
MOZART: HIS TRAGIC LIFE AND CONTROVERSIAL DEATH

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At eight o'clock on Sunday evening, January 27, 1756, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, one of seven children, first opened his eyes in the Austrian city of Salzburg. The child was baptized Johannes Chrysostomos Wolfgangus Theophilus. This last name was derived from the Greek *θεός* (*theos*), meaning God and *φιλέω* (*phileo*), meaning to love; accordingly it became Amadeus, from the Latin *amo*, to love, and *deus*, meaning God. Leopold Mozart, the child's father, also showed love in his diminutive for Wolfgang: "Wörfel." The boy was destined to become the most sensational infant prodigy and one of the greatest musical geniuses of all time. Mozart has not had an equal for swift composition and great spellbinding music that has an unmistakable personal musical style full of variety and beauty. His manuscripts have very few corrections. During the last 17 years of his life-span of 36 years there flowed from his pen on the average a major work every fortnight. In spite of recurrent prostrating illness, economic woes, frustrations, and humiliations, Mozart nevertheless nourished the astonishing talents that produced, according to the official thematic catalogue of Ludwig von Köchel, a priceless and stupendous output of 626 works. These works include, among others, 22 operas, 50 symphonies, 28 piano concertos, violin concertos, sonatas, chamber music to include 27 string quartets, 17 masses, vocal and choral works, and dance music. Mozart's music brought him great critical acclaim (sometimes unpleasant reviews), royal welcomes, and hero worship from his infancy to his death.

Even at the age of three he could pick out chords on the clavier and memorize passages he heard when his musician father gave lessons to his sister Nannerl, who was five years older. At the age of five he composed minuets and violin sonatas which were transcribed by his father. Endowed with a highly sensitive musical ear, he could detect the

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Mozart as a boy. From a portrait by Thadäus Helbing. Reproduced by permission of the Mozart Museum, Salzburg, Germany.

slightest error in pitch. He played the violin without any formal teaching. Once when his father assembled a few musicians for chamber music, Wolfgang, then five, sporting his powdered wig and sword, walked in uninvited and, to the astonishment of all, played second violin and then, amidst laughter, first violin. His father said that if the youngster had practiced enough he would have been "one of the first violinists of Europe." Emperor Joseph II of Austria, during a command performance, referred to him as the *kleiner Hexenmeister* (little magician). Leopold liked to show how the child, whose tiny fingers could scarcely reach a sixth on the harpsichord, could strike the proper notes on a keyboard covered with a piece of cloth. Wolfgang at five was already conversant with the principles of composition. His arithmetical mind helped, for he was scribbling the solution of problems on the walls of his house. At this period of his life his path toward recognition was strewn with petals.

As an adult Mozart demonstrated a remarkable memory; he could compose a new opera in his mind for subsequent transposition into a score. With extraordinary facility he injected into his music what came through to listeners as pathos, humor, drama, malice, sweetness, sunshine. He was prolific in new melodic ideas, especially for the voice. It may be said to his credit that he worked very hard from early morning

until 10 at night, when he ate his only meal of the day. He wrote in a letter, "Believe me, I love work and not idleness." On request, he improvised and played an aria or song—for example, *Affetto*, a love song, and *Perfido*, a song of temper and rage. He sight-read symphonies and transposed at sight into any key.

Mozart's physical stature was against him. He was unimpressive, short, and thin, with small, plump hands, blue, near-sighted eyes, and a disproportionately large head and long aquiline nose. His head and nose were frequently caricatured. His ears were deformed, but the narrow, slitlike entrance to the auditory canal had no untoward effect on the acuteness of his hearing. His hair, a source of vanity, was thick and fair. During the years 1784 and 1785, when he was at the height of his earning capacity, he squandered a good part of his income on clothes, which were handmade, embroidered, and colorful, with red predominating. Jewelry was another fetish of his. Wolfgang's letters, usually signed Wolfgang Amade, were witty, frank, incisive, chatty, sophisticated, and full of earthiness. They contained some of the most striking pornography in the German language, especially as it related to physiological functions. Casual to a fault, indecisive, careless, and extravagant, he did not seem to face reality, and he lacked adroitness in business and financial matters. It was difficult for him to withstand the jealousies and intrigues of competitors. Strangely enough, he did not care much for literature or the static arts. A gay blade with pretty women, he is alleged to have been oversexed. Was he overcompensating for what society viewed as physical defects? He once wrote, "If I had to marry every girl I've jested with, I'd have at least two hundred wives by now." Dancing and billiards were his entertainment. Wolfgang liked wine but he was never a drunkard. His house pets were a canary and a dog. Although his sharp and tactless tongue frequently got him into trouble, he was basically a gentleman—cheerful, affectionate, honest, cooperative, and proudly independent. A personality of quicksilver!

