

## WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART: THE DEATH OF A GENIUS

### WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART: SMRT GENIJA

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#### SUMMARY

*The early and unexpected death of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Salzburg, 1756 – Vienna, 1791) was a mystery from the very first day and the subject of wildest speculations and adventurous assertions. Over the last 100 years, medical science has investigated the physical sufferings and the mysterious death of Mozart with increasing intensity. The aim of this article was to recreate Mozart's pathography relying on the his correspondence with father Leopold and sister Nannerl and on reports from his physicians and contemporaries. The rumour that Mozart was poisoned followed shortly after his death on 5 December 1791, at the age of 35, and has survived to this day. The alleged culprits were his physician van Swieten, Mozart's freemasons lodge, and the Imperial Chapel Master Salieri. Mozart however died of chronic kidney disease and ultimately of uraemia. If kidney damage reaches a critical point, even a minimum additional stress can lead to its failure. This usually occurs in the fourth decade of life.*

*Next time we listen to Mozart, we should remember that this apparently happy person was actually a precocious boy, ripped of his childhood, whose short life was an endless chain of complaints, fatigue, misery, concern, and malady.*

**Key words:** History of medicine, Mozart, kidney dysfunction, uraemia

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## INTRODUCTION



Figure 1. Joseph Lange, Mozart at the piano. Vienna 1789. Salzburg, Mozart Museum

Slika 1. Joseph Lange. Mozart za glasovirom. Beč, 1879. Mozartov muzej u Salzburgu

The rumour that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) was poisoned spread shortly after his death. On 12 December 1791, one week after his death, an obituary appeared in a Berlin newspaper *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* that closed with the following words: “Because his body swelled after death, it is believed that he had been poisoned.” In a biography published in 1798, Franz Xaver Niemetschek (1766-1840) recounts that during a walk in Prater, Mozart complained to his wife: “Indeed, I have been given poison.” Since that time, the poisoning theory has trailed through literature [1-4]. Accusations include the Vienna doctor Gottfried von Swieten (1733-1803), Mozart’s freemason lodge, and the Vienna court chapel master Antonio Salieri (1750-1825).

We however believe that letters from Mozart’s father Leopold Mozart (1719-1787) and from his sister Nannerle, Mozart’s own letters, accounts by contemporaries, and reports from physicians who treated him could shed some light about the circumstances of his death and help to recreate his pathology [5,6,7].

Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Mozart was born on 27 January 1756, the seventh child to Leopold and Anna Maria Mozart (1720-1778). Mozart later decided to keep only the two middle names, Wolfgang and the French translation of Amadeus which is Amadè. The fact that only two of the seven children survived, namely Wolfgang Amadeus and his sister Nannerl (1751-1829), speaks a lot about the hygienic conditions of that age.

This highly gifted child performed for the first time at the age of five and toured with his sister European royal houses as a child prodigy. One can only imagine how strain and deprivation affected young Mozart during these month-long travels. Of the 13,097 days of his short life, Mozart spent no less than 3720 travelling!

The record in the Vienna death register reads as follows: “On 5 December 1791, honourable Wolfgang Amadeus, K. K. Kapellmeister and chamber



Figure 2. The last bars of *The Requiem*. Carl Bär. Mozart, *Krankheit, Tod und Begräbnis*. Salzburg: Mozarteum, 1966, p. 42.

Slika 2. Posljednji taktovi *Requiem*a. Carl Bär. Mozart, *Krankheit, Tod und Begräbnis*. Salzburg: Mozarteum, 1966., str. 42.

composer, born in Salzburg, died in a small Kaiserhaus in Rauhensteinergasse in Vienna of a fervid prickly heat" [1,2,8].

Benedikt Schack (1766-1826), a singer, wrote about the last days and hours of Mozart's life: "We were in the first bars of the *Lacrimosa* when Mozart started to cry hard. He put the quill aside and 11 hours later at 1 o'clock in the morning, he passed away" [9]. This early and unexpected death of a genius was the beginning of a crime investigation and medical campaign to find the true cause of death. Even today, more than 200 years later, his demise continues to tickle public curiosity just as earnestly. Since his grave is lost, there will never be a definitive answer, and all the hypotheses, even the most solid ones, will remain pure theory. Different theories fuelled by the latest medical knowledge will surely continue to appear in newspaper headlines. Table 1 illustrates familiar theories and speculations about his death from a number of authors.

