

Auenbrugger: Opus and Opera

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Auenbrugger is properly remembered for his discovery of percussion as a diagnostic technique and for his pioneer studies in diseases of the chest. It is not generally known that he was a great lover of music and wrote the libretto for Antonio Salieri's opera *Der Rauchfangkehrer* (*The Chimney Sweep*). I am not aware of any other famous physician who has an operatic libretto to his name.

AUENBRUGGER (1722-1809)

Josef Leopold Auenbrugger (Fig. 1) was born in Graz in Austria on 19th November 1722, the son of a prosperous innkeeper. He studied medicine in Vienna under the celebrated Professor van Swieten who had been attracted from Leiden to the Vienna School. He qualified MD in 1752, and worked in the Spanish Military Hospital in Vienna. He was interested in psychiatry and epidemiology but his chief studies were in the diagnosis of thoracic disease. He developed the method of percussion of the chest for detecting pleural effusion and lung consolidation, and in 1761 he described this new technique in his famous book *Inventum Novum*. Auenbrugger became the object of his colleagues' jealousy and in 1762 he decided to resign as physician to the Spanish Hospital. He then devoted the remainder of his professional life to general practice in Vienna.

He married the beautiful Marianna von Priestersberg who bore him two daughters, Marianna and Katherina. Auenbrugger's practice prospered and he was renowned both for his medical expertise and his great human qualities. He was taken into favour by the Imperial Court, and in 1784 was honoured by the Emperor Josef II and raised to the nobility, his title being Josef Leopold Auenbrugger von Auenbrugg.

In 1798 he suffered a severe illness, probably typhus, and later lost the sight of one eye, which forced him to retire. His wife died in 1807, and following this he lost interest in life and died in Vienna on 18th May 1809. The story is told that he himself determined the day and hour of his death. In his last illness, due to a respiratory infection, he looked at the clock in his room and said that when the hand of the clock pointed to two in the afternoon he would be dead, and so it happened (Neuburger, 1922).

INVENTUM NOVUM

The book, of only 95 pages, was written in Latin and published in Vienna in 1761 (Fig. 2). Its importance was not at first appreciated, although news of the book

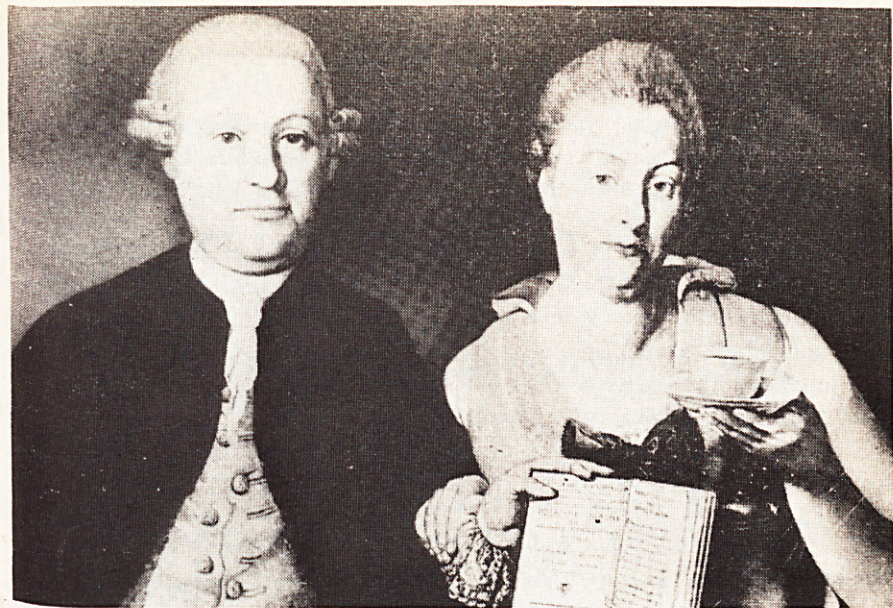


Fig. 1. Leopold von Auenbrugger (1722-1809) and wife. (Oil Painting. Artist anonymous. In the Putti Collection, Rizzoli Institute, Bologna.)

