Salieri, a rival court composer, may have plotted against the genius.

The first accusations against Salieri began in 1823 when the composer attempted to commit suicide. Rumors stemmed from an unsupported claim that Salieri was a long time enemy of Mozart who, in his dying days, confessed responsibility for his early death. As Ludwig van Beethoven, a former student of Salieri's, learned from his friend Schindler, "Salieri is again in a very bad way. He is quite ruined. He has fantasies that he was responsible for Mozart's death and gave him poison. This is *true* - for he want to confess it..." (qtd. in Landon 173). Yet, it is important to note that Salieri's final days were characterized by a decreasing state of reason. In another interview with Salieri, this time by the pianist Moscheles, he states,

“Although this is my last illness, however I assure you in good faith that there is no truth in the absurd rumor; you know what I mean - that I poisoned Mozart. But no, dear Moscheles, tell the world that it is malice, pure malice; old Salieri who will soon be dead, has told you this.” (qtd. in Stafford 43)

Indeed, in the letters of the Mozart family, there are references to the tense relations between the two composers yet there is no reason to believe Salieri held special malice for Mozart. In a sense, all composers were Mozart's “enemies” as Rosselli argues,

“There is nothing in it. All composers in Vienna were in a sense Mozart's rivals, but Salieri was the most successful of all: court composer, hence far better paid than Mozart, favoured by Joseph II, able in his tragi-comic, Franco-Italian opera *Axur* - a resounding success ever since its first performance in 1788 - to blend all the styles then in vogue. Nor was he a mediocre artist by the standards of his age or ours;” (154)

Mozart's earlier talks about being poisoned or plotted against, recorded as early as 1789, may be interpreted as simple slanders made towards his competition in order to gain commissions. Thus, it may be that the movie *Amadeus* is fair in highlighting Salieri's contribution to Mozart's death by “obstructing his career, thereby helping to produce indebtedness, depression, and overwork” (Stafford 45). Many times the romantic notion that Mozart was an unrivaled genius gives way to biased assumptions that he was never challenged, or even economically and socially surpassed, by others. Despite the controversy between the two artists, Mozart's last letter to Constanze, dated October 14, 1791, describes the cordial response Salieri and his wife gave to the performance of Mozart's opera, *The Magic Flute*,

“You can hardly imagine how charming they were and how much they liked not only my music, but the libretto and everything. They both said that it was an *operone* [grand opera], worthy to be performed for the grandest festival and for the greatest monarch, and that they would often go to see it, as they had never seen a more beautiful or delightful show. Salieri listened and watched most attentively and from the overture to the last chorus there was not a single number that did not call forth from him a *bravo!* or *bello!*” (qtd. in Hirschmann 1383)

Even if Salieri's response to the opera was expected, there was no motive or basis for his participation in a crime against Mozart.

An interesting twist to the poisoning myth is the involvement of the Freemasons. The theory suggests the Freemasons killed Mozart, among other motives, for having written *The Magic Flute* in which, "he either challenged their doctrines or revealed their secret rituals" (Hirshmann 1383). The theory claims Mozart became a member of the Masons in 1784 without being aware of the criminality of the organization. Only later did he realize their dark plots and sought to protect himself by creating a rival group, *Die Grotto*. He threaded his anti-masonic message through his compositions, the most important being *The Magic Flute*. This theory was first introduced by G. F. Daumer in his periodical *Out of the Attic* in 1861 and then supported by Erich Ludendorff, a German general in World War I. In 1926, he and his wife argued that the Masons and Jews had poisoned Mozart and arranged for a cover-up after his death, thus the lack of evidence and mystery concerning the composer's last days. The Daumer/Ludendorff idea was reinforced in books published in 1966 and 1971 by three German doctors: Dalchow, Duda and Kerner.