According to a popular legend, Antonio Salieri (Legnago Italy, 1750 - Vienna, 1825) was a mediocre composer, whose envy turned him into a fervent



Figure 3. Joseph Willibrod: Antonio Salieri (1750 – 1825), Court chapel master. Vienna, Galery Joseph Sonnleithner. (From Melograni P. *La vita e il tempo di Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*. Roma: Editori Laterza, p. 260)

Slika 3. Joseph Willibrod: dvorski skladatelj Antonio Salieri (1750. – 1825.). Beč, Galerija Joseph Sonnleithner. (iz Melograni P. *La vita e il tempo di Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*. Rim: Editori Laterza, str. 260.)

antagonist and eventually Mozart's nemesis (Fig. 3). When Salieri's got old and ended in the hospital, an absurd rumour started that the confused old man admitted murdering Mozart [10,3]. His two caregivers, Gottlieb Parsko and Georg Rosenberg, and his physician Joseph Röhrig denied the allegations, as at least one of them was always with Salieri and would have heard his confession. The death theory was fuelled by a theatrical piece written by Alexander Puschkin (1799-1837) (*Mozart and Salieri*) in 1831 and especially by the musical version by Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908). The truth is however that the two composers maintained a rather friendly relationship [1,2,9,11].

Table 1 - Theories surrounding Mozart's death

Tablica 1. *Pretpostavke o uzroku Mozartove smrti*

MURDER THEORIES	MEDICAL THEORIES
Antonio Salieri	Thyreotoxic crisis
Baron van Swieten	Trichina infection
Freemason Lodge	Uraemia
	Syphilis

Figure 4 - Gottfried van Swieten (1733 – 1803), Mozart's physician and patron (from *Mozart Experiment Aufklärung Exhibition Catalogue*, Albertina Museum 2006, p. 141)

Slika 4. Gottfried van Swieten (1733.–1803.), Mozartov liječnik i zaštitnik (Katalog izložbe *Mozart Experiment Aufklärung* u muzeju Albertina 2006., str. 141.)



The Vienna doctor Gottfried van Swieten (Leiden, 1733 – Vienna, 1803) is yet another murder suspect in popular tradition. (Fig. 4). This suspicion arises from the fact that murders by poisoning were mainly committed with mercury compounds. Van Swieten was a pioneer in the treatment of syphilis with mercury. Furthermore, Mozart was often invited to van Swieten's house for Sunday dinners. In other words, he had the means and the opportunity to administer the poison. The only thing missing for a perfect culprit is the motive [3]. Yet, his behaviour after Mozart's death was somewhat dubious. Van Swieten was entrusted by the widow to take care of the funeral arrangements, and even though the doctor had the means to ensure a proper burial, Mozart was buried in a common grave. This kind of a third-class, 12-florin funeral service was usual at the time, as 85% of the population were buried in this manner. A first-class funeral arrangement, however, cost 340 florins. A good and faithful friend, especially a rich man like van Swieten could certainly afford to pay more than the 12 florins, and this throws a shadow over van Swieten as a person and leaves a bad taste in one's mouth.

On the occasion of the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mozart's death, Duda, Kerner, and Dalchow published *Mozart's Death 1791-1971*[2], in which they follow in the tracks of Mathilde Ludendorff (1877-1966), who was a fanatical supporter of the murder-by-poison theory and who argued that Mozart was poisoned by Freemasons. The cornerstone of this poison theory, which is based on