spread beyond Austria. In London, Oliver Goldsmith reviewed it in the *Public Ledger* on 27th August 1761, and said of percussion: 'If it cannot cure, at least it can do no harm'. In 1770, Rozière de la Chassagne in Montpellier described Auenbrugger's method of percussion but unfortunately he misconstrued it as a variant of Hippocratic succussion. It was Baron Corvisart, personal physician to Napoleon Buonaparte, who was responsible for drawing attention again to *Inventum Novum* in his French translation which appeared in Paris in 1808. This was of special importance in that it came to the notice of Laënnec and influenced him in his own studies of the diagnosis of thoracic disease and his invention of the stethoscope. An English translation of *Inventum Novum* by Sir John Forbes appeared in London in 1824, and the German Translation by Ungar in Vienna in 1843.

The first sentence of *Inventum Novum* has been said to be the most scientific statement with which any medical treatise begins: '*Thorax sani hominis sonat, si percussitur*' ('The thorax of a healthy person sounds when struck').

AUENBRUGGER AND MUSIC

Auenbrugger maintained lively contacts with the outstanding personalities of his time, and exchanged letters with foreign scholars, e.g. Haller. He showed a great

LEOPOLDI AUENBRUGGER

M E D I C I N Æ D O C T O R I S
I N C Æ S A R E O R E G I O N O S O C O M I O N A T I O N U M
H I S P A N I C O M E D I C I O R D I N A R I I.

INVENTUM NOVUM

E X
P E R C U S S I O N E T H O R A C I S H U M A N I
U T S I G N O

A B S T R U S O S I N T E R N I
P E C T O R I S M O R B O S
D E T E G E N D I



V I N D O B O N Æ,

T Y P I S J O A N N I S T H O M Æ T R A T T N E R, C Æ S. R E G.
M A J E S T. A U I Æ T Y P O G R A P H I.

M D C C L X I.

Fig. 2. *Inventum Novum*. Title page of first edition, 1781. (Courtesy the Wellcome Trustees, London.)

interest in subjects outside his professional sphere and, in particular, he was extremely fond of music, and associated with the musical world of Vienna.

Piano playing and singing were encouraged in his house. His mother had been musical, and his two daughters were gifted musicians. Marianna played the piano, was a pupil of Antonio Salieri and composed a piano sonata which was published. She was unfortunately a sick girl and died young. Her sister Katherina, reputedly very beautiful, had a splendid soprano voice. The two sisters often appeared together in concerts in Vienna. Katherina married Joseph Freiherr von Zois-Edelstein, and the Auenbrugger family and that of his son-in-law, the family Zois, lived together as a joint household on the second floor of the large house in the flour market next to the Kapuzinerkirche in Vienna. For several years, during winter months, musical matinees were held in the house every Sunday from 12.00 to 2.00 pm. and these were often visited by foreign musicians. No doubt Salieri was frequently present.

ANTONIO SALIERI (1750-1825)

Antonio Salieri (Fig. 3) was born in Italy in Legnago on 18th August 1750. From an early age he showed great musical promise. He studied at the San Marco singing school in Venice under Florian Gassmann. In 1766 he was taken to Vienna by Gassmann, who had become musical director at the Imperial Court, and introduced to the Emperor Josef II. In 1770, Salieri's first opera *La donna letterata* was performed in Vienna at the Burgtheater. In 1774, he succeeded Gassmann as musical director and conducted the Italian opera. He associated with the Court poet Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782) who was the greatest librettist of his time and was used by numerous composers for their operas.