The Freemason argument is perhaps the darkest story regarding Mozart's death. It may be easily disregarded on the consensus that the belief is supported by an audience hoping for a conspiracy theory which deems any critic a participant in the intricate plot. Ludendorff's story is not supported by evidence and the statements made by the three doctors are unscholarly and fantastic. We are expected to believe that Mozart played a role in his death under manipulation or supernatural power. Stafford states,

"the impression is conveyed that Mozart cooperated in his own ritual sacrifice, carefully and knowingly preparing three works to that end, *Die Zauberflöte*, the Requiem and the cantata *Laut verkünde unsre Freude*, filling and surrounding them with symbols of sacrifice and mercury." (50)

There is also an argument concerning the use of numbers, in particular the number 18, in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*. According to the theory, the number 18 signifies a grade in the secret organization and also comes to symbolize Hiram, a legendary figure in masonic

history, and sacrifice. The argument is fascinating, it makes it seem Mozart was aware of the use of numbers in his composition, yet lacks support. In generating the number 18 many methods can be used. For example, I can claim this essay will be written out in eight pages. Eight divided by two (this number symbolizes both drafts: rough and final) equals four. 4 p.m. *sharp* is the time at which my final draft will be due and four is the grade I hope to receive (A). Thus, this is a mere tactic used for the reinforcement of an argument.

Apart from the disreputable tactics the Freemason theory uses, the contemporary authors leave no room for counter-arguments to be made as they cloak themselves under the term of “medical experts”. Any who disagree must be involved in the Masonic plot and historians of medicine are considered amateurs as their methods are out-dated. In discrediting the Freemason legend Stafford puts it best,

“[The theory] is a perfect specimen of a closed system with built-in strategies to protect itself against scientific testing. They are not made downhearted by the absence of documentary proof of the nefarious activities of the masons; for them it is axiomatic that the masons represent an occult conspiracy which takes care never to leave documentary evidence. The very absence of the evidence proves the depth and danger of the secret.”
(53)

Other poisoning theories suggest mercury as the culprit. One theory claims that Mozart may have used mercury to treat himself for syphilis and accidentally overdosed. Although he was suspected as being a promiscuous man, no proof exists that Mozart contracted syphilis. Even if doctors used mercury to treat him at any point, he was not a victim of the substance. Hirschmann argues,

“accounts of his demise do not mention the typical, prominent features of mercury poisoning: memory loss, excessive salivation, and erethism (from the Greek word meaning “irritation”), which denotes emotional lability, irritability, forgetfulness, timidity, and delirium. His handwriting shows no signs of intention tremor, probably the most common manifestation of chronic mercury poisoning.” (1385)

Doctors may have used mercury in the 18th century for medical purposes but the fatal symptoms the substance brought about is not characteristic of Mozart's death.

Mozart's death was reported in newspapers and caused general interest but it is wise to note that up until 1823 no one suspected murder by poison or foul play. Many scholars give credit to the scrupulous care given by Dr. Closset who attended Mozart under intense watchfulness and even predicted his death to the hour. Dr. Closset found nothing strange in the fatal symptoms exhibited by Mozart as similar cases had been widely reported in Vienna. If the close watchfulness of Dr. Closset and Mozart's family members may help rule out the poisoning myths then possibly it may help us understand more about Mozart's last days. It may have been that Dr. Closset found Mozart's fatal symptoms predictable due to an epidemic sweeping through Europe at the time. Therefore, the claims concerning Mozart's death as argued through medical analysis provide a more rational, although less appealing, conclusion to the life of the composer.

Acting as a devil's advocate, most of the information received, concerning Mozart's battle with illness, bases itself on the eyewitness accounts of his family members. Therefore, the validity or accuracy of such medically uninformed sources is often questioned. Although Mozart was attended by two of Vienna's finest practitioners, Dr. Thomas Closset and Dr. Mathias von Sallaba, their testimony is very broad and does not make reference to a specific cause of death. Their diagnosis is recorded in the death register of St. Stephen's Cathedral as "acute military fever". Such a diagnosis is, in fact, an attempt to assimilate the patient's symptoms under one category. One can also argue that what was known as "acute military fever" in the 18th century has been substantially altered and now refers to different symptoms. Yet, despite the obscurity of the situation, the various accounts that report on Mozart's last days have been pieced together to support a number of medical theories.