*The Magic Flute*, is number 18. In *The Magic Flute*, Mozart betrayed 18 secret rituals of Freemasons and was poisoned with mercury as retribution. Mercury is in alchemy associated with number 8, which makes part of the mysterious no. 18 [2]. On 18 November 1791, the so-called Freemason cantata was performed for the first time in Mozart's Freemason lodge: it included 18 sheets of music. Mozart died on 5 December, exactly 18 days after the debut of the cantata. All this suggests that Freemasons calculated the day of Mozart's death. This theory is far-fetched. Anyone who is even a little familiar with Freemasons would know that the number 18 means nothing to the Lodges and that Freemasons avoided alchemy. According to Ludendorf's theory, the commissioning of the *Requiem* (a mass in Catholic liturgy or a piece of music dedicated to the dead) by a secretive grey messenger, to use Mozart's own description [1,2], was also staged by Freemasons. Mozart is said to have composed the *Requiem* plagued by presentiments of death, while the poison slowly began to take effect. The reality was something very different: the *Requiem* was commissioned by Count Franz von Walsegg-Stuppach (1763-1827) to pass it off as his own composition.

Now let us take a look at the medical theories of Mozart's demise. Death due to a rapidly progressing thyreotoxic crisis, for example, is supported by Mozart's late portrait showing him with signs of exophthalmia. Furthermore, his authenticated restlessness and signs of hypertension are typical of hyperthyroidism [11,12].

His passing due to advanced syphilis comes up now and again. This theory is mainly based on Mozart's allegedly turbulent morality. However, there is no proof that Mozart or anyone around him suffered from syphilis. His wife, Constanze Mozart (1762-1842), died in 1842, 51 years after he did. In addition, she gave birth to five healthy children. If her husband had suffered from syphilis, it would surely have had consequences for her as well [7,13,14].

Another somewhat abstruse theory of Mozart's death was proposed by an American physician, Dr Hirschmann, in 2001. Intrigued by a letter Mozart wrote 44 days before his death about his indulgence in pork cutlets, Hirschmann attributed his death to the aftereffects of trichinosis [15]. He pointed out that an unknown epidemic hit Vienna at the time, and suggested that Mozart could have died due to a complicated, progressive infection with trichina after a three-week incubation period.

However, a far more probable cause of his much-too-early death was a chronic, slowly progressing kidney failure. Countless letters he received

from his father and sister, as well as his private correspondence seem to shed light on the ordeal of his childhood (Table 2) [6,8,14,16]. Like almost all patients with a chronic kidney disease, Wolfgang Amadeus had hardly any symptoms at first. Even when the kidney function is considerably compromised, one can continue to work and feel relatively well. But once kidney damage reaches a critical point, it only takes little additional strain to precipitate death.

Table 2. Medical History of Mozart  
*Tablica 2. Povijest Mozartove bolesti*

1763	Scarlet
1763	Erythema nodosum
Starting 1763	Chronic tooth maturation
1764	Angina tonsilaris
1765	Thyphus abdominalis
Starting 1766	Rheumatic fever
1767	Smallpox
1778	Influenza
Starting 1784	Recurrent renal colic
Starting 1784	Hypertension, epistaxis, cluster headache
Starting 1791	Depression, anancasm
5.12.1791	Death of uraemia

This critical point is usually reached in the fourth decade of life, even nowadays. Such patients are aware that they are about to die. For a while this premonition manifests itself as general depression, and when uraemia begins, they feel the taste of death on their tongues, as Mozart did. People around the patient often notice a slight aroma that reminds them of ammonia.

According to the letters by Mozart's father, when Wolfgang was just seven years old and on his first trip to Vienna, he suffered from scarlatina and an ulcerous molar. Allegedly, this chronic tooth problem accompanied Mozart until his death [1,2]. In 1763 and again in 1766, he had bouts of severe articular rheumatism. In 1765, at the age of nine, he only just survived abdominal typhus and two years later smallpox [1,4,13]. Fortunately, Wolfgang