Salieri held Imperial Court office for fifty years and made frequent visits to Italy and France. In 1784, the French Académie de Musique had commissioned Gluck to put on an opera in Paris. Salieri's *Les Danaïdes* was performed under Gluck's name. It was highly acclaimed and only then did Gluck divulge that the opera was in fact composed by Salieri. Salieri's most important opera *Tarare* (later renamed *Axur, re d'Ormis*) appeared in 1787, and was so popular in Vienna that it was preferred to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. His last opera, *Die Negerklaven*, appeared in 1804, and he then devoted the rest of his life to sacred music. In all, he composed 37 operas in Italian, 3 operas in French and 2 in German (one of them being *Der Rauchfangkehrer*) as well as a concerto, an oratorio and five Masses. He died in Vienna on 7th May 1825 and, in accordance with his wishes, his own Requiem Mass was performed after his death at the Italian Church in Vienna.

Salieri had been a pupil of Gluck and he was later a friend of Haydn. He taught Beethoven, Schubert and Liszt, and Beethoven dedicated three violin sonatas of Opus 12 to him. Salieri was, of course, a contemporary of Mozart (1756-1791). There was a great deal of jealousy between Salieri and Mozart; in fact, Mozart



Antonio Salieri

Fig. 3. Antonio Salieri (1750-1825). (Engraving by Scheffner. Courtesy the Royal College of Music, London.)

developed almost a paranoid distrust of Salieri. In 1790, Mozart was seriously ill with nephritis but he was convinced that his illness was due to poisoning. After Mozart's death, rumours were spread that he died of mercurial poisoning and Salieri was suspected. It was even said that Salieri had confessed on his death-bed to the murder of Mozart by poisoning, but this accusation cannot be taken seriously and there is no real foundation for the suspicion. When Mozart died, a

few friends gathered for a brief service in St Stephen's Church and Salieri was one of them.

It is of interest that these rumours formed the basis of Pushkin's dramatic poem (1831) which was later used by Rimsky-Korsakov for his opera *Mozart and Salieri* (1898). Cedric Glover's novel *The Mysterious Barricades* (1964) also used the same theme.

DER RAUCHFANGKEHRER (1781)

It was at the suggestion of Emperor Josef II that Auenbrugger came to write the libretto for an opera. Auenbrugger's daughter Marianna was a pupil of Salieri, who often visited the Auenbrugger home, and most probably it was in these circumstances that Salieri and Auenbrugger came to collaborate over the opera *Der Rauchfangkehrer* (*The Chimney Sweep*) which was first performed in Vienna in the Burgtheater on 30th April 1781 (Cramer, 1783). Salieri wrote this work to further the cause of German opera (Fig. 4).

The chief characters of this opera are:

Frau von Habicht (Soprano)	A Viennese lady
Nanette	Her daughter
Herr von Wolf (Tenor)	} Admirers of the two ladies
Herr von Baer (Bass)	
Lisel	Cook to the Habicht household
Volpino (Tenor)	Chimney Sweep and Lisel's lover

The story is as follows: the servants are angered by the arrogance and meanness of their mistress, Frau von Habicht, and her daughter, Nanette, and plot their revenge. Volpino, the chimney sweep, disguises himself as a marquis and pays suit to the two ladies who are both captivated by him and implore him to give them singing lessons. Herr von Wolf and Herr von Baer, admirers of the two ladies, are upset by this turn of events, and approach Volpino who, for the sum of 500 ducats for each lady, promises to restore their affections. A fire breaking out from the chimney during a singing lesson in the ladies' salon provides an opportunity for Herr von Wolf and Herr von Baer to make their way back into their ladies' favours, Volpino gets his financial reward, and all ends happily with a triple marriage.

At the first performance, the music of Salieri was applauded but Auenbrugger's libretto was considered to be tawdry and vulgar. Mosel, the biographer of Salieri, wrote: 'The text is in respect to verse and language beneath criticism' (1827). Hermann, a later biographer of Salieri, wrote: 'The action and construction of the play, both as a whole as well as in single parts, is to be regarded as an example of theatrical nonsense and lack of taste' (1897). It is reported that, despite the general disapproval of the mundane text, Auenbrugger was not satisfied and

Der
Rauchfangkehrer,

oder

Die unentbehrlichen Verräther ihrer
Herrschaften aus Eigennuz.