Mozart came of a nice, middle-class family of business people and mechanics in the Swabian city of Augsburg. His father, whose name in full was Johann Georg Leopold Mozart, was born in 1719, the son of a bookbinder. He married pretty Anna Maria Pertl of St. Gilgen, near Salzburg. Leopold began the study of law at the age of 18, but dropped law and took up music as a vocation. At that time it was customary for musicians to be in the employ of a noble or rich family and to function

additionally as house servants, such as valets or footmen. Leopold's slim livelihood was augmented by a public post as organist and later as a fourth violinist. When he was appointed vice kappelmeister in Salzburg, he attained his height of professional recognition. An accomplished and versatile musician, he taught violin and clavier, including keyboard instruments such as the harpsichord and pianoforte but not the organ.

Leopold, industrious, handsome, austere, irascible, and a strict disciplinarian, had a profound influence on his son. He has been criticized for the alleged exploitation of Wolfgang from the age of six. There began irregular hours of arduous, slow, dangerous, and uncomfortable tours in jolting coaches through Austria, Germany, Italy, and England; on these tours Nannerl was a musical participant. Roads were bad, mechanical breakdowns unavoidable, wayside inns intolerable. The adverse effects on Mozart's health seem obvious. His third tour began at the age of seven and lasted three years. The itinerary included many cities in Germany and Austria and the cities of Brussels, Paris, and London. It was in London, at the age of eight, that Wolfgang met Johann Christian Bach and was cordially received by George III and Queen Charlotte, both of whom were musical. Wolfgang sight-read difficult pieces and played accompaniments for the queen, who showered favors on him at court. Suspicions were aroused that he was not a mere boy. This illusion came to an abrupt end when, during one of his concerts, a cat walked onto the scene. Wolfgang deserted the keyboard to play with the cat. At times he would prance around the room with a stick between his legs, playing horse. A horse race introduced him to one of the favorite sports of the time. He stayed in England 15 months and during this time he wrote his first symphonies, K 16 and K 19. The *Public Advertiser* for July 11, 1765, described him as "The greatest prodigy that Europe or even Human Nature has to boast of."

The criticism of Leopold's exploitation of his young son is open to argument. It is true that Wolfgang was dragged through many countries in Europe and exhibited as a wunderkind. But he himself was on his father's side much later when he wrote Archbishop Hieronymus Colloredo in Salzburg requesting leave of absence as kappelmeister. "Parents endeavour to place their children in a position to earn their own bread. . . . The greater the talents which children have received from God, the more they are bound to use them for the improvement of their own and their parents' circumstances." To be sure, Mozart missed two of the

assets of boyhood—playmates and exercise—at a time when the child prodigy was escalating into a musical genius. Was not the father justified in exposing his little boy not only for the entertainment he gave and the contacts he made, but also to add to the meager family income, even though the financial rewards were not in keeping with Wolfgang's genius? The boy's first three tours netted a profit of 7,000 gulden* in addition to gifts of numerous watches, rings, jewelled snuffboxes, and other trinkets. Some of these are on exhibit in the Mozarteum in the Getreidegasse in Salzburg, including a ring from Empress Maria Theresa and another from the prince archbishop in Augsburg.

At the age of 13 Wolfgang wrote his little German operetta, *Bastien and Bastienne*, which was performed in the private theater of Dr. Anton Mesmer, the physician hypnotist. Already conversant with Italian (in addition to his native German) Mozart also knew French and Latin. The opera *La Finta Semplice* was produced next in the same year in the palace in Salzburg. The young composer toured Italy three times, the last time when he was 16 years old, when his opera *Lucio Silla* was partly successful. This was his last commission in Italy. Pope Clement XIV bestowed on him the order of the Golden Spur and the title *signor cavalier*. At Bologna, Mozart was elected a member of the Academia Philharmonica. His ninth tour lasted until he was 23 years old. No longer a boy prodigy, he went through a difficult age transition and was received politely as an adult. In our own time Yehudi Menuhin, Ruggiero Ricci, and others have gone through a similar transition.