One proposed diagnosis for Mozart's death is Henoch-Schönlein Syndrome in relation to kidney failure. This disease was first identified in the 19th century by two German doctors, Edward Henoch and Lucas Schönlein. The illness manifests itself mainly in children and although adult cases are unusual they are possible. Developed from an infection in the upper respiratory tract, the disease affects blood vessels associated with various vital organs, such as the heart, lungs, and kidneys, and produces purple rashes on the arms, legs, and buttocks. Furthermore, joints are affected as they become swollen and tender. Dr. Peter J. Davies' research has developed this theory on the basis that Mozart suffered a series of respiratory infections throughout his life which resulted in the development of the Henoch-Schönlein

Syndrome in 1784. The syndrome weakened his kidneys which resulted in kidney failure seven years later. Dr. Davies final conclusion, “Mozart died from the following: streptococcal infection - Schonlein-Henoch Syndrome - renal failure - venesection(s) - cerebral hemorrhage - terminal broncho-pneumonia” (qtd. in Landon 179). Davies argues that the delusions Mozart suffered about poisoning and the fainting episodes he is known to have had during the composition of the Requiem are evidence of kidney failure. It is important to note that Dr. Davies’ theory bases itself heavily on Mozart’s medical history and the accuracy of the terms listed in the many sources, such as his letters, that describe his ailments.

Henoch-Schönlein Syndrome can account for much of Mozart’s fatal symptoms yet it fails to be proven by evidence. Davies’ theory suggests Mozart developed the illness in 1784, yet the syndrome primarily affects children and young adults - not a 28 year old man. If, according to Davies, Mozart died of chronic renal failure derived from the syndrome, the following description given by Sophie, Constanze’s sister, proves vital to his theory, “It was about six months before he died that he [...] complained that he felt great pain in his loins and a general languor spreading over him by degrees” (qtd. in Stafford 61). Because Henoch-Schönlein syndrome does not cause death but, rather, creates complications the theory suggests Mozart suffered a progressive decline in health until the day he died. Seemingly acceptable, yet, as Hirschmann states,

“Mozart’s letters in his last few days of life, however, depict physical and emotional vigor, and his musical output was then prodigious: 2 operas (*La Clemenza di Tito* and *The Magic Flute*), a clarinet concerto, 2 cantatas, and the incomplete *Requiem*. These facts vitiate any theory of a protracted, progressive illness.” (1386)

Furthermore, extended kidney failure may be ruled out due to the fact that it is not an epidemic disease associated with fever, rash, and joint swelling. Dr. Closset found Mozart’s symptoms to be closely related to other patients in Vienna and Davies’ theory suggests Mozart’s case to be a solitary one. Therefore, Davies’ theory proposes extended kidney failure, yet the evidence proves otherwise: a Mozart fully active weeks before his death.

The proposed theory that Mozart died of acute rheumatic fever was pioneered by Dr. Carl Bär in 1966. Much like Henoch-Schönlein Syndrome, rheumatic fever is a secondary

illness that follows an infection of the air passages. The patient suffers from fever and an inflammation of the joints making it painful to move. The illness is most dangerous when it causes permanent damage to heart valves which may bring on a heart attack in later years. Mozart is known to have had two bouts of rheumatic fever during his childhood and Bär's diagnosis refers to heart failure as the culprit. An indirect testimony of Dr. Closset and Dr. Sallaba as recorded by Dr. Guldener von Lobes states,

“He fell sick in the late autumn of a rheumatic and inflammatory fever, which, being fairly general among us at that time, attacked many people. [... I] informed myself of his condition through Dr Closset, with whom I came in contact almost every day. The latter considered Mozart's illness to be dangerous, and from the very beginning feared a fatal conclusion, namely a deposit on the brain. One day he met Dr Sallaba and he said positively, ‘Mozart is lost, it is no longer possible to restrain the deposit’. Sallaba communicated this information to me at once, and in fact Mozart died a few days later with the usual symptoms of a deposit on the brain.” (Stafford 58-59)

Dr. Anton Neumayr reinforced Bär's argument by stating that the “deposit on the brain” Dr. Closset feared Mozart would die from is supported by the claim that the disease must have attacked Mozart's nervous system and brain.