Ein musikalisches Lustspiel
in drey Aufzügen.

In Musik gesetzt von Herrn Anton Salieri,
Compositor in wirklichen Diensten Sr. Ma-
jestät des Kaisers, und des kaiserl. Hof-Na-
tional Theaters.

Aufgeführt
im k. k. Nationaltheater.

W i e n,
zu finden bey dem Logenmeister.

1781.

Fig. 4. *Der Rauchfangkehrer*. (Title page of text of opera. Vienna, 1781. Courtesy Österreichische Gesellschaft für Musik, Vienna.)

complained that, sitting in the stalls, he could not hear a word of the text because the singers swallowed all the beauty of it.

The failure of the opera in Vienna led to its replacement by Mozart's *Il Seraglio* (1782). On 10th December 1783, Mozart wrote to his father, who was considering putting on *Der Rauchfangkehrer* in Salzburg: 'As far as I can gather from your letter you think it is an Italian opera, but in fact it is a German opera and a very bad one, which was written by Dr Auenbrugger of Vienna. You will remember that I told you about a satire which Herr Fischer gave in public. It was about this opera' (Jahn, 1858).

Despite the poor reception in Vienna, the opera was later put on at Frankfurt (1782), Berlin (1783), Prague (1783), Budapest (1787), Munich (1788) and finally returned to Vienna in the Theater an der Landstrasse on 10th May 1790 under the title *Die Lustigen Kaminfeger, Oder Die Bestraften Spröden* (*The Happy Chimney Sweep or The Punished Prudes*) (Loewenberg, 1970). In Italy it was performed under the title '*La Spazzacamino*' (Magnani, 1934).

For many years the text of the opera was missing, but it was then discovered in the archives of the Hof Bibliothek in Vienna. The opera is now virtually forgotten and it has never been performed in this country.

AUENBRUGGER, MUSIC AND PERCUSSION

Robert Coope (1948) has written: 'Auenbrugger played on the thorax as though it were a set of percussion instruments: Laënnec added to the thoracic orchestra by using its wind instruments'.

Laënnec's invention of the stethoscope is often related to his observing two lads playing with a plank of wood, the first scratching one end and the second listening at the other end. This story may be true, but we know that Laënnec had a fine musical sense which no doubt helped him to differentiate the sounds heard in the thorax and so to develop the art of auscultation. Laënnec also enjoyed whittling wood, and constructed the flutes on which he played, and he himself carved the first wooden monaural stethoscope.

Similarly, there is the story of Auenbrugger as a lad in his father's inn at Graz, observing the manner in which his father tapped the casks to detect how full or empty of wine they were. Auenbrugger himself wrote: 'the cause which occasions this diminution [of percussion note], whether solid or liquid, produces analogous results to those obtained by striking a cask, for example, in different degrees of emptiness or fullness'. But, in addition, it was Auenbrugger's keenly developed musical sense, together with his scientific curiosity, which facilitated his distinguishing the fine differences in tone on percussion of the chest, and so enabled him to develop this technique for diagnosis of diseases of the chest and to write his *Inventum Novum*.

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SIC TRANSIT . . .

When the College went up west to Pall Mall in 1825 it left behind the building in Warwick Lane that rehoused it after the Gréat Fire. It was to fall on lean times and the *Illustrated London News* wrote its obituary in 1866 when the building was about to be knocked down. The house 'consists of a pretentious stone building octagonal in plan, and surmounted with a dome, which the poet describes as "majestic to the sight" but which, in truth, is of mean design, more especially in contrast with the majestic dome of St. Paul's; yet both are designed by the same architect'. At the time of its demolition the building was the property of Tylor and Sons, brass founders. They had altered the premises, which had also been adapted to house a meat market. Gone were the pristine days when Garth wrote—

A golden globe, placed high with artful skill,
Seems, to the distant sight, a gilded pill.

The *ILN* must have known this couplet because they remembered the building when it was 'leased to the Equitable Loan (or Pawnbroking) Company when the "golden globe" was partially symbolic of its appropriation'.