

Did Mozart have Tourette's syndrome?: some comments on Mozart's language.

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Did Mozart Have Tourette's Syndrome?: Some Comments on Mozart's Language

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Perspectives in Biology and Medicine

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 37, Number 2, Winter 1994

pp. 247-258

10.1353/pbm.1994.0036

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

DID MOZART HAVE TOURETTE'S SYNDROME? SOME COMMENTS ON MOZART'S LANGUAGE K. ATERMAN* The enemy of creativity « good taste.—Picasso. One of the striking features of the extensive literature on Mozart's life and work is the continuing debate on certain aspects of his personality, prompted by a perceived discrepancy between his sublime music and the "vulgarity" of his "uninhibited" language [1], which is marked by a "forthright, coarse exuberance" [2] that has caused some "understandable embarrassment" [3] to at least some readers. His language in letters to his cousin Maria Anna Thekla—the "infantile" [1], "notorious" [3], "inimitably bawdy and whimsical" [2] "Bäse Briefe"—so offended the "refined" tastes of the rising Central-European middle class that these letters were either bowdlerized or simply not published.

This was, for example, the course taken in 1828 by G.N. Nissen, one of Mozart's early biographers, who was aware that the attitude toward language and its "indecentcies" was changing and decided not to include the Bäsle letters in his *Biographie W.A. Mozarts* because of Mozart's "too childish and coarse jokes" [4]. Indeed, these letters did not appear in extenso until 1938—and in an English translation at that, [see 5, Simkin cites 1985 ed.] for the German version still had not been published in 1947 [3]. In due course, however, Mozart's characteristic style in these letters—and in his life—came to be examined and reexamined from sociological, psychological, and merely conjectural points of view. The result, as Simkin [6] has recently maintained, is that "the surprising scatology found in Mozart's letters has not yet been satisfactorily explained." Yet, the key to understanding Mozart's occasionally "eccentric" [7] style and lan

The author acknowledges with pleasure the great interest and encouragement of Leroy P. Heffernan, M.D., and the expert assistance of Mrs. M. Larlham. The paper is written for Myre Sim, a friend of many years. AU translations from German by K. Aterman.»Address: 5737 Southwood Drive, Halifax, N. S., Canada B3H 1E6. © 1994 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 003 1-5982/94/3702-0852W 1.00 Perspectives in Biology and Medicine, 37, 2 | Winter 1994 247

guage can, according to Simkin [6], be found in "Mozart's plausible affliction with Tourette's syndrome." This assertion is certain to refuel the controversy about Mozart's "peculiarities." Neumayr [7], for instance, in his study of Mozart's illnesses and death, had already in 1987 dismissed as "absurd" the suggestion that Mozart suffered from Tourette's syndrome. Sacks [8], well-known for his studies of the subject, also has questioned this diagnosis. Moreover, Simkin himself recently has been quoted as saying in a telephone interview that "no one can prove [if] he [Mozart] did or did not have this disorder [Tourette's syndrome], manic depression, hyperactivity, or was just juvenile" [Matinée: The Daily News (Halifax, N.S.), Saturday, Dec. 19, 1992]. In view of these uncertainties, it may be appropriate to draw attention to some factors that may help us see the question of Mozart's eccentricities in sharper perspective. A discussion of this question in a somewhat different context has been presented on an earlier occasion [9]. In their systematic review, Singer and Walkup [10] define Tourette's syndrome, first described in 1825, as "a spectrum of familial involuntary motor and/or vocal tics and comorbid neuropsychiatric problems." This seemingly straightforward definition is complicated however, by the fact that, as Sacks [8] has pointed out, there are "different forms of the syndrome," with the "stereotypic form" representing one end of the spectrum and the "phantasmagoric form" the other. Sacks describes the phantasmagoric form as being: especially remarkable for its mimicry, antics, playfulness, extravagance, impudence, audacity, inventions, dramatisations, unexpected and sometimes surreal associations, intense and uninhibited affects, speed, "go," vivid imagery and memory, hunger for stimuli and incontinent reactivity, and constant reaching into inner and outer worlds to Tourettise . . . The difficulty is that this impressive and eloquent catalog of largely admirable qualities has wide applicability, leading us to ask whether eccentrics and provocative and creative artists are "Tourettising"? This is where part of our dilemma lies, for Sacks's description of..

DID MOZART HAVE TOURETTE'S SYNDROME? SOME COMMENTS ON MOZART'S LANGUAGE

K. STEEMAN*

The enemy of modesty is good sense. —VICASSO.

One of the striking features of the extensive literature on Mozart's life and work is the continuing debate on certain aspects of his personality, prompted by a perceived discrepancy between his sublime music and the "vulgarity" of his "uninhibited" language [1], which is marked by a "forthright, coarse exuberance" [2] that has caused some "understandable embarrassment" [3] to at least some readers. His language in letters to his cousin Maria Anna Theresia—the "infantile" [1], "notorious" [3], "inimitably lewdly and whimsical" [2] "Basle Briefe"—so offended the "refined" tastes of the rising Central-European middle class that these letters were either bowdlerized or simply not published. This was, for example, the course taken in 1828 by G. N. Nissen, one of Mozart's early biographers, who was aware that the attitude toward language and its "indecencies" was changing and decided not to include the Basle letters in his *Biographie W.A. Mozarts* because of Mozart's "too childish and coarse jokes" [4]. Indeed, these letters did not appear in extenso until 1938—and in an English translation at that, (see 5, Simpkin cites 1983 ed.) for the German version still had not been published in 1947 [3]. In due course, however, Mozart's characteristic style in these letters—and in his life—came to be examined and reexamined from sociological, psychological, and merely conjectural points of view. The result, as Simpkin [6] has recently maintained, is that "the surprising scatology found in Mozart's letters has not yet been satisfactorily explained." Yet, if a key to understanding Mozart's occasionally "eccentric" [7] style and lan-

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0031-5382/94/3702-0052\$01.00

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