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The Mozart Family's Physicians and Their Treatments

What few details we possess about the health of the Mozart family come primarily from family correspondence. Leopold, the father, was the family chronicler in his many letters to his wife, daughter, numerous friends and to Wolfgang, his son. The Mozarts had frequent medical contacts in Salzburg and Vienna. Music was often the common ground for the building of significant friendships between musicians and the medical profession (Rosenberg 366).

Leopold himself appeared to enjoy good health, apart from the common respiratory maladies of the day. In his later years, recurrent rheumatism, possibly gout, was his main affliction (Anderson 152). He was a great believer in patent medicines and carried a supply whenever he travelled. These included a variety of tonics, powders, laxatives and ointments. He believed firmly in the practices of bleeding and purging for a variety of illnesses as well as for prophylaxis. He advocated bleeding particularly on Saint Days and purging on other days. During many of the illnesses of his two children, which he experienced, bleeding was often part of the treatment. Mozart's mother, Maria Anna, appears to have enjoyed good health until her sojourn in Paris with her son. One can only speculate as to the cause of her death in Paris on 3 July 1778. In a letter to Leopold on 1 May 1778 (Anderson 534), she writes, ". . . I have been plagued with toothache, sore throat and ear ache and the rooms are cold, even when a fire is burning." Leopold's concerns for the health of his wife and son were obvious. "My dear wife, do not forget to be bled. Remember you are away from home" (Anderson 536). Maria Anna's

response was, "I will remember to be bled; only I must first look about for a good surgeon, for people in Paris are no longer bled as commonly as they used to be. Indeed, how fashions change!" (Anderson 543). She did indeed succeed in being bled on June 11 (Anderson 550) but over the next few weeks she became more seriously ill and died on July 3. Mozart describes her illness in letters to his father (Anderson 556) and to the Abbé Bullinger (Anderson 560). His mother had been attended by Baron Grimm's physician, but even Mozart could see the situation was hopeless. "Once our hour has come, all means are useless; they rather hasten death than delay it," he wrote to his father. This letter was written after his mother's death but he lacked the heart to tell his father the truth. Leopold's reaction was that they had "waited too long" (to have her bled) (Anderson 568).

In keeping with the times, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was probably delivered by a midwife. Even Wolfgang and Constanze's first child was delivered by a midwife. The details of obstetrical practice of the day are described by Tom Baskett in his paper, "Obstetrical Practice in the Age of Mozart." Wolfgang would not have been breast-fed because it was not fashionable. Nor was his wife, Constanze's first child breast-fed. In a letter to his father from Vienna 18 June 1783 (Anderson 851) on the day of his son's delivery, he says, ". . . I am quite determined that whether she should be able to do so or not, my wife was never to feed her child. . . . I wanted the child to be brought up on water, like my sister and myself."

Many of the details of Wolfgang's childhood illnesses are described more fully by others, including Mary Wheeler in her paper, Mozart's Health and Final Illness. When Mozart was ill in October, 1762, at the age of six and a half years, with what was certainly erythema nodosum, Leopold consulted Professor Johann Anton von Bernhardt, who called the skin lesions scarlet fever spots. Leopold's description of the painful, red and raised spots on his son's "shins, on both elbows and a few on his posterior" (Anderson 9) was likely the first recorded description of the common skin lesions of erythema nodosum (Rothman 33). In this same letter, Leopold states that the skin lesions appear to be, "a fashionable complaint for children in Vienna." No details of Bernhardt's treatment are available but Leopold had already given his son black powder (*pulvis epilepticus niger*) as well as Margrave's powder, which he always carried.

Margrave's powder was made by a variety of pharmacies and contained a mixture of mistletoe, magnesium, oyster shells and gold leaf. This elegant preparation probably had little or no therapeutic value. Mistletoe was used at one time to treat epilepsy, neuroses and nervous afflictions in general. It was also given for colic, asthma and menstrual disorders. Its main reputation, however, was as an anti-epileptic and for the treatment of hysteria (Hager 1272).

Mozart had numerous respiratory illnesses and sore throats. On his first visit to Paris in February 1764, he was treated for what was probably a streptococcal sore throat (quinsy?) by a Dr. Herrnschwand, a German physician to the Swiss guards, who prescribed, "a small dose of Vienna laxative water" (Anderson 40). In The Hague, in October and November 1765, both of the Mozart children became ill with what may have been typhoid fever. Leopold consulted several physicians including Dr. Thomas Schwenke, a retired director of the School of Anatomy. He was asked to see Mozart's sister after another doctor had examined her and had recommended bleeding. When Schwenke was called, he diagnosed "boils and pocks on the lungs" (without a stethoscope too because it had not yet been invented). A cough medicine containing opium was prescribed (Koopman 38). Koopman's paper describes Schwenke's prescription in detail. Dr. Haymans, physician to a variety of Envoys, was also consulted as was Dr. Cornelius H. Velsen who, according to Koopman, was probably a quack.

When Mozart was ill in Vienna in September 1784, with "a fearful attack of colic, which ended each time in violent vomiting," he was attended by Dr. Sigmund Barisani, whose father, Sylvester von Barisani, had also been Leopold's physician. No details of his treatment are available.