was treated in Olmütz by Dr. Joseph Wolff, the personal physician of Duke Leopold Podstatsky [13]. Otherwise, he may not have survived. Smallpox left visible traces on Wolfgang face; the child, who had been quite attractive, was deformed by scars. This is why none of the many well-known portraits of Mozart show what he really looked like. One may speculate that his relatively small figure, large nose, congenital deformation of the left ear, and smallpox scars may have contributed to his depression. While travelling to Italy in 1769, Mozart got frostbites on both hands and on his face. Although his father was exposed to the same weather conditions, he did not have any. Today we can assume that Mozart had a chronic focal tooth root infection, a condition that causes considerable additional damage to a body that is already weakened by constant infection. Even today, this type of process can damage the kidney if it goes untreated [8,11]. The life of a travelling musician in those times was certainly strenuous, as it involved unheated carriages and poorly heated hotel and rehearsal rooms. In 1784, Mozart suffered from his first renal colic, accompanied by a very strong pain and vomiting. In the last few years of his life, he complained of severe headaches, nosebleeds, inability to concentrate, and depression. The last phase of his illness began in the late summer of 1791 in Prague, where his opera *Titus* debuted. He became haunted by premonitions of death, especially after a stranger, to whom Mozart refers to as “grey messenger”, commissioned the *Requiem* when Mozart returned to Vienna. In Mozart’s romanticised imagination, this messenger was a creature from another world, and the *Requiem* was his own.

On 30 September, he conducted the premiere of *The Magic Flute* and managed to conduct 10 more performances before he was bedridden in mid October. Once again he got up to conduct the debut of the Freemason cantata and after that, he worked on the *Requiem* smitten with fever, nausea, vomiting, oedema, and Kussmaul breathing. On 5 December 1791, he finally passed away a few minutes before 1 a.m. Those around him claimed that just before he died, he noted down the bass drum passage with his lips [1,2,6].

## CONCLUSION

Murder theories aside, it is quite likely that Mozart died a natural death. Even though he survived severe conditions such as articular rheumatism, typhus, and even smallpox, he yielded to a chronic kidney disease that 25 years later led to kidney failure and death due to uraemia. In fact, it is nearly a miracle that he survived that long and managed to create masterpieces whose



beauty is beyond comparison. The next time we listen to Mozart, we should remember that this apparently happy person was actually a precocious boy, robbed of his childhood, whose short life was an endless chain of fatigue, misery, worries, and malady.

*Da der Tod, genau zu nehmen, der wahre Endzweck unseres Lebens ist, so habe ich mich seit ein paar Jahren mit diesem wahren, besten Freunde des Menschen so bekannt gemacht, dass sein Bild nicht allein nichts schreckliches mehr für mich hat, sondern rechts viel beruhigendes und tröstendes<sup>2</sup>.*

(Mozart in April 1787)

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<sup>2</sup> “As death is, in fact, the true end of our lives, I have acquainted myself with this true best friend of humanity over the years, so that his image is no longer something terrible for me. Instead, it is more comforting and consoling”.

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#### SAŽETAK

*Rana i neočekivana smrt Wolfganga Amadeusa Mozarta (r. u Salzburgu 1756. – u. u Beču 1791.) obavijena je tajnom od prvoga dana te je postala predmetom nevjerojatnih nagađanja i hrabrih tvrdnji. Medicinska je znanost u posljednjih stotinu godina sa sve više interesa istraživala Mozartove tjelesne tegobe i tajanstvenu smrt.*

*Želja je ovoga članka rekonstruirati Mozartovu patografiju oslanjajući se na njegovu korespondenciju s ocem Leopoldom i sestrom Nannerl te na izjave njegovih liječnika i suvremenika. Ubrzo nakon Mozartove smrti 5. prosinca 1791., u dobi od 35 godina, raširila se glasina da je otrovan, koja je i danas aktualna. Navodni osumnjičeni su njegov osobni liječnik van Swieten, Mozartova slobodnozidarska loža te dvorski skladatelj Antonio Salieri. Ipak, Mozart je umro od uremije uslijed kronične bolesti bubrega. Kada oštećenje bubrega dosegne kritičnu točku, dovoljan je i neznatan stres koji će dovesti do njegova zatajenja. To se obično događa u četrdesetim godinama života.*

*Sljedeći put kada budemo slušali Mozartovu glazbu, sjetit ćemo se da je ova naizgled sretna osoba zapravo bilo prerano sazrijelo dijete kojemu je ukradeno djetinjstvo i čiji je život bio beskonačan niz tegoba, premorenosti, jada, briga i bolesti.*

**Ključne riječi:** povijest medicine, Mozart, oštećenje bubrega, uremija