Idomeneo, produced in 1781, helped to establish him as a recognized composer in Germany. Wolfgang had some unpleasant problems when he was engaged as kappelmeister in the home of Archbishop von Colloredo in Salzburg. He was unhappy because he disliked sitting at the same table with cooks and other servants. The archbishop called him a knave, a scamp, and a dissolute young man. Enraged, Mozart sent in his resignation. When he returned a month later, the detested, grim martinet von Colloredo dismissed him with the help of Count Arco, his high steward and toady, who unceremoniously kicked him out the door. Young Mozart was articulate about a reciprocal plant of a well-aimed shoe on Arco's posterior. The humiliating experience was a pronounced

*It is difficult to evaluate the currencies of 18th century Austria as they related to other countries because of the different economies. Marcia Davenport in her book *Mozart* wrestled with the problem. She figured one gulden or one florin (silver) to be worth about \$0.45 and one ducat (gold) about \$2.25 in the currency of the United States in 1792.

setback for Mozart, but he determined to make a success of his career independently.

Even when Mozart was a youngster love affairs crept into his life. He was alert to petticoats and to the kissing games and bawdy jokes that were then current. At the age of six, after one of his concerts in the palace in Vienna, the Empress Maria Theresa was fondling him in her lap when he slipped down and fell on the polished floor. The Archduchess Marie Antoinette, only two months older than Wolfgang, helped him to his feet. The story goes that her reward was a marriage proposal. At the age of 21 he stayed for a while in Mannheim with a family whose breadwinner was Fridolin Weber, a prompter and singer at the opera. The calculating matriarch, Frau Caecilia Weber, drew a net around him for one of her four daughters, Aloysia, a young opera singer. Mozart's father objected to the affair in a strong letter, "Off with you to Paris, and that immediately! . . ." Wolfgang was accompanied on the trip to Paris by his mother, who died there in convulsions and of an unknown illness. Subsequently Aloysia became a prima donna in Munich and despite Wolfgang's insistent advances she rejected him for Lange, a painter, sculptor, and actor. About two years later Mozart carried on an intense love affair with a girl cousin, Maria Anna Thekla, "the Basle," who was three years his junior. His ardent love letters to her, in which pornographic four-letter words were incorporated, finally won her over. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist me much longer. Why, of course, I'm sure of success." He was known to pass a sly, slithering hand over her thigh under a dinner table. She eventually gave him an illegitimate child, Marianne Victoria.

Mozart, determined to maintain his contact with the Weber family, at the age of 26 married Aloysia's sister Constanze, a serious musician. In nine years of married life, Constanze had six pregnancies, but only three babies came to term. Two of them survived. Karl (September 17, 1784 to December 30, 1858) became a career government official and Franz Xaver Wolfgang (July 26, 1791 to July 29, 1844) a frustrated musician. Both remained unmarried.

After his marriage, Mozart made the romantic music-struck city of Vienna his home for the rest of his life; he lived in a shabby, narrow, and smelly street. There he wrote some of his best and popular operas: *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Don Giovanni*, for the last of which he accepted a compensation of 100



Mozart in his manhood. From a portrait by Joseph Lange. Reproduced by permission of the Mozart Museum, Salzburg, Germany.

ducats. Winthrop Sargeant, distinguished music critic, has described *Don Giovanni* as “the greatest opera ever written” with “supremely beautiful music . . . breathless suspense . . . unsurpassed delineated character.”

In great demand in musical and social circles, Mozart continued to pour out concertos and chamber music. Franz Josef Haydn, the most celebrated composer in Europe and a great friend of Mozart, told his father in 1785, “I tell you before God as an honest man that your son is the greatest composer known to me either in person or by reputation. He has taste, and what is more, the most profound knowledge of com-

position." Two years later the domineering father was dead at the age of 68, crippled with arthritis. It was a severe blow to Wörfel, who idolized him to such an extent that he would frequently say, "Next to God comes papa." During the next year, 1788, Mozart composed three great symphonies in six weeks: the E flat, the G minor, and the C major (Jupiter)—the last full of the most complicated counterpoint. Meantime, his wife Constanze became ill with phlebitis and frequently went to Baden for the cure.