We learn a few details about Constanze's health from the Mozart family correspondence. Her physicians included a Dr. Exner, who was consulted in May 1787 so that she could be bled. Mozart in this letter to his friend, Baron Gottfried von Jacquin (Anderson 908) does not give details of her illness. In this same letter, Mozart mentioned that he had just "received the sad news of my beloved father's death." Leopold had died in Salzburg at the age of 68 years. The cause of his death is not known.

Constanze and Mozart also consulted Dr. Johann Nepomuk Hunczowsky, who was professor at the military hospital at Gumpendorf, a suburb of Vienna. She was pregnant (her fifth) and he may later have delivered her of Anna Maria, who lived only a few hours. Mozart owed Dr. Hunczowsky money for his medical services to his wife (and possibly to him) as he mentions the debt in his letter to Michael Puchberg (Anderson 934) from whom he was requesting a loan. Constanze had spent a considerable amount of time at the spa in Baden on the advice of her physicians. Dr. Thomas Closset, who became the Mozart's physician in 1789, treated her for what was probably a varicose ulcer by applying leeches.

Dr. Closset had obtained a PhD in Cologne in 1774 and later studied Theology for two years before he qualified in Medicine in Vienna. He opened a private practice in that city in 1787. Dr. Closset attended Mozart during his final illness and his treatments are discussed in other papers. He consulted Dr. Mathias von Sallaba (1754-97) about his famous patient's lack of response to treatment. Dr. Sallaba may or may not have actually examined Mozart, but he was obviously a well qualified physician. He had been born in Prague and studied medicine under Professor Stoll in Vienna, qualifying in 1786. In due course, he was promoted to Primary Physician in the Vienna General Hospital in 1797, succeeding Dr. Sigmund Barisani. Dr. Sallaba's academic qualifications were exceptional. His textbook, *Natural History of Disease* had been published in 1791, the year of Mozart's death.

Vienna possessed several large hospitals and at that time medical education and hospital practice had a good reputation amongst the medical profession. However, the hospitals were not always considered fit places to find oneself, especially to die. Although rural folk flocked to Vienna for medical treatments, they often dreaded the hospitals. There were rumors that patients were given nothing to eat. If a patient died, he or she might be subjected to the further indignity of an autopsy and becoming part of an Anatomy lesson. Patients who were able to afford treatment at home often preferred this.

Details of Dr. Closset's findings and treatments in the case of Mozart's final illness are largely speculative. If he kept notes, they have never been found. Much has been written about the practice of bleeding, which Dr. Closset may have applied to Mozart during his last days. In

particular, some suspect that excessive bleeding may have hastened Mozart's demise. Dr. Closset's recollections of Mozart's final days could provide many of the missing details about his illness. Can we speculate what Closset would say if he could be interviewed today? He would probably have considered Mozart to be reasonably healthy until the last year of his life. He may have known that Mozart's growing debts bothered him a great deal and made him nervous and depressed. He worked hard, slept poorly and lost his appetite. During that time, he took all kind of medicines on his own. Dr. Closset must have noticed that Mozart's declining health affected his work which made him feel even sicker.

I have noted that bloodletting was a traditional treatment to drain the bad humors out of the system. To relieve Mozart's fever, Closset also recommended cold applications to his head and cold wrapping around his body covered with blankets. Many have asked why Mozart was not treated in the General Hospital. Closset would probably answer that more personal treatment and better care was possible in the patient's home. Hospitals were places where the poor and dying people spent their last days and if they were not dying, the dirty and unhygienic environment would sometimes finish them. Most patients and their families refused to use the hospitals, and the university hospitals were always overcrowded. It is possible that Closset did not sign the death certificate with the diagnosis of "heated miliary fever." In that time, church officials and morticians sometimes put their signature on the certificate. "*Hitziges Frieselfieber*" (a feverish skin rash) was not a medical diagnosis. This layterm was used as a description of symptoms of high fever, probably with shivers and goosepimples. His description of "*un deposit alla testa*" (a deposit on the head, later described by Dr. Guldner) probably signified that Mozart's mind was affected by his physical illness.

Autopsies were not carried out regularly, especially when a patient died from contagious disease. Hospital anatomists refused to do one if they suspected a contagious disease. Closset must have believed that autopsies did not always discover the causes of fevers and other illnesses and anatomists' reports were at times difficult to interpret.

Mozart's wife, Constanze, has frequently been portrayed as a woman with failings. There were rumors of her having an affair with her husband's student, Süssmayr, who accompanied her when she visited

Baden for treatment. Constanze's illness was likely to have been chronic varicose ulcers, the result of *Phlegmasia alba dolans*. Regarding her fidelity, Closset would surely have maintained her confidence, and reminded us that although Mozart's last son was named Franz Xaver (Süssmayr's names) he appeared to have the same deformity (so-called Mozart's ear) as his presumed father, Wolfgang. Closset's failure to arrive at an accurate diagnosis and his less than effective treatment must be viewed in the light of twentieth-century medicine. A physician then was committed to a certain obedience and could not easily extradite himself from the traditional medical knowledge and practice. Two hundred years from now, our treatments will doubtlessly be examined and scrutinized too. Closset's diagnostic endeavors were limited by available methods of examination and questionable theories. His treatments were influenced and often impeded by earlier medical writings and traditions.

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