When Dr. Lobes states the disease as “fairly general among us” it is inconceivable to imagine, in modern medicine, a widespread epidemic of the illness. Stafford states, “von Lobes must here be using it [...] to refer to a wide range of feverish illnesses, rather as we use the term ‘flu’ today” (75). Acute rheumatic fever was known to attack many people during Mozart's time but seldom did recurrent episodes affect adults and cause death. If the illness is found in adults, its primary manifestation is arthritis, not heart problems. Furthermore, if Mozart suffered attacks of rheumatic fever as a child, he must have developed heart disease from those initial attacks. Hirschmann explains,

“In addition, attacks of acute rheumatic fever tend to be mimetic, each episode affecting the same sites as previous ones. Mozart's 2 suspicious childhood illnesses consisted primarily of joint complaints, but no cardiac symptoms [...] suggesting that a subsequent episode during adulthood should have also included no heart complications.” (1387)

Those who die of rheumatic fever exhibit severe heart disease beforehand. This is once again discredited by Mozart's physical vigor till death.

Until recently, the theories proposed by Dr. Davies and Dr. Bär have led the debate on Mozart's death. Yet, the most recent medical theory concerning the composer's death attributes the guilt to a meal of pork chops. In a letter to Constanze dated October 7, 1791 Mozart writes, "What do I smell?... pork cutlets! Che gusto [What a delicious taste]. I eat to your health" (qtd. in Hirschmann 1388). Dr. Jan V. Hirschmann provided this analysis on Mozart's death in 2001. A worm known as *T spiralis* may be found in undercooked or raw animal meat and when consumed causes a disease known as trichinosis. In describing the disease Hirschmann writes,

"It is an epidemic disorder characterized in the past by a substantial mortality rate and a predictable course, with deaths occurring in the second and third weeks. It causes fever, rashes, and edema without dyspnea. Limb pain and swelling from muscle inflammation and vascular damage are common, prominent findings." (1388)

In fact, after the first identification of trichinosis in 1860, reports of German outbreaks appeared. Thus, Mozart may have unconsciously poisoned himself with the very food he was savoring argues Hirshmann who believes this is a diagnosis that deserves to be explored.

Hirshmann's argument seems to answer the Mozart mystery. Because 18th century doctors lacked the medical knowledge of bacteria and microorganisms, Mozart's doctors may have left the general term of "acute military fever" as the cause of death due to their inability to distinguish the true illness. Dr. Closset found Mozart's fatal symptoms common and if an epidemic of trichinosis was sweeping Germany, Vienna being one of its major cities, the disease may have consumed the 35-year-old composer. Mozart did not suffer a declining state of health, as his letters and musical output demonstrate, but took to bed on November 20, 1791, and was pronounced dead 15 days later. *T spiralis* has an incubation period of up to 50 days and the letter to Constanze indicates a diet of pork. Thus, the composer's sudden death may have been caused by a meal of pork chops.

After analyzing the various myths and theories concerning Mozart's death, Dr. Jan V. Hirschmann's trichonosis assumption is the most plausible. Although no theory has completely won the public over, there has been a trend to disregard the rumors of poisoning and murder as

nothing more than myths. The medical technology we possess today has cleared new ground in examining the issue; as Hirschmann has demonstrated in his study. Mozart must have died of a disease brought on by a prevalent pestilence. His doctors questioned the illness that plagued the composer's last days but found nothing out of the ordinary to consider it an act of foul play. If the disease he suffered was not brought on by an epidemic there must be evidence that supports a declining state of health or warrants an illness associated with his lifestyle and/or character. This evidence has been lacking and therefore has encouraged researchers to dismiss the mythological proportions an event, such as the death of a musical genius, can warrant. The unglamorized understanding of the composer's death is vital to any future claims on the issue as it can be safely assumed: the legend of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart did not end in conspiracy or malice but in a debatable illness that has intrigued us for over 200 years.

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