At the age of 33 Mozart was back in Vienna, where he began to suffer from the tribulations of outrageous fortune and declining income, even though he was a most popular and fruitful composer. Failing health, bad marketing of his extraordinary talent and virtuosity, jealousies, and intrigue did not help. Financial distress compelled him to sell or pawn his valuables, some of his clothes, furniture, and plate. A viola on which he played quartets with Haydn went for two dollars. Rent was in arrears. Pupils were in short supply and creditors were hounding him and pounding at the door. Karl, five years old, had to be cared for by strangers.

Although Mozart was a pious Catholic, he also sought refuge and comfort in freemasonry and became an active member of the order in 1785. There were pitiful and degrading requests to brother masons for loans. In 1788 a letter to one of them, Michael Puchberg, a wealthy merchant in Vienna, emphasizes the plight to which Mozart had descended. "Your true friendship and brotherly love embolden me to ask a great favor of you. I still owe you eight ducats. Apart from the fact that at the moment I am not in a position to pay you back this sum, my confidence in you is so boundless that I dare to implore you to help me out with a hundred gulden until next week, when my concerts in the Casino are to begin. . . ." And again, ". . . In short, being unable to find a friend to help me, I have been obliged to resort to the money-lenders; . . . I am at the moment so utterly penniless that I have to beg you, dearest friend, by all that is sacred, to help me with whatever you can spare! . . . If you only knew how this worries and troubles me!" Mozart also appealed to Franz Hofdemel to ". . . lend me 100 florins till the 20th of next month." He was victimized by loan sharks and became a target for cheats and leeches. To make a little money he wrote *Così fan Tutte*, which was produced in January 1790. In the face of all his adversity and progressively bad health, necessity spurred him

on to write and, between May and July 1791, he composed *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*). Emanuel Schikaneder, a mercenary and uncouth producer, paid 100 ducats for the score. To celebrate the coronation of Leopold II as king of Bohemia, Mozart wrote the opera *La Clemenza di Tito*. It failed. The strain of meeting deadlines and his failing health had shown their effects. Mozart left Prague for Vienna in sunken spirits.

His strenuous life, anxieties, failures, precarious financial situation, and many illnesses began to take their toll. He became neurotic, moody, and unsociable. A fragmented personality! Then a mysterious, tall, and cadaverous visitor, clad in gray, appeared and gave him an advance fee of 50 ducats to commission a *Requiem*. It turned out that the visitor, Leitgeb, was the steward and go-between for a Count Franz van Walsegg, an amateur musician who was scheming to have it performed as his own. Mozart worked hard on it, although he had an obsession that it would be a sign of his own approaching death, and that he was writing it for himself. "I know I will not last very long," he tearfully told his wife. Sickness prevented the completion of the *Requiem* and it became his last musical testament. "My music making is drawing to an end. I feel a cold which I cannot explain—winter is coming." Violent headaches, blackouts, nausea, and tell-tale swelling of the extremities and face plagued him. "I am at the point of death. I have finished before I could enjoy my talent. Yet life is so beautiful, my career opened so auspiciously—but fate is not to be changed. . . ." Mozart was so exhausted that the thought of death was sweet as compared with the fear of life.

Constanze returned home from Baden and gave birth to a son in July 1791. Sick as he was, Mozart conducted the first two performances of *The Magic Flute*, which ran for 100 consecutive nights in Vienna. His health continued in a serious decline. Run down, nervous, and feeble, he was highly susceptible to infection. His eyes had lost their lustre and they stared into space. Dr. Sigmund Barisani, an intelligent and conscientious family physician, had treated him for rheumatic fever when he was 28. After this doctor's death, Dr. Nickolaus Closset assumed charge. Much later, Dr. Closset called in consultation Dr. Mathias von Sallaba, chief of the Allgemeine Krankenhaus in Vienna. They agreed on the hopeless outlook. Mozart struggled on, impoverished, sick in body and spirit, and continued as best he could to work on the

Requiem. Although the composition was unfinished, friends* gathered at his bedside to sing it on Sunday, December 4th. Only seven bars of the "Lacrimosa" were finished. Mozart started to sing the alto part and even puffed out his cheeks in an attempt to imitate the trumpets (maybe respiration was difficult), but he broke into a bad weeping spell. "Here is my death song. I must not leave it incomplete." He asked his good friend and former pupil Franz Xaver Süssmayr to finish it. He begged his sister-in-law, Sophie Haibel, to stay at his bedside. "You must see me die. . . . I already have the taste of death on my tongue." Constanze was hysterical. Dr. Closset was called from a theater. Cold compresses were ordered for the feverish brow of the delirious and comatose Mozart. A priest delivered the last sacrament. On attempting to rise, Mozart fell back dead, 55 minutes after midnight, December 5, 1791. Thirty-six years later, his *Requiem* was performed at the solemn high mass during the funeral of Ludwig van Beethoven.

On December 6, in a third-class funeral that cost \$5.50, the plain coffin was carried through the streets in such inclement weather that it prompted the accompanying mourners, who numbered nine and included Süssmayer and Salieri but not Constanze, to return home. The hearse arrived at the St. Mark cemetery in a suburb of Vienna and without a note of music, a sad and tragic irony and an inconsequential event. The coffin was deposited in the mortuary chapel. The following day it was lowered into a pauper's grave that has never been positively identified. The city of Vienna later erected a handsome monument by Hans Gasser, on what was dubiously considered to be Mozart's grave; the monument was unveiled on December 5, 1859, 68 years after Mozart's death. There is no certainty that the skull exhibited in the Mozarteum and alleged to be that of Mozart is actually his.

"Even his funeral was a failure," wrote George Bernard Shaw. "Depend on it, they no sooner put up their umbrellas and bolted for the nearest shelter than he got up, shook off his bones into the common grave of people and soared off into immortality." Rubenstein characterized the master's genius as "Eternal sunshine in music, thy name is Mozart." Great composers acknowledged their debt to him: Beethoven, Rossini, Donizetti, Schubert, Wagner, Gounod, Massenet, Debussy.

There is some lively and simmering controversial literature in

*Schack, soprano; Hofer, tenor; Gerle, bass: members of the cast of the first performance of *Die Zauberflöte* at the theater on the Wieden, the so-called Freihaus Theater, on September 30, 1791.

German, French, Russian, and English which embraces Mozart's illnesses, with wide speculation on the cause of his death. Was his death natural or was he poisoned? It has been difficult to separate fact from fiction. In Mozart's day diagnoses were clinical and philosophical without the help of laboratory tests such as are available today. Perhaps one of the most comprehensive and painstaking research treatises on the subject, *Gewiss, man hat mir Gift gegeben* (Surely, I have been given poison), was written by Gunther Duda, a German physician, and published in 1958. The bibliography is extensive. After a lapse of almost 200 years, Duda, Dr. Dieter Kerner, and a Russian physician, Igor Belsas, have become the chief proponents of the theory that Mozart died as a result of a slow poisoning by a mercury salt. One version has it that the Venetian Antonio Salieri, director of the Vienna Opera and an arch rival and jealous composer-conductor, admitted the crime in a confessional (how could such a secret get out?); according to another version, he stoutly denied the crime on his death bed on May 7, 1825. Can it be that the poison theory was triggered by Mozart's tearful exclamation to his wife ". . . I will not last longer. I have been given poison. I cannot get this out of my head"? Indeed, it has not been shown anywhere that this claim was factual. Toward the end of his life Mozart was very sick, and his claim, a pathological obsession, was a pure figment of his delirious and paranoid moments, the result of fear of imagined or actual enemies.

According to Duda, the first poisoning occurred in the summer of 1791, by means of a small dose of mercury. This was followed by a large dose on November 20th. This would be hazardous pinpointing. But one month earlier Mozart was apparently well enough to conduct *The Magic Flute* and to write a clarinet concerto. In that same month Constanze went to Baden where she received long letters from her husband. On October 14 he brought her back to Vienna. There were, then, two months during which he had no outstanding complaints. Duda and others have drawn conclusions from detective stories, and use unproved dates and non sequiturs. The poison legend became so fixed that Pushkin seized upon it and wrote the tragedy *Mozart and Salieri*.

Over the years the myth became a source of idle or malicious gossip. Even during a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as late as May 23, 1824, circulars were passed around which stated that Salieri had put containers of poison at Mozart's bedside. How much credence can this be given?

Mozart's physicians did not suspect foul play. Their diagnoses of the cause of death were recorded as malignant typhus (*ein hitziges Frieselfieber*) or meningitis. In the light of our present knowledge, after analysis of the clinical picture, these diagnoses were incorrect.

What, then, are the facts? Perhaps it is possible to be more realistic and conservative after analysis of the historical records which seem to indicate why Mozart died so young and what pathological processes in his various infections took the life of this burning and creative genius. To begin with, Mozart was one of seven children; it was fortunate that he and his older sister, Nannerl, survived infancy and childhood. His father and mother thought that the proper feeding for babies was water. It is probable that the infant suffered from malnutrition. The family lived in dampness and poor sanitation in an otherwise fine house. A high fever and scarlet rash, diagnosed scarlet fever by the physician to the Countess von Ginseldorf, struck Wolfgang at the age of six. He was sick for four weeks. This infection was the inception of kidney damage which undermined his health for the rest of his life. The administration of *Schwarzpulver* (black powder), a cathartic, and *Markgrafenspulver*, an antiperspirant, had little if any remedial effect. Concerts were canceled for eight days and there was a financial loss of 50 ducats. The next year painful knees and fever (rheumatic fever?) were so severe that Mozart could not stand up. At the age of nine, he had what probably was a septic sore throat, which disabled him for a month and left him emaciated. Smallpox attacked him at the age of 11, made him desperately ill, and closed his eyelids for nine days. More sore throats followed. Cramps and vomiting with high fever attacked him several times and disabled him when he was 28. Many bad toothaches with swollen jaws and many bad colds added to his ailments. It must be emphasized that five years before his death, at the age of 31, he was so sick that he wrote, "I never lay myself down in bed without reflecting that perhaps I, as young as I am, shall never see another day." Because of his bad health, he delayed writing the overtures to *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute* until just before their dress rehearsals.

Late in 1790 he was critically ill, but his iron will, residual stamina, and rallying power enabled him to give concerts in Frankfurt during the coronation of Leopold II. Challenge and financial necessity pushed him far beyond human tolerance.

From then on, the massive insult to his kidneys from repeated bac-

terial maladies became evident by the superimposition of acute on chronic nephritis,* a recognized clinical entity. He had uremia from kidney failure and infection, with significant and symptomatic black-outs, abdominal pain, splitting headaches, vomiting, fever, and extensive and more pronounced edema of the upper and lower extremities and face. In fact his lower extremities were so swollen that he could not turn in bed. His kidneys could not properly eliminate chemical waste products, urine was scanty, his breath was foul, his muscles twitched and were weakened, and his face took on a waxy pallor. There were terminal episodes of delirium and coma. Hypertension was a natural complication. The battle against degenerative disease was lost. With modern technologies and therapy, the story might have been different.

Mired in poverty, Mozart was dogged to the very end by desperate financial problems. He left six florins and a destitute wife, except that she received from the emperor a paltry pension of 22 gulden a month. Happily, in 1809, she married a Danish diplomat, G. N. Nissen. She died in 1842.

Mozart, bedeviled with tragedy, was a man who received intermittent recognition of his greatness. He went from ecstasy, financial and social success to pauperism, mendicancy, rejection, despair, and depression. Covered with glory in his best years, he nevertheless had an inglorious finale. He failed in success. With comparatively good health and longer life, it is probable that he would have surpassed his extraordinary productivity in even higher standards of music as an added legacy for the civilized world.

One may appropriately paraphrase Callimachus, the Greek architect and poet:

Somewhere, lapped in hallowed slumber Mozart lies,
Asleep, not dead: a great man never dies.

*Vide Duda, J. Barraud, Casseroller, H. Holz, A. Marx, and J. Willms concur in the diagnosis of nephritis and they do not substantiate that of mercury poisoning. After a perspective of many years, the *Neustadter Tageblatt* of October 10, 1957, concludes that Mozart died of severe chronic nephritis